



Claimed by the Hitman: Codename Cupid (In His Sights #2)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: She was assigned as his handler. But the assignment is handling her.

Spies. Saboteurs. Assassins. I've handled them all. When Olympia, the shadowy agency I'm a sliver of, gives me a mission, I see it done. These agents live on the edge. They need a stern figure to keep them in line.

But Cupid is something else entirely.

Olympia warned me. Cupid's files overflowed with impulsiveness, disdain for authority, and a habit of breaking his handlers. He's an agent they're on the brink of losing control of. What all the intel could never tell me is how I'd feel the moment I saw him. And the look in his eyes that would threaten everything I've built.

Cupid has his sights set on a new target, and I think it might be me...

Total Pages (Source): 7

CHAPTER 1

HERA

Cupid is keeping me waiting.

Am I surprised? Not in the least bit. I was told my new assignment would be unlike any other assassin I've managed. Olympia doesn't like that word— assassin. They prefer field asset or agent or auxiliary tool .

But an assassin he is, as much as the killers of ancient times.

More than that, he's late.

It's a sweltering Parisian day, and the breeze is lazy. I'm sitting outside a café on one of the lesser-known streets, away from the tourists, hidden from the watchful gaze of the Eiffel Tower. Here, the city crowds and looms. It hugs itself. The narrow buildings provide some shade, but I'm still sweating in this ridiculous summer dress.

If I had it my way, I'd be in a pantsuit or tactical gear. Blending in, however, is the ultimate function of my attire. I should look like any other French woman enjoying her green tea. I should be nearly invisible.

That man across the street should not be staring at me.

Attention from men is not something I'm accustomed to. Perhaps it's my resting-bitch face, or the fact that most men I converse with are assassins I am technically in

charge of. In fact, only one field asset ever made a move on me, and I put a stop to it almost reflexively. Most members of the opposite sex don't look at me the way he is right now... like he wants to rip off my dress with his eyes.

The man is standing outside a bicycle shop, leaning against the glass. A loose white button-up shirt dances with the breeze, flashing up slightly to give me a glimpse of his toned stomach. With his hands in his pockets, he tilts his head as if he's trying to look under my dress. A few dark curls drape over his forehead before he brushes them back and smiles.

Some horny Frenchman hitting on me is the last thing I need right now.

I sigh, sip my tea, and pretend to read the book in my hand.

He starts walking across the street.

Without glancing up from the pages, I wave him off and tell him I'm not interested in perfect French. He laughs like he's seen the future, like he already knows that I'm his, and it makes my toes curl. Against all my training, bearing, and will, my eyes drift to meet his gaze.

Handsome would be an understatement.

The man's face is dashing sharp with dark features. Wild curls form passageways on his head, secret tunnels of black hair as tempting to explore as the catacombs beneath this city. His smile is a knife cutting through my heart like butter; he traces the stubble of his mustache with his fingers.

I've always prided myself on professionalism. The job is my life. Olympia recruited me because I was bored at the three-letter agency that had previously employed me; I was looking for something more, something to devote myself to completely. Men

have never fit into the equation of my existence.

Something about this man puts the faintest chink in that armor.

It's a runaway thought, a fantasy that I laugh off as I close my book and hold his gaze. I've got a job to do, and I won't throw everything away for a one-night stand in Paris.

Did you not hear me? I say again, inflecting to let him know I'm annoyed. My French is damn good, enough to pass for a local. Go bother someone else...

The man, unfazed and still smiling, speaks to me in English, "Spare an obolus for the ferryman?"

The breeze is sucked from the world.

Suddenly, I feel so hot that this dress is suffocating.

An obolus. The devilishly handsome man from across the street has spoken the code. This isn't protocol. We were to sit outside for an hour before attempting the codephrase—I've been here for forty-five minutes, but he's only just arrived.

How does he know I'm the one?

"Taking the journey across the Styx?" I repeat the trained response.

The man, who I now know is Cupid, sits in the empty chair at my table. "Not yet, but Charon is waiting."

We stare.

We stare for far too long.

Cupid's dark eyes scan me, plucking out every bead of sweat on my exposed neck. The assassin's gaze is hungry. I wonder if he looks at his targets the same way? Suddenly, I feel naked in this dress.

I'd feel vulnerable in a suit of armor if he were looking at me.

"You're late." I sit upright, set my book down, and snap for the waiter. "Order something to drink."

Cupid smirks at me, leans back, and crosses his legs as the waiter comes over. He never takes his eyes off me as he switches to French to order an espresso. There's a nonchalantness about him that I find infuriatingly attractive. It's like he doesn't have a care in the world.

Me? I've had a stress headache since yesterday.

"I'm on Paris time," he yawns, waving his hand as if to dismiss the concept of clocks altogether. "Been here for weeks. Waiting. Drinking. Eating. Maybe you're the one who's late?"

"I was here exactly when I needed to be."

"Ah, but what if you had come early?" He accepts his coffee and stares at me over the rim as he smells the creamy film at the top. "We could have explored Paris together. Drinking. Eating. Fucki—"

"Enough."

I don't raise my voice, not yet. Already, Cupid is living up to Olympia's warnings.

Organizations like Olympia never deal in physical media. I've never seen a picture of Cupid, never read a file, and certainly never seen footage of his work being carried out. When I'm given an assignment, I'm usually shoved into a van with a bag over my head and brought to Zeus.

Zeus told me that Cupid would be different.

We're losing control of the asset.

"I need you to understand something," I speak lowly as a group of teens saunter by. "I am not your previous handlers. You will follow my directions to the letter, or I will simply report to Olympia that you are unfit for utilization."

This puts an even slyer smile on Cupid's gorgeous face. He smirks like the Devil.

"This is not a game," I say.

"Everything is a game, Hera," he responds. "Especially this."

Beneath the table, his foot inches near my heels.

"Why do you think they call you Hera?" he asks.

"It's a codename. It doesn't mean anything."

"So, what's your real name?"

My heart flutters at the thought. It's been so long since I spoke it. An alias occupies my passport, and I wouldn't even give that name to Cupid. This wild line of questioning makes me yearn for my previous assignment. Hephaestus was straight-laced; he did things by the book. Unfortunately, he had to go and break his back in a

rock-climbing accident.

So, here I am, staring down Cupid's mischievous grin.

"Do not ask me that again. It's against protocol, as you know. No names. No files. Olympia passes information to me, and I pass it to you. You know this. No evidence."

"No evidence except for us ."

Cupid loudly scoots his metal chair over until our legs are completely entangled. My dress rides up my legs, and I can feel my sweat being wiped off by his pants.

"What are you doing?" I hiss.

"Ah, come on. Act natural." He leans in and smiles. "Have you ever even been to France? Two attractive Parisians would never sit so far away from each other on a hot day like this. The tension is too tight for that, *ma chérie*."

My mind does flips trying to place his morphing accent. One minute, he sounds American with hints of West Coast flair. The next, his tongue moves like he's from the Netherlands but studied abroad. His French, what little I've heard, sounds more localized than mine.

The fact that he called me attractive melts my mind further.

"Keep your hands to yourself..."

Cupid smiles and sips his espresso.

I'm keenly aware of the glances he steals toward my thighs.

If I had my gun, I might hit him with it.

“We have a target,” I speak softly, as if we’re flirting. “He is attending a dinner tonight at La Truffière. Fifty-seven years of age. Bald. Brown goatee. Brown eyes. Thin scar under the right ear. Keen on maroon suits, so keep an eye out for that. His driver pilot’s a twenty-twenty five black Mercedes GLC. The target wears a gold cross necklace, always. Apart from the driver, he should be alone once he leaves the restaurant.”

