

LIBRIS

We know
books

Does It Hurt? Copyright © 2022 by H. D. Carlton

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design: Emily Wittig
Formatting: Opulent Swag and Designs
Distributed by Zando

First Edition: July 2022

978-1-63893-249-9 (Paperback)

1098765

Manufactured in the United States of America

DOES IT HURT?

LBRIS

We know
books

PROLOGUE

Sawyer

Stop staring at me, fucker.

S My leg bounces profusely, and I force myself to stop for the millionth time. I'm making it obvious that I'm nervous, but how can I not be when my mother's cousin's husband's niece is staring at me?

She looks like she's seen a ghost, and I practically have been for the past six years. But if that were the case, I wouldn't need to get on this damn flight.

We're both sitting in chairs across from each other, waiting to board a plane to Indonesia. What the hell is she going there for anyway? It's nearly Christmas, for fuck's sake.

I suppose it could be a work trip considering she's wearing a skirt, a matching blazer, and Louboutin heels. Who travels in fucking Louboutin heels?

Doesn't matter. What matters is that she noticed me, and that's so not cool right now.

Sweat is pouring down my back, and I'm almost positive I have pit stains.

I'm trying to be inconspicuous, but so is she. Appearing nonchalant, yet not nonchalant *at all*, she slowly slides her phone out of her pocket.

Normally, not a red flag, but she also has pit stains, and she's glancing at me every two seconds.

Carefully, she brings the phone to her ear, attempting to hide it within her pin-straight hair. The strands are so thin, they're basically translucent—she's not hiding her phone beneath them like she thinks she is.

Bitch.

I have no idea how I'm supposed to escape with her watching, but I don't have a choice. It's either I leave, or they find me.

Fuck being inconspicuous, my life is on the line. I grab my carry-on bag, stand, and attempt to calmly walk away.

"Hey!" she calls, but fuck that and fuck her. I slip through the crowd, on the verge of tears. I've put off leaving the country for so long, convinced I'd be caught, and that's precisely what might happen.

Heart racing, I head directly to the gift shop, purchase a zip-up hoodie, along with sweats and a ball cap, then find a bathroom to change in, all the while checking over my shoulder.

Even the restroom is crowded, so I keep my head down and quickly duck into a stall. Hands shaking, I wind my hair into a low bun, shove the hat over the top, and then slip on the jacket, flipping the hood over my head to cover the rest of my hair. Lastly, I pull the sweats on over my shorts, already sweating from the layers and adrenaline.

Then, I wash my hands and rush to the ticket counter, out of breath and practically panting in the agent's face. She looks up at me, startled by my sudden presence.

"May I hel—"

"I need a ticket to the next flight out," I interrupt, nearly tripping over my words.

She blinks at me, then focuses on her computer screen, clicking around with her mouse and tapping a few keys.

"A flight to Indone—"

"Not that one," I cut in again. "A different one."

She shoots me a glare. I'm pissing her off, but I'm sure a big glass of red wine will soothe her woes, whereas I will definitely be meeting my maker if I'm caught.

"A flight to Australia is departing in forty minutes."

"Sold," I say, slapping a wad of cash and my ID on the counter. Giving me an unimpressed look, she processes the ticket and counts through the money. Albeit very fucking slowly.

"You're \$8.09 short," she clips.

I'm not usually a snappy person with customer service. They deal with enough shit. That being said, if I get caught over \$8.09, I'm pointing directly at her and screaming *she did it* before bolting.

Muttering beneath my breath, I fish out a ten-dollar bill from my pocket and slap it on the counter.

Giving me the evil eye, she takes the bill and continues.

I'm constantly checking over my shoulder, but thankfully, the airport is crowded, and I don't see any angry faces wearing a uniform and a gun headed my way yet.

"Do you have any luggage?"

"No, just my carry-on," I reply.

After a few more minutes, she finally slides the ticket to me, along with my change and ID.

"Gate 102. Terminal B."

I snatch them from the counter, clip out a quick *thank you*, and take off toward the shuttle, my duffel bag slapping against my legs.

My heart is beating nearly out of my damn mouth by the time I make it through TSA, off the shuttle that takes me to the terminal, and ultimately reach the gate. It took fucking forever, and they've already called my name over the speaker. I'm panicking that I won't make it, and they're literally about to close the door when I finally arrive at the gate.

"Wait!" I shout.

The employee sees me coming, and I swear to God, he deserves a blowjob for kindly stepping aside and allowing me through. Even as I run down the hallway to get to the plane, I'm checking over my shoulder.

My heart refuses to return to its designated area until the plane takes off.

Even then, I'm waiting for air traffic control to stop the plane and tell them a fugitive is on board.



CHAPTER 1

Sawyer

Cancer tastes like shit.
I suck in deeply, menthol gliding past my tongue and filling my lungs with manufactured chemicals. How many of these do I have to smoke before cancer invades my cells, metastasizing until I'm ridden with disease?