Cupid doesn’t seem to be paying attention. He finishes his espresso, sighs, and leans forward until our faces are inches apart. “Do you think it will protect him?”

“Excuse me?”

“The cross.”

“If you’re as good as Olympia says, then no.”

Flattery. Zeus suggested that encouragement might work where sternness has failed. I’m not very good at it...

Anyone passing by would see two lovers sharing an intimate conversation, and Cupid adds to the scene by brushing a strand of my black hair behind my ear. I shiver in the summer heat.

“This dress looks good on you, Hera. Maybe you and I should take a day or two after the assignment. I know many places we could get lost in...”

My breath catches like a jammed bullet.

If he kissed me, I’d go along with it.

I can't blow up on him in public, and he knows that. He's got me cornered. He can take this act as far as he wants to...

A strand of his curly hair falls and brushes my forehead.

Cupid smiles and palms my cheek before leaning back in his chair. "Fifty-seven. Bald with a brown goatee and brown eyes. Scar under right ear. Maroon suit. Black Mercedes. A golden cross necklace."

I suppose he was listening.

"No collateral damage. Clean kill, if possible. It doesn't need to look like an accident, but don't make a fuss, either. In two days, we'll meet for our debrief," I say as I finish my tea. "If you don't show, we'll know you failed."

"Or succeeded and was killed in the process."

"This shouldn't be that difficult." I narrow my eyes at him. "Not with your track record. If I'm being honest, I think Olympia is throwing us an easy target to feel out this arrangement."

Cupid perks up. "Oh? What have you heard? Are they worried I'll do something crazy?"

Zeus thunders in my mind, Precise. Ruthless. Dramatic. Unpredictable...

I stand and straighten out my dress. He's still close enough to hide himself under the fabric and kiss between my thighs, if he wanted to.

If I'd let him.

“Do this by the book, Cupid.” I stare down at him as I hook my purse over my shoulder. “No collateral. No unnecessary attention. In two days, meet me in front of Saint Agnes church along the Marne—same time. May Tyche smile upon you.” The goddess of luck, a customary closing among agents.

Before I can turn to leave, Cupid snatches my arm.

His strength and speed shock a gasp from my lips. All his arrogant coolness has boiled over, leaving a desperate look in his dark eyes.

“We should have a rendezvous in case something goes wrong,” he says.

I shake my head. “That’s not protocol.”

“You can give it a stupid Greek name if you want. House of Atreus, or some shit. I don’t care. We need a backup... in case I need to find you.”

Erratic. Unwieldy. Potentially insane...

I take a slow, deep breath, closing my eyes for a moment.

All of my training tells me to break his fucking wrist and report back to Olympia. Some assets... they don’t last. Something in them breaks, and they’re of no use anymore. I don’t know what happens to them when they can no longer be utilized...

If this arrangement doesn’t work, I don’t know what they’ll do to Cupid.

“Stand up,” I whisper, putting on a fake smile. “Or you’ll make a scene.”

Cupid returns the smile, but his feels genuine. He stands, runs his fingers up my arm and takes me by the waist.

We look like two parting lovers.

“I have a suite at the Hotel Plaza Athénée.” I take in his strong scent as I whisper in his ear. Staying in character, I slide my arms over his broad shoulders. I even kick my foot up so my heel points toward the sun—I have never kicked my foot up in a man’s arms. “Top floor. Westernmost room. There are staff watching the elevators, and you’d need a keycard to access the floor.”

“I wouldn’t be much of an assassin if a few bellhops and a plastic card could keep me from you.”

His fingertips dig into the silky fabric of my dress, easing down my hips like a man who isn’t quite ready to watch his lover walk away.

I can feel him smiling against my cheek. “How about a kiss before you leave?”

“Don’t push me, Cupid.”

“It’s only for show.”

“How about I knee you in the balls?” I fake a laugh. “We could pretend to be quarreling lovers.”

“I’d take any kind of lover with you...”

I break our embrace, fully aware that my nipples are stiff under my dress.

“Don’t make me regret this.”

“Emergency use only.” Cupid lifts my hand and kisses the backs of my fingers. “And if not, I’ll see you in two days.”

“I count on it.”

“It’s a date.”

I make sure he sees my eyes roll before I finally turn and leave. My heels strike the cobblestone sidewalk, sounding off like gunshots. I can feel his eyes on me, trained like a sniper.

To the end of the block, I know I’m in his sights.

I curse myself for telling him where I’ll be.

It’s completely against protocol. If Olympia found out, I’d get the ass-chewing of a lifetime, maybe worse. And yet, as I get out of the cab and stare up at all the windows of the old hotel, I can’t help but smile.

Something about breaking the rules makes me feel so alive.

Olympia always sets me up lavishly.

Back home, stateside, I have a five-room house in South Carolina. The subdued waves of Charleston Bay rock me to sleep. Out on assignment, I’m given a limitless expense card, the finest clothes to match my disguises, and luxury rooms I never want to leave.

I suppose they have to make up for the fact that at any moment I could be snatched up by their assets, have a bag thrown over my head, and driven to some unknown location to be briefed, interrogated, or worse.

Fortunately, I stay on their good side.

My hotel suite is like stepping back in time. The old architecture is reminiscent of a French era filled with philosophers, socialites, and revolutionaries. High ceilings hide painted figures I can't fully examine in the low light, and the view from my balcony sets Paris sprawling out for me. The city is lit up, blazing in the night; the Eiffel Tower is a torch in the distance.

Fresh out of the shower, I change into a pair of gym shorts and an oversized Harvard sweater. I never attended Harvard. My alias, Clarissa Dumont, certainly did. Still, I'm happy to be out of that dress and into comfy clothes. I sit my Glock down on the coffee table next to my tea, crack open my book, and settle in for the night.

Two days of nothing to do but enjoy my expense card and this lovely room. These transitional periods make the stress worth it. For a while, I can pretend that my life isn't cloak and dagger.

I'm sure in some convoluted way, Olympia owns the hotel. Shit, they probably own the airline I flew in on. Shell companies. Offshore bank accounts. Fake persons they funnel money through to cover their tracks. The agency's web is encompassing but invisible. Apart from Zeus, the assets I've handled, and the agents who've taken me in, I don't even have a rough estimate of how many people work for Olympia.

Follow orders, and life gets to be unreal. We operate above governments, laws, and international boundaries. We're gods guiding civilization, eliminating those that need to be snuffed out.

Step out of line, however, and the Underworld awaits.

Three knocks make me snatch up my Glock and chamber a round. I'm aiming at the door to my suite before the final knock finishes. It's nearly two in the morning—there's no reason for anyone to be knocking on my door.

Another knock, only this time I realize it's not coming from the door.

I whip around, training my gun on Cupid through the window of my balcony. He's standing in the night, eyes wild and hair dancing in the wind. The collar of his white shirt is undone under his black blazer. The Eiffel Tower is erected behind him like distant fire.

He has one hand on his gut, holding himself like he has a stomach ache. The other hand waves a bottle of vodka like an offering.

Open the door , he mouths.

There's blood trickling between his fingers.

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CHAPTER 2

CUPID

Finishing a job makes me feel alive.

Do you see the irony?

I eliminate a target, and it gives me life. I'm sure Olympia has some Greek analogy they'd love to tie that to if they could get me to sit down with one of their psychologists. Those dorks love putting their nerdy bow on everything.

Tonight is different.

Mr. Scar Under Right Ear is dead. Gone. Target eliminated. It was a clean, easy job. I waited for his driver to depart and ended him inside his fancy Paris home. Nice place, great snacks in the pantry. And that wine collection! I used a knife, in case you're curious. He received a mostly painless death.

No one will ever know it was me.

I disappeared into the night, got myself a bottle of vodka, and perched up on a bridge over the Marne. The river bled moonlight, and I poured out a bit of the clear liquor for the man I'd just killed.

I did not feel alive.

Even as the vodka hit my lips, the burn in my throat was subdued.

I considered jumping into the river. The water would be cold enough to force some feeling into me. A temporary solution. The real answer is waiting for me on the other side of the glass. She's been waiting for me for some time now, even if she didn't know it.

Hera points her pistol at me, standing as still as a gargoyle. Maybe she'll shoot me? I'm sure I'd feel that.

Open the door , I mouth. My hand presses against the knife wound at my side. Warmth soaks my palm.

Her green eyes search me, scan the wound, the bottle, my face... finally, she lowers her weapon and unlocks the door.

"Evening," I say before she grabs me by the collar and yanks me inside.

She peers out into the night. "Shut up. Were you followed?"

"By who? The target is dead."

"By whoever did that." She gestures to my stomach with her gun.

"Oh? This?" I'd almost forgotten. "Flesh wound. Nothing a drink can't fix."

Hera's out of that sultry dress, cozy in a baggy sweater and shorts. The look suits her. Any look would suit her.

"Did you seriously climb twelve stories with a bottle of vodka and a gunshot wound?"

“What? Don’t be ridiculous,” I laugh and collapse onto the curving blood-red sofa. “I took the stairs to the eleventh floor, picked the lock on an empty room, and climbed up to your balcony. And it’s a knife wound.” I glance around before smiling up at her. “Lovely room. Very let them eat cake. ”

“Well, that makes it so much better. Give me that.”

She tries to snatch the vodka away, but I’m too fast. “You’d take my painkillers?”

“It’ll thin your damn blood. I need to stitch you up and get you out of here.” Hera finally sets the gun down and rubs her temples. “God, I should have never told you where I was.”

“Do you have a headache? Grab a glass.”

“ You are my headache.” She hurries off on her bare feet, rummaging around in the bedroom. “Take off your shirt... and don’t get any ideas!”

I smile, take off my jacket, and start unbuttoning my white shirt. “I’m a tool, Hera. We don’t get ideas.”

She comes back with a little knitting kit. It’s innocent enough, but there’s everything she needs to stitch up a wound. Cautiously, she sits next to me on the sofa and lays out her tools.

As I get my shirt off, I notice her eyes wander. They trace the scars that mark my weaponized body.

She arches an eyebrow. “Not your first rodeo.”

“You look surprised.”

“I’m more shocked by the lack of stupid tattoos.”

“Ink makes you easy to identify. Everyone has scars...”

Hera takes the bottle from my hand, pours a bit on a cotton pad, and presses it to the wound. I suck in a deep breath and exhale the pain.

“That hurt?” she asks, smirking at me.

“Not at all.”

“Liar.”

I shrug. “I’d be a poor assassin if I didn’t know how to lie.”

Hera shakes her head; she takes a look at the bottle before snatching it up again and pulling a swig.

“Oh, God. That is awful.”

“Liquor should feel like a punch to the throat.”

I drop back against the sofa and let her get to work. Hera works the needle in and out through the severed walls of flesh. Her black hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail like a military girl. She has a hard face, unyielding. There’s a hidden softness in her eyes though as she patches me up.

She’s everything I knew she’d be...

“Hera is the goddess of marriage. Did you know that?” I ask conversationally. “She watches over women during childbirth. Maybe that’s why it’s your codename: you’re

so motherly and tender.”

She finishes the job by breaking the thread with a yank that makes me curse in Russian.

“Was that tender enough for you?”

“Tough love, I suppose,” I say, examining her work. “Hera is known as a vengeful goddess.”

Hera stands, leaving me on the sofa. I can see her fingers itching to take up her gun again. “Enough mythology, Cupid. I need you to tell me what happened. No collateral, remember? If there were additional fatalities, I need to know about them. Olympia won’t be pleased.”

I sit up and throw my shirt back on, but leave the buttons undone. Blood has dyed a portion of it red. “Oh, the job was clean. Target eliminated. No witnesses. No collateral.”

She stares at my wound as if she’s expecting the explanation to rip the stitches open. I’ve stared killers in the eyes (even looked in the mirror on occasion), and none have compared to the look she’s giving me right now. It’s a look that could kill me.

Finally, I shrug. “I fell.”

“Onto a knife?”

“Perfect stab, really,” I say nonchalantly. “No organs pierced. That knife really knew what it was doing.”

“Cupid...” Hera looks like she might explode. “Is that wound self-inflicted?”

I smile. “I needed a reason to see you...”

This time, I think she actually might shoot me.

“Are you fucking crazy?” She’s pacing. Is it strange that I find her pacing attractive?
“Are you insane? ”

“I’m an assassin, Hera. Insanity is a prerequisite.”

“You stabbed yourself!”

“Barely,” I laugh. “It’s a scratch. I just needed a bit of blood for show. It got you to let me in, didn’t it?”

Hera stands at the balcony, pointing her gun out at the night as if she’s going to murder the Eiffel Tower.

“Leave,” she commands. “Immediately. Consider this the debrief. Leave now so I don’t have to report this bullshit to Olympia.”

“What’s the difference between leaving now or in the morning?”

I stand, challenging her.

She doesn’t budge as I close the distance and smell the lavender in her hair. Standing this close together, she has to crane her neck to look up at me. Still, she doesn’t look small.

“Either way, you should report this, no?”

“You want me to?”

“I want to know why you wouldn’t,” I whisper with a smile. “You work by the book. This isn’t protocol.”

“It would be easier for both of us if they didn’t find out. This sort of thing doesn’t sit well with them, Cupid.”

“Or maybe you have a soft spot for me...”

I can sense her tensing.

Her finger sneaks toward the trigger.

“Come on. You feel it.”

“Feel what? ”

Slowly, I drag my finger up her thigh. The way she hisses, you’d think I just sliced her open. Maybe I have...

“ This ,” I say softly, inching closer. “This... tension. I’ve felt it since the moment I first saw you. It’s been drawing me to you.”

“Maybe the Paris air is getting to your head.”

Oh, Hera. I felt this long before Paris... “We’re both too strong to be lulled by that false romance people feel here.”

As my hand rises, so does her gun.

My fingers brave her throat, sliding up until my thumb rolls over her chin.

The barrel of her weapon buries itself under my jaw.

“Don’t push me,” she warns.

The fields of green in her eyes tell me a different story—they tattle on her lying lips.

“Face it, Hera. You’re in just as deeply as I am.”

I hold her gaze as our noses brush together.

Her skin is so soft against my palm, so unlike the hardness she presents.

“One kiss,” I whisper. “Just to see what happens.”

“Kiss me and I’ll shoot you.”

“Worth the risk.”

Our lips seal, but no bullet hits my brain.

Finally, I feel alive.

I feel the thrill like I’ve never felt anything before.

Hera loosens beneath me, welcomes my tongue like she’s been waiting for it her entire life. Breath floods from her nose as the kiss deepens, and she finally pulls back with wide eyes and a desperate gasp.

“I’ll shoot you,” she repeats.

“You would have done it already.”

Something passes through her rigid face. A realization. The moment that everything changes.

She's in my arms before the gun hits the floor.

I slam her against the wall, greedily clawing at her thick legs as they wrap around me. Hera kisses me like a woman who hasn't been touched in years—I take her like a man who's been deprived his entire life.

“We can't do this,” she pants as I lift her sweater. “This isn't protocol.”

“Fuck protocol.”

Pinned against the wall, Hera lets me pull her sweater over her head. Perfect, milky tits fall out to meet me, soft against her toned body. No tattoos for her, either. Fingerprints are damning enough.

“This is all I've been thinking about since the moment I first saw you.” I speak like a maniac, kissing her nipples, swirling my tongue around them as she moans. “Even during the job... all I could think about was you.”

“You thought about me while you killed a man?” she gasps. “Is that supposed to turn me on?”

“It clearly is.”

“You're crazy. We can't do this.” She shakes her head as I meet her gaze. “Don't you get it? If Olympia finds out, they'll fucking kill us.”

I cup her face in my palms.

I stare into those deep green eyes and lose myself for the first time in my life.

Nothing about my existence has ever made sense, so why should this?

From the moment I saw her, I knew that a switch had been flipped. I knew there was no going back.

“Hera,” I whisper, desperate to speak her real name. “I’d die for one night with you.”

She laughs against my lips. A tear rolls down her cheek.

“That’s so fucking stupid, Cupid.”

“Stupidity doesn’t keep it from being true.”

As I carry her to the bedroom, Hera wraps herself up in me. She doesn’t fight. She doesn’t speak another word about Olympia or protocol or the consequences that are sure to come.

She lets me lie her down on the bed, pull off her panties, and gaze upon her naked body. The snowy whiteness of her flesh is so pure that I fear I’ll stain in with my blood-stained hands. A goddess lies before me; I’m going to taste her divinity.

“Tell me your name,” I say as I whip off my belt.

She sits upright, guarding herself. “No . That I won’t do.”

“I’ll tell you mine.”

“I don’t want to know,” she says sternly. Her legs writhe even as she hides herself.
“Don’t say it.”

Fine. I'll peel her back layer by layer. I'll taste her and fuck her and do anything she wants if it means that someday, maybe, I'll get to hear my true name leave her lips. There will be more assignments, more people to kill, more opportunities to unmask the woman who's become the sole object of my desire.

She has no idea what she's been doing to me, and for how long...

"You would have let me kiss you back at that café." I step out of my pants, cock trained on her like the rifle of a marksman. "Wouldn't you?"

Hera's gaze drifts. She stops hugging herself so tightly, lets her legs part now that I'm bare before her. It takes her a moment to respond, to stop staring at the raging thing between my legs. "To keep up the act... yes."

"That's not why."

I dive onto the bed, making her shriek and slide back against the headboard. I crawl to her like a beggar, like an animal slinking toward its kill.

"Tell me the truth." My hand runs up her foot.

Hera nods. "I-I wanted you to... I wanted to kiss you. I still do."

With all the speed my training has given me, I snap her head back by her hair, loom over her, and growl into her mouth. "Then fucking kiss me."

Hera loses and gains control all at once.

Her tongue shoots into my mouth, whipping at me wildly.

She moans and growls and cries out, scratching my chest, nicking my wound with her

knee. The pain means nothing.

She means everything.

The headboard slams against the wall as I shove her back. I smack her legs open, diving between her muscled thighs and biting hard. She rakes her fingers through my hair, searing my scalp with pain.

“Go on. Taste me,” she sounds so desperately mad with lust. “Fucking have me. I want it. You psychopath. You fucking crazy asshole. Do it. Oh, God—“

My tongue turns her words to mush.

Through her thin bush, I find her clit and lick it like I own it. I’m an assassin, and her pleasure is my target.

It doesn’t take long before she’s screaming my name.

Not my real name, this plaything I’ve been given.

I’m Cupid, and Hera has finally been struck by my arrow.

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CHAPTER 3

HERA

Waking up next to my naked lover in Paris sounds so storybook, but here I am. Me... the stone-cold handler who once popped an assassin on the mouth for making a run at her. How far I have fallen...

The sun is barely starting to peek up from Germany.

Cupid is lying on his back, limbs sprawled out vulnerably. He needs to leave now . And yet, I can't help but take a moment to watch him. I count scars. I even let myself trace a few with my fingertips.

My body still hums from the things he did to me.

I feel better than I have in... well, ever. Even with the stress of potentially being found out by Olympia and killed for it. It makes me want to stay in bed and explore every thick muscle Cupid fucked me with last night.

But we don't have time for that.

I slap him hard across the face. "Get up."

Cupid snaps awake with killer's eyes before he realizes I'm the one who hit him. Suddenly, his cock stiffens.

“Well, good morning.” He rolls over and sweeps his arm around my body. “I could get used to waking up like this. Hit me harder next time, would you?”

This man is deranged.

I hate that it turns me on...

“Enough.” I lurch out of bed, scrambling around for anything to throw on.

Cupid lies lazily on his side, watching me as he touches himself.

I sigh and shake my head. “Stop that.”

“You want me to leave? I can’t exactly climb down the balcony with this thing in my way.”

“You don’t need the keycard to get down the stairs,” I say, finding a tank top. “You need to get the hell out of here. Now. ”

I pause and stare at him.

Cupid doesn’t budge, slowly stroking his thick, curved cock. He holds my gaze, waiting for me.

“Fuck...”

I throw myself at him like a wild animal. My thoughts are explosions, left without reason or logic in all the noise and force. As I take him in my mouth, nothing else seems to matter.

How is this even possible? Before him, all I cared about was the job.

One kiss turned me into some teenage girl risking getting caught by her parents. Except my parents will literally kill me.

But, damn, does he taste good...

Cupid lies back, moaning softly and pressing my head down deeper. I choke a little, but don't stop. The pain makes it better.

"Don't fucking stop," he growls. "Faster."

I obey him. God, it feels so good to do as I'm told. Last night, I let him take control, and I've never felt such freedom.

He pours cum down my throat.

I kick my feet and welcome it, moaning onto his cock.

As soon as he's done groaning and pumping into me, I gasp and slap his thigh so hard he bucks. "Now, get out."

"Is that an order?"

"If it gets you to move." I leap up and throw him his pants. "Yes." He watches me lick my lips; I savor the salty taste that lingers on them.

Cupid rolls out of bed, laughing as he gets dressed. I ripped his stitches open last night while I was... riding. No time to fix him up. He'll be fine; besides, he's the one who fucking stabbed himself.

"Let's meet later," he says, buttoning up his shirt.

I'm already throwing clothes into my suitcase. I unload the Glock and hide it in the floor panel where Olympia had hidden it for me. "No. I'm taking the next flight back to the States. This shouldn't have happened, Cupid. And if I stay, I can't ensure it won't happen again."

"Enjoyed yourself, did you?"

His stupid accent crests as one thing and crashes as another. It soothes me like a sedative—it's dangerous.

I look him in those mischievous eyes and smile. "You know I did."

"When will I see you again?"

"Our next assignment. You did well, Cupid. Olympia will be happy that we're a good match."

"Better than good ." He steps toward me, running his teeth over his lip. "They've been worried about me, haven't they? I'm out of control."

"I can't speak to that," I shudder as he lifts my chin. "But, yes. You're clearly out of control."

"It's because of you ."

"Not according to Olympia," I whisper a breath away from his lips. "You've been spiraling for some time." For whatever reason, I ask something I shouldn't ask. "What's been going on with you, Cupid? What's wrong?"

He pauses.

Just like when he grabbed me at the café, his demeanor changes and something in him slips. His lower lip bounces erratically before he speaks, “Nothing. They’ve just never sent a handler that can actually handle me.”

“Is that what I’ve done? Handled you?”

“Careful,” he hums. “You’re turning me on again.”

We kiss like we shouldn’t.

And if we’re smart, it’ll be for the last time.

Stateside again, but I feel like I left something in Paris. My heart? How cliché.

This isn’t like me—I don’t get hung up on one-night stands. Is it still a one-night stand after what we did the next morning? What happened between Cupid and me can be nothing more than that. A one-off. An admittedly amazing night that can never be repeated.

He’s all I could think about the entire flight over the Atlantic.

Even now, as I march out of the terminal in Raleigh International, I find myself looking for him in the crowd. I hope that he’s watching me with those trickster eyes.

Someone is watching me.

We’re trained to pick up on these things—people that look too regular, heads turning just as you look at them, someone trailing you even as you take a roundabout path—and all my senses are alerting me to danger.

It’s not Cupid.

I walk through the long-term parking garage and feel their eyes on me. I know what's about to happen, and they make their move just as I reach my Lexus.

Tires screech.

Men dressed in plain clothes grab me.

The black bag is fitted over my head.

"Don't fight, Hera." The voice is familiar, though, I've never seen this person's face. Is this his only job?

"I know the drill."

They load me into their van, and we get rolling.

"Did you at least get my suitcase?" I ask. "Olympia gave me some fine clothes, this time."

"We have it."

The agents will say nothing more to me. No point in asking any questions.

Just like me, they are told only what they need to know. They are tools completing their task.

They'll take me to Zeus, and then I'll know what this is all about.

As far as I know, Olympia has no headquarters. There is no address or phone number, no email chains or Monday memos. Our safe houses change constantly. I never know where I'm being taken.

The room, however, is always the same.

I'm sitting on a metal foldout chair. The box of a room is four white walls, a white marble floor, and a white ceiling. The white blends so perfectly together that I can't identify the corners of the room. It's a void. I could be underground, in the ocean, or in fucking space for all I know.

Always, the bag is pulled off of my head from behind. I'm instructed to face forward and to look behind me under no circumstance. When the meeting is over, the door behind me (whatever it looks like) will open, and an agent will put the bag back over my head and escort me out.

The only other thing in the room is a small white speaker on a white column pedestal. Wherever the light comes from, the pedestal casts no shadow. It feels godly, which I imagine is the desired effect.

As always, I wait.

They took my phone and my watch.

Time blends to nothing, like the tiny, endless room. Even here, all I can think about is him.

Hera, the distorted, booming voice erupts from the speaker. I swear, they put that thing on full blast. The voice shakes me; it bounces a thousand times in the claustrophobic void. Welcome back. Report.

It's not unheard of to be brought in so soon after a job. But I wasn't expecting it. For a handler as experienced as I am, Olympia usually waits until they have another target for me. They know when an assassin succeeds or fails, all I can give them are the details.

I hope they're just eager to know if Cupid is still viable.

"Target eliminated," my voice sounds so tiny in comparison. I speak as if I'm reading off quarterly financial reports. "Clean. No collateral... Field asset unharmed."

Assessment of field asset, Zeus demands.

A daydream of Cupid's body swims through the white room. My moans bounce off the walls—wherever they are—a million times. I squirm in the chair. Christ, I never thought I'd feel horny in this weird space.

"Erratic. Playful," I sigh. "Arrogant. But highly precise and capable. Field asset is fit for further assignment."

Silence before Zeus echoes, Under your supervision?

Olympia has always given me a choice. If I feel that I'm not the right fit for an assassin, I can make it known. It wouldn't be the first time I've extricated myself from handling an asset.

All I have to do is say so, and I'll never see Cupid again.

"Yes: under my supervision."

How is it that even here, in the bowels of whatever Olympia is, with the voice of Zeus vibrating my spine, the last thing on my mind is protocol?

I want to see Cupid again.

I have to.

Zeus seems to ponder this from behind the wall or in his office on the other side of the planet or high up in the clouds on Mount Olympus. When he finally speaks again, he startles me, Amplifying information?

"None," I say quickly. "As I said, the target was eliminated and it was a clean—"

The speaker makes a sound like a thunderbolt being hurled. It crackles and whines so loudly that my teeth hurt. When all that cacophony finally settles, Zeus speaks as softly as the speaker allows, We know what you did. We know everything, Hera. Enjoyed yourself, did you?

I close my eyes and slump back in the chair. Of course, they know. How stupid am I? They probably own the hotel. The whole place must've been bugged.

I wait for a bullet to blow out my skull.

Zeus doesn't give me a chance to admit anything. It's unlike you, Hera. You breathe protocol. It's no exaggeration to state that you're our finest handler. You'd throw this all away for a good fuck?

The way he says fuck is tinged with contempt. Does Zeus, whoever they are, get laid? They wouldn't be worthy of the name if they didn't...

I bite a smirk down, but it bleeds into my tone. "If you were listening, you know just how good it was." God, Cupid is a bad influence on me.

Quiet, Zeus roars. The only reason you're still alive is because you're a valuable asset, but we will not tolerate insolence. Don't test us.

Zeus is right. If they've known all along, they could have me killed that very night. If I'm still alive, it's because they have use for me. Cupid is surely still alive. He's far

more valuable than I am and infinitely harder to kill.

Chances are, I'll never see him again. But he lives, and that fills my heart with a defiant joy.

Silence consumes the white room. Without a point of reference, I'm not sure how much time passes. I count my heartbeats until I grow bored. My mouth goes dry. I have to relieve myself, but I don't say a word.

Finally, Zeus speaks, You are reassigned. Relief smacks a breath from my lips. Immediately. A new field asset, and a new target. Lake Tahoe, California. Codename: Ares. Stand by for details. Request repetition when necessary. And, Hera...

I hold my breath.

I close my eyes, wait for the door to open, and a bullet to enter my brain. How spectacular the stain of my blood would look in the all-white room; perhaps then, I'd be able to make out the defining lines of the floor and walls.

This is your only warning.

I'm dropped off right where I was snatched up. Olympia is efficient like that.

I don't turn around until the van's squealing tires fades. No one is there. No one is watching.

I manage to get my luggage in the trunk, get in the car, and start the engine before I weep.

I almost lost everything. My position within Olympia. My life. Everything I've worked for. And, still, I can't stop myself from yearning for Cupid's touch. That night

lives in me like a piece of shrapnel that I never want extracted.

Olympia is letting me keep it. They are letting me live even after I broke their most sacred rule.

Assassins and handlers are not friends. My field assets are not my buddies, or flings, and certainly not my lovers. They are tools, and I let myself forget that.

My next assignment is one they call Ares. The God of War. I won't forget this time.

If they had sent me back to Cupid, I know I would have failed again.

I would've been happy to die in his arms.

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CHAPTER 4

CUPID

Olympia thinks assassins never mingle. Or maybe they know everything I do, and they let it go because they need us. Either way, killers gossip as much as the gods and goddesses we're named after. We're only human, after all.

With so much time between assignments, identities and passports that could take us anywhere, and more money than most of us know what to do with, my colleagues and I often link up in the wide world. A true hunter recognizes a fellow hunter: it's in the eyes.

We talk. We share all the dirty details Olympia forbids us to regale. And we can get away with it because we're not easy to kill. Crack down on us, and there will be hell to pay. It's a delicate balance.

It's how I knew Hera was my handler before we spoke the code phrase.

It's how I knew that she'd been reassigned to Ares—that Olympia had found out about us, and decided to keep us apart.

The gods have made a mistake.

Ares. I met him in Japan years ago. He was a brute, preferring blunt force over tact and precision. Good drinking buddy, though. I had no reason not to like him. No reason until Olympia gave Hera to him.

He was easy to subdue, easy to extract the information I needed. Stealth is not his strong suit, and he never saw me coming. I even let him live, but he'll be out of commission and off-grid for a while. I saw to it that his needs are met. I'm not an animal; I'm just in love.

It's a hot, clear day on Tahoe's massive mountain lake. Ares gave me the location for first contact: a small beach on the north side. Hera's identifier is apparently an all white bikini with a red thunderbolt on one breast. Is Olympia taunting me?

You broke our rules, so we'll offer her up to Ares like a piece of meat.

Apart from my payment for the last job (as always, a cash drop in Spain) I've had no contact with Olympia. There's been no indication of a new assignment or new handler. Hermes has not found me to deliver a message. Maybe they're letting me go. Maybe they decided that eliminating me would be too much trouble.

Still, I can't help but think they're poking me. If they know I'll go after her, they're fools for not realizing that antagonizing me is a fatal error.

I'll kill them all for her.

Ares was supposed to approach Hera from the beach, but I've opted for my own route. The boat I purchased cruises smoothly along the clear water, cutting the emerald blue as I guide it into a small bay. I've been living on it for a few days, sleeping in the cabin below, working on my tan as I wait. It came with a little captain's hat, and I've grown fond of it. The beach is just ahead. There's only a handful of people on the sand, and only one of them is wearing a white bikini.

Through my binoculars, I spy on her body. I've seen her naked from head to toe, but the way that two-piece digs into her curves does something new to my desire. Her dark hair is braided into playful pigtails; she looks less like a spy than ever. If she

were alone on that beach, I'd run this ship aground and take her in the sand.

Instead, I kill the engines. The anchor plops into the water as the boat slows. I toss my captain's hat aside, take off my shirt, and dive into the refreshingly cold lake to make the swim ashore. I'll miss that hat.

I'm not sure when Hera realizes that I'm here, but she's on her feet and shaking by the time I wade out of the shallows. Water cascades off of me with each step. I stop an arm's length from her, catch my breath, and stare into those cool green eyes.

Time slows itself for us, lets us live in this moment.

If there are any threats on this beach, I've lost the will to look for them. All that matters is that perfect, stunned look on her face.

"No need for code phrases this time, no?"

"C-Cupid..." Does she know how badly I want to hear my real name leave her lips?

"You shouldn't be here. How did you even find me? You need to leave before—"

"Before Ares arrives?"

She closes her eyes. "What have you done?"

"He's alive, but I did what I had to. Did you think I'd let you go?"

"Cupid..."

I step toward her, so close that I could unfurl her bikini with the tug of a string. "Did you really think that I wouldn't come for you? That I wouldn't do anything to find you?"

If I've been wrong about her, Hera will walk away from this. She'll report to Olympia that I've gone completely rogue, that Ares is out of the game. They'll hide her from me. They'll do their best to kill me, no matter how much damage I cause on my way out.

"You need to leave," Hera says through trembling lips. "You need to get out of here, and I'm coming with you."

Her words stagger me like a slug to the chest. Actually, I've been shot before, and this is far more exhilarating.

"What about protocol?"

Hera smiles, green eyes full of defiant fire. "Fuck protocol."

We don't care who on the beach is watching us. A couple of them might even be assets of Olympia. I dare them to try to pull our lips apart, to pry our bodies away from one another. I'm the deadliest assassin on the payroll—I know it.

And they know it, too.

Finally, I've found something truly worth killing for.

We abandoned the boat in the bay. I left the keys in the cabin. Eventually, someone will climb aboard and claim their new toy. The stupid thing only cost me six hundred grand. A drop in the bucket of my blood money.

The cabin we're hiding in only cost a million more. We're tucked away deep in the mountains outside of Tahoe. No phones. No Internet. I even had Hera ditch the bikini when we jumped into the car I had waiting for us, just in case there was a tracker sewn into the hem—that made the drive more fun than it should have been. For two

weeks, I've been planning our escape. That's the mark of a proper assassin: preparation.

Olympia will expect us to run halfway across the planet. They'll watch for us to board flights or ships, so we'll stay right here for as long as it takes.

Forever, if necessary.

How we proceed relies entirely on Hera. There are things she doesn't yet know, things I have to say to her, and those secrets might turn her against me.

If that's the case, I'll load the gun for her.

Hera comes out of the bathroom just as I get a fire going. Her silky hair hangs wet down her back. The sun kissed her pale skin today, but she looks the same as that night in Paris. She's perfect.

She clears her throat and gestures to the baggy flannel I set out for her. The shirt hangs off her like a dress. "It's a little big."

"It suits you." I stand and beckon her near the fire. "But, I must say, you were a sight to see in that bikini..."

"God," she laughs. "I fucking hated it. That's the first time Olympia set me up in a swimsuit for a rendezvous."

"First and last," I correct.

Hera sighs and falls onto the deep sofa. Worry lives on her face. "Yeah. We're really doing this. Congratulations, you've infected me with your insanity."

"We could eliminate the target they gave you. Maybe that would put us back in their good graces."

"They know we can kill targets, Cupid. That's not enough. We disobeyed orders. We're AWOL. And you attacked another asset. The gods are unforgiving. No, this is it. We're on the run—always will be. You realize that, don't you? Is being with me worth looking over your shoulder for the rest of your life?"

The floorboards creak as I drop slowly to my knees before her. With my hands on her thighs, I stare up at her like a worshiper.

"If they had killed me out there on that beach, if a sniper had been waiting and taken me out before I even had the chance to say a word to you, it still would have been worth it to see you one last time, Rose ."

She gasps like I've torn her soul wide open. "W-what did you just call me?" She squirms and shakes uncontrollably. How long has it been since she's heard that name, since she's looked in the mirror and seen her true self?

I hold her hands so she won't flee over the back of the couch. "Rose Watson," I say it, and she sobs. "There's so much you don't know..."

CHAPTER 5

ROSE

It's a strange thing, taking on so many artificial identities. Hera, the stern handler. Clarissa Dumont, the French Harvard graduate with a penchant for fashion. You become them, steal bits from them, all while hiding the real you from the world and yourself. It's the only way to train your mind and avoid mistakes in the field.

Rose Watson is a name I haven't heard or even thought about in years. It unearths childhood memories that I'd tactically forgotten. I always thought I was hiding them away, securing them until someday I could revisit it all once I retired and had nothing to do but figure out what the fuck this was all for. But if I had worked myself into old age with Olympia, would I have forgotten myself altogether?

Right now, none of that matters. The real question is, how does Cupid know my true name?

"What is this? A set up?" My eyes dart frantically around the cozy cabin as if I'm suddenly aware of cameras and bugs that have been hiding in the blankets, snowshoes, and fireplace the entire time. "Did Olympia plant you to test me? How do you know that name? HOW DO YOU KNOW?"

The last thing I expect Cupid to do is kiss me. His lips naturally sedate me. It's no spy trick or secret assassin's weapon. It's the chemicals in my mind and body. It's my heart that beats for him.

He pulls back, staring into my eyes.

I search his handsome face desperately, tracing every sharp line for some hint as to what's going on.

"Fuck Olympia. Fuck protocol, right?" He holds my face with both hands, keeping me from shaking. "Rose, I've had you in my sights long before Olympia assigned you to me. Apollo... remember him? You punched him in the mouth on an assignment in West Africa."

The memory makes me laugh. It puts me at ease. Apollo was such a shit-bag assassin. "He was hitting on me. Bastard wouldn't cut the shit. I busted his lip."

"Straightened him out, didn't you?" Cupid laughs.

I can see in his eyes how badly he wants me to understand. I take a few deep breaths and nod.

"Apollo told me about you. Assassins... We're like a cohort. We find each other. We talk. One drunken night in Spain, Apollo told me all about his stone-cold handler and that busted lip. We went for tapas, actually. Have you had tapas in Spain? I'll take you. I know the best—"

"Cupid..."

"Right. Unimportant." He shrugs. "He told me about Hera. I pressed him for details. I don't know... I became obsessed. Obsessed with the woman who punched assassins trying to get in her pants. Just hearing about you made me feel more alive than I ever have."

"What are you saying?" I'm still quivering. "You've been stalking me?"

“I’m saying it’s no coincidence that we were assigned together...”

It doesn’t make any sense. Olympia operates so far above us all. How could he influence their decisions?

“I found you, Rose,” he whispers my name like it’s his most guarded possession. “No identity is so well protected that it can’t be found. Twenty-nine years old. Born in Idaho. West Point graduate and Army veteran. Worked for the CIA before being recruited to Olympia. Currently residing in Charleston, North Carolina. You have a beautiful home, by the way.”

The thought of Olympia’s deadliest assassin prowling outside my home sends a chill down my spine. It frightens me in a way that transcends fear. How long has he been watching me? How many nights passed with him so close that he could have decided at any moment to reveal himself?

Would I have wanted him to?

“Yeah,” he says. “That’s why I didn’t just knock on your front door. That’s why I watched from a distance until my time came: that look on your face. How could I have explained myself? You would have flipped. You would have shot me, even. I would have taken the bullet gladly, but I knew there was another way.”

Cupid risks sliding onto the couch with me.

Even with my body radiating panic, I don’t inch away. Somehow, impossibly, hearing all this makes me want him more. And how could it not? Paris wasn’t a fluke; it was the night that set me free.

I’ve never been in more danger in all my life, never been so close to death. That home in Charleston is a memory I’ll never return to.

And it feels so good.

Every word he says to me breaks another link in Olympia's chain around my neck. I was suffocating in the lifestyle, drowning without knowing it. Cupid showing up at that café in Paris was my first gasp for air...

"My behavior that Olympia has been so concerned with," Cupid says with a smile, "started when I found you. I don't know how many handlers they have, but I was ready to run through them all until they sent you to me. And your last assignment, Hephaestus, how do you think he got hurt?"

"Olympia told me he was injured rock climbing..."

"He was," Cupid says. "I cut his line."

I hold his fierce gaze. "You could have killed him."

He laughs, "I've killed for money for years, Rose. You think I won't kill for you?"

My heart races for him.

Cupid has been pursuing me, hunting me, stalking me... and I had no idea. All this time, Olympia's finest killer—maybe the finest in the world—has had his sights set on one thing: me.

I feel like I'm sitting on heaven's highest pedestal. I've been raised to a level of desire reserved for deities.

He'd die for me.

He'll kill for me.

And either thing would plunge me further into my need for him.

Slowly, I rise from the couch.

Cupid jerks like he'll have to chase me, like I'm going to run. I shake my head and stare down at him, biting my lower lip.

One by one, I undo the buttons on my flannel and let the shirt slip away.

He gazes upon me like I'm Helen of Troy. Aphrodite. His goddess. His everything.

War. Death. Blood. For Cupid, one taste of me would make it all worthwhile.

He reaches for me like a starving man begging for bread.

I grab his face and squeeze.

"Tell me your name," I demand. "Say it."

"There's no going back once you hear it. You can still walk away, Rose. If you leave now and tell Olympia I took you, they'll let you back in. They'll come for me, but you'll live. You can be a handler again."

Nothing has ever sounded so horrifying. There's no going back. There's no receding from the fullness in my heart.

I lean in, growling in his perfect face. "You'd kill for me? I'd go to war for you, too. You're all I've thought about since Paris. I thought I'd never see you again, and I would have slowly rotted if that were true. Before you, before your touch, I was dead. You pulled me from the Underworld...."

“Maybe we should go by Bonnie and Clyde,” he jests. “We might meet a similar end.”

“I’ll happily die with you,” I whisper. “As Rose, and...”

A moment passes before he reveals himself.

“Alexei.” Just like me, I think it pains him to speak the name. “Alexei Malis.”

The shadows have been lifted. There’s nothing to protect us now.

“Alexei...” I test the name on my lips. It fits just right. “Alexei.”

“Rose.”

We tease a kiss. Our first kiss as ourselves.

Our first step into a world where we will always be hunted, together.

Alexei opens his mouth, tongue waiting for me. I lick him slowly, I take his taste and claim it.

“Fuck me, Alexei,” I breathe onto his lips. “And don’t stop saying my name...”

I’m lifted off the floor before I get the words out.

Alexei holds me in his arms, searing my body red with his clawing fingertips. He tastes like the lake, fresh, clear water.

“You’re mine,” he pants, eyes wide and wild. “And I’m yours. If they come for us, I’ll kill them all.”

My warrior. My assassin. My God.

He's only got one weapon that I'm interested in right now.

I slide my hand down his pants and let his cock know that I've missed it. Alexei—Cupid, until now—has been hiding in my dreams every night since Paris.

Finally, he's mine again.

Only this time, I'm not afraid.

I get my toes back on the floor and shove Alexei onto the couch. Behind me, the fire crackles delightfully, warming my back so that beads of sweat roll over his fingers as I mount him.

He works his pants off, tears off his shirt, and takes my breasts in his mouth. He's rabid, filled with wild lust that's finally unleashed.

I want him every way I can get him. Wild. Hard. Soft and slow. I want to fuck so desperately all night that we wake up lazily in the morning and make gentle, passionate love.

"We could be dead by morning." I lean back in his lap as he kisses my belly. "They could find us."

"Doubtful," he huffs. "But just in case, we better screw like it's our last night on Earth."

He feels even more perfect than before. Paris was a dream. Tonight is an awakening. Before, there was the fear of being caught.

Nothing is holding me back this time.

Alexei pulses inside of me as I ride him slowly, as I open myself up to his perfect body.

“I haven’t cum since the last time I saw you,” he admits. “It’s been torture, thinking about you every night but resisting the urge...”

Pain drives him.

Pleasure will be his reward.

I press him back against the couch, rolling my hips and dragging my fingers down his scarred chest. “You have one mission tonight...”

Alexei gazes up at me, working his hips in time with mine.

His eyes are so full of want, of need, that it makes me feel like the most powerful being in the universe.

“Anything for you,” he moans, burying his cock deeper. “Rose, anything. Tell me who to fight. Tell me who to kill...”

I shake my head, brushing my nose across his lips. “Tonight, I want you to fill me.” Never in my life have I even thought like this... wanted this so badly. “I want you to fuck me like tomorrow isn’t promised.”

“Oh, God.” His head drops back. His fingers claw at my thighs. “Rose, you’re insane. You don’t know what you’re doing to me. You’re gonna make me... Oh, fuck...”

“Do it,” I pant, bouncing harder and faster. “Cum inside of me.”

“Rose. Rose...”

“That’s right. Don’t stop saying my name, Alexei.”

“Rose...”

“Don’t fucking stop...”

“Rose. Rose! ”

“You stabbed yourself for me. You’d die for me. You’d kill for me,” I moan so loudly that I’m sure Hades could hear me in the Underworld. “I’m fucking yours. Cum for me!”

Alexei’s body spasms as he pours himself into me. He shakes like it’s the first time, moans my name like he’ll never let go of me.

I lose my fingers in the trails of his curls.

I lick the sweat from his neck and suck his skin so hard I nearly draw blood.

Here, in our hideaway cabin, only the mountain is witness to our desire.

Not even the gods are watching.

"Do you think all of the people you killed were bad?"

Alexei hums into the crook of my neck. "It's not that simple. I think they were all living at a level of society that requires bad acts to reach. Do you think Olympia is good?"

"I used to. But I don't know why. I just believed in the mission. I believed in them."

"To rid the world of evil," he mimics their words. "You had faith, like gods. All I knew was that I was good at what they asked me to do, and they paid me insane amounts of money to do it. When you're born in the dirt, morality doesn't get in the way of a paycheck."

I turn on my side, examining his muscular silhouette before the fire. After countless bouts, we've opted to remain on the floor in a pile of blankets. Sweat glistens over every inch of him, casting a heavenly glow.

"But love does?"

Alexei flashes me an obnoxious smile. "Are you saying that you love me?"

"I'm saying that those big paychecks are about to stop." I playfully smack his chest and let my fingers linger over the curved scar near his collarbone.

"I have plenty of money."

"Stashed? They'll vanish our bank accounts, all of our identities. I have some money hidden..."

Alexei mischievously arches his eyebrow.

"Shut up. It's common practice," I say. "But I wasn't planning on running. I don't have much."

He sighs as if he doesn't have a care in the world and lies flat on his back. "I've been planning on running for quite some time."

"How much do you have stashed?"

"Millions in the states." He glances at me. "Tens of millions abroad."

"Shit," I laugh and lay my head on his chest. "Not bad. But it won't matter if they kill us. It's only a matter of time before they realize both of us are off the radar, or until Ares resurfaces and tells them everything. They'll dispatch Hades and Cerberus, Alexei. You know what they are..."

"Bogeymen. Assassin hunters." He wiggles his hands in the air. "I'm not afraid of them."

"It's not just them," I say softly, thinking of the unlimited resources at Olympia's disposal. "They'll never stop sending assets after us. They'll find us. I know it sounds romantic to die together in a shootout, but I don't want to. Not now that we're together, that you found me. I want to live... with you. I want to see what life together could be like."

He sits me up and faces me, running his fingers through my hair like he's reading a story in braille in each strand.

Every time he looks into my eyes, I'm calmed. For a brief moment, I feel like I was never a part of any shadowy organization, never an aide to killers, and never on the run. I feel as normal as a woman head over heels in love can feel, which isn't very normal at all. It certainly isn't safe, but a different sort of danger.

Alexei smiles and stretches his words like he's a ghost haunting our cabin. "Then maybe we should become the bogeymen."

He tickles me. It's crazy how innocent an act has such an effect on me. I can't remember the last time I let someone get close enough to try to tickle me.

"What? The two of us can scare Olympia?" Giggles bubble out of me as his touch becomes more tender. "How? We don't even know who they are."

"Rose," he says gravely. "I've been planning on running for a very long time."

His hazel eyes are full of light, beaming with all the secrets of this man—Cupid and Alexei both—that I've yet to uncover.

"What if we didn't have to run? What if I had a plan?"

"A plan like stabbing yourself in the gut and knocking on their bedroom window?"

Alexei bobs his head from side to side. "Sort of. A little bit crazier," he says in an accent that ironically leans Greek. "This would involve letting their hunters find me, and going with them without a fight."

"I think you've overlooked the fact that they'll kill you on site. They're quite good at that, I've been told."

"They won't. Olympia needs to know how I got to you. How I knew that Ares was your next assignment. Information is leaking from the cracks, and they'll see an opportunity to plug those leaks by bringing me in alive. Say what you will about Olympia, but they are efficient. I still have value to them."

"Fine, I'm intrigued." I stare into the flames in his eyes like I'm looking into the depths of Hades's lair. "So, what stops them from killing you after you told them how you found me?"

Alexei guides my face to his, wearing that same cocky, knowing smile that was plastered on his face outside that café in Paris.

"I'm going to tell them everything I know."

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CHAPTER 6

ALEXEI

Cupid's days are numbered. It's been a good run, but there's only one thing I have left to do under this alias.

Rose doesn't like my plan, doesn't like that I'm the one who must surrender. As if I would ever put her in harm's way. That's not an option. There's only one way forward now, and I'm on the path.

"Hit," I said confidently, almost like a boast. "I know what's coming."

The steely-eyed dealer drops a card and exclaims, "Twenty-one!. Winner, winner, chicken dinner."

Everyone at the table erupts in celebration. Of course they do: they're making money. All around us, the casino chimes and rings and tolls with hopes and dreams. Most of them will lose—the house always wins.

But sometimes, a lucky few manage to steal their fortunes.

When Rose said my plan was a gamble, I couldn't help but laugh. How poetic. But that's not why I chose Vegas as the location to carry it out.

I chose Sin City because there are more cameras here than anywhere in the country. The casinos are always looking for cheaters, and you can't walk five feet on the floor

without being scanned by some of the best facial-recognition software in the world. Facial recognition can be tricked, but I'm not playing any games. For two days, I've been hitting the tables in fine suits, drinking my fill, and raising my glass to the eyes in the sky.

I'm not hiding.

I'm throwing up the white flag.

So, I'm not surprised as two men fill into the empty seats at the blackjack table. Hunters recognize hunters, and I've been waiting for them.

One is a slender man who towers over everyone in his seat; he has eyes so dark that they seem to swallow light. His associate is ugly like a bulldog, scruffy and lumpy and gnarled. Both are wearing all black suits. The two men exchange cash for chips at our high roller's table.

Hades and Cerberus have entered the game.

I breathe a sigh of relief. The first part of my gamble has paid off: if their orders were to kill, I'd already be dead.

"Having fun?" Hades asks, running his knife fingers through oily black hair. "Looks like you're on quite the run."

"I suppose I am." I lean back and toy with my stack of chips. "Was thinking of cashing out, though. Don't want to press my luck."

"A wise decision."

"Yeah," Cerberus grunts. "Game's over."

The poor dealer doesn't know what to make of our cryptic conversation. "Your bets, Sirs?"

The two hunters grab their chips. "We're going to try another table."

I smile, drop one chip into my shirt pocket, and slide the entire pile toward the dealer. "That's for you. Thanks for the game."

"Are you serious?" The dealer calls out in disbelief as I saunter off with my two new friends in tow.

I raise my hand to him without looking back. "All yours, kid."

The other players at the table clap and congratulate the dealer on his big bonus. Cerberus growls behind me, "Stop making a fucking scene."

"You're the ones who sat down, dropped ten thousand for chips each, and got up without playing a hand." I plop my empty glass down on a waitress's tray as she saunters by, along with my last chip. "I thought a devil and his demon dog would be more at home in Sin City..."

"Cute," Hades sizzles. "Head toward the parking garage. Don't try to fight, Cupid."

I smile broadly. "Wouldn't dream of it."

We leave the noise and haze of cigarette smoke behind us, delving into the cool subterranean lot. Hades takes the lead, and Cerberus