My throat tightens and revolts against the tobacco, forcing out a harsh cough. I pull the cigarette away and stare at it, my face twisted in disgust as smoke filters out of my nose and mouth. I rock my hand, viewing it from different angles.

A bright orange glow radiates from the tip, gray ash eating at the paper. Fire is on the tip, flaring as if to entice me to wrap my lips back around it. Nope.

Still isn't appealing.

A tanned hand reaches out, nabbing the cigarette before I can stub it on the sand.

"Give me that before you waste it."

I frown. How flammable is sand? I bet not at all. It's too dense—nothing to feed the oxygen. Not unless I pour gasoline all over it. I bet it'd make the beach prettier, though.

Fire on the shoreline of a vast, blue ocean? Who wouldn't want to see that?

The salty sea breeze blows softly, coercing the blonde, curly tendrils around my face into a sensual dance. I tuck the locks behind my ear, too tired to pull them back into the loose knot tied low on my head.

I look over to the guy sitting next to me. His overgrown sandy hair curls against the nape of his neck and the dagger tattoo behind his ear is alluring against his sun-kissed skin. All of his tattoos are—he's covered in them.

I still don't know his name, but his cock is nice, and that's all that really matters. Well, that, and his murderous nicotine. He's not the type I usually go for, but I was feeling lonely and entertained the first guy who didn't make me nauseous.

"What kind of cancer do you think you'll get from that?" I ask, nodding toward the cigarette in his hand.

He quirks a thick brow, his pretty blue eyes sparkling in the morning glow. "I dunno. Lung cancer is too typical. Throat?"

"Do you think you'll die?"

He barks out a short laugh. "I fucking hope so."

I nod, reaching out my hand for him to give it back to me. He looks at me like I'm strange, a beat passing before he does as I ask.

Another inhale, and it tastes a little better with the reminder that I'm ingesting death into my lungs.

Yeah, that tastes *much* better.

Loud waves crash up the shore, rolling up and reaching toward my chipped baby blue painted toes with outstretched claws, before sinking back down and dragging sand with them.

The ocean is beautiful. But it's also unforgivable. Within seconds, it can turn against you. Drag you down so violently, you don't know which

way is up, and feed you into its cavernous mouth until you drown or end up between the teeth of something much scarier.

I inhale again deeply, closing my eyes as I feel the smoke fill my lungs and stick inside of them.

Cigarettes are also unforgivable, with the way they eat at you from the inside out. Kill you slowly, and then all at once.

I decide I like the ocean, and I like cigarettes.

Because I... I am also unforgivable.



"That will be \$68.10," the cashier says pleasantly, a smile on his face.

"For a pregnancy test and a pack of cigarettes?" I ask incredulously.

The guy chuckles. "Fraid so."

"That's literally robbery," I mutter, but I'm not sure if he heard me because he's still smiling.

I'd love to siphon some of that happiness for myself, but after three weeks in Port Valen, Australia, I don't feel any safer than I did in America.

After landing, I checked the news online, and authorities were informed that I was possibly sighted at the airport and presumed to have escaped on a plane. The lady at the ticket counter may or may not be able to identify me and confirm my flight to Australia, regardless of using a different name. At the very least, she could say I was acting suspicious and give them a reason to look.

I'm not safe in this country—they'd turn me in to U.S. authorities if caught—but it's too risky to fly to a country that'd grant me mercy. So, I've resigned myself to the fact that I'm staying here for a while yet, and that it's time to take on the life of someone else again.

There are worse places to be, I suppose.

Port Valen is a beautiful seaside town on the east coast, surrounded by a bright aqua blue ocean and crowded with tourists looking to shark dive or explore the coral reefs. Outside of the beach, it's rich with massive waterfalls and diving holes surrounded by wildlife and miles of bright forests, attracting hikers from around the world.

It's also expensive as hell here.

I dig through my ratty coin purse, strings frayed at the edges and getting caught in the zipper. I count out the bills and coins, berating myself for winding up in this situation. Precious money down the drain because I can hardly stand to be alone, plus the extra cost since now I feel the need to get a buzz just to take the edge off.

Problem is, that edge is sharp and jagged, and there's not a drug in this world that will prevent it from cutting me.

"Here ya go," I tell him, forcing a smile on my numb face. Feels like when Mom used to take me to the dentist, and I walked out with lidocaine injected in my mouth and no control over my facial muscles. I always used to giggle at the odd feeling, but I don't feel much like laughing now.

He hands me the change and my purchases, another smile on his face. Now it's almost annoying how happy he is.

"Have a good day," he chirps.

"Thanks," I murmur.

I snatch the sack and rush toward the exit of the grocery store, my bright orange flip-flops clacking against the dirty white tile.

This stupid fucking pregnancy test really cut into the little allowance I give myself. Still, I'd rather know if a little alien is invading my body than live in fear, obsessively checking my stomach on any reflective surface I come by just to see if it grew an inch.

I live with enough fear, I don't need any more.

They can't find you, Sawyer. You're safe.

I shake my head, persistent on staying in the cold, lonely place where the

terror resides. *Am I safe?*

If my insides are being invaded by an alien, that will make my life that much harder. I can't take care of a child *and* provide for myself. I'm barely doing that as it is, and my means for doing so are... God, they're awful.

My thoughts spiral, picturing a little blonde baby in my arms, screaming at the top of its lungs because they're hungry and suffering from diaper rash or something. I'd have to give the baby up for adoption, no question.

But it'd break my fucking heart. Or whatever is left of it.

My breathing is starting to escalate, and I work to control it, fighting to fill my tightening lungs. Bright sunlight warms my cheeks as I storm out of the automatic doors, run out of the parking lot, and onto the sidewalk, my dollar store flip-flops threatening to snap from my speed.

I inhale deeply, desperately sucking in oxygen, but it's clogging my throat.

My period is a week late, though I've been stressed. Really stressed. I've never prayed so much—hovering over a toilet with my thumbs hooked in my shorts, begging the gods to give me a reason to use the tampon in my hand.

I think Heaven has me on their shitlist.

Which is such bullshit, even though I can't blame the angels for rebuking me in the name of the Lord.

The taste of the salty ocean lingers in the air, coating my tongue as I continue to suck in deep breaths and feel my tightened chest loosen just a bit. Something about the smell of the sea always soothes my tortured lungs, whether it's because I'm abusing them with a panic attack or cigarette smoke.

It's something I'll mourn when I eventually move on to the next destination.

For now, I appreciate the beauty of Port Valen while I can. Greenery surrounds the streets, along with bright pops of pink, orange, and purples from flowers. Massive cliffs are far behind me, and though miles away, their imposing structures are not to be ignored.

A group of women pass by in their thong bikinis and tops, and I can't

help but fall in love with how laid-back this town is.

Even more dangerous, I'm falling in love with Port Valen as a whole, despite the man-eating spiders that inhabit this country.

I speed walk toward the bus stop and plop on the bench with a shaky exhale, the plastic bag dangling between my spread legs. There's a magpie circling overhead, setting me further on edge. I've learned the hard way that the demon birds like to swoop down and attack unprovoked. I'm still traumatized from the last one and pray the bus gets here quicker than scheduled.

I could've driven Senile Suzy, the van I bought last week. It's an old, buttery-yellow Volkswagen—the ones you'd see hippies back in the 70s driving around. Living out of a van is more ideal than a hotel, and I got incredibly lucky to find one for much cheaper than it's worth. He claimed it was his daughter's who had passed away, and he just wanted it gone.

I don't have my license here anyway, and I'm not confident enough to drive on the opposite side of the road. I'm convinced I'll perish from a car wreck or get pulled over and caught driving without a license.

On cue, the magpie squawks as if to warn me that taking my chances with Senile Suzy might be safer, but thankfully, it flies elsewhere.

Hands shaking from the residual anxiety, I dig through the bag and pluck out the pack of cigarettes. I shouldn't be smoking these in my possible predicament, yet the thought of death is too enticing, and I'm too scared to do anything else.

I'm ashamed of myself, but I don't think I know what it's like to feel anything else.

Don't make it a habit, Sawyer. You have enough of those.

Just as I slide one out and stick it in my mouth, I realize two things. I forgot to buy a lighter, and there's somebody sitting next to me, the weight of their stare hardening on my face like dried clay.

I turn to find an older man with deep brown skin holding out an orange lighter as bright as my flip-flops, his thumb poised on the striker and ready

to ignite it for me. He's wearing an old white shirt and an aged khaki-colored ball cap on his head. Sweat gleams down the side of his face, but he smells like Old Spice and salt.

Smiling, I lean forward, and he flicks it. I'm just as mesmerized by the fire as I am by watching it eat at the flimsy paper. Smoke coils from the stick into the salty air, burning my eyes as it wafts into my face.

"Thank you," I say, waving away the smoke. "Do you want one?"

"Sure," he says. I hand him a cigarette and watch him closely as he lights his own, an orange glow blaring as he inhales.

"Been trying to cut back on smoking but can never seem to let 'em go for good," he muses conversationally.

A terrible problem to have, and one I shouldn't inflict on myself, but then a wave of euphoria washes over me, and I suppose it's not so bad. It won't last more than a minute, however it makes the sharp edge bearable, and that's all I need right now. That, and good company.

"When have we ever been able to let go of the things that hurt us most?" I mutter.

"Well, you got me there."

I grin. "What's your name?" I ask, attempting to blow out a smoky O but failing miserably.

He chuckles, the sound husky. "Can't remember the last time a pretty young lady asked me my name. Name's Simon."

Normally, an old, strange man calling me pretty would have me getting up and walking away without a backward glance, but the way he says it doesn't make me uncomfortable. In fact, it makes me feel a little like what a home is supposed to feel like. Warm and welcoming. Safe.

That sense of comfort lulls me into doing something I rarely do. Something I *never* do. I give him my real name.

"Sawyer. Thanks for keeping me company, Simon."

A beat of silence passes, and then, "Want to see my new tattoo?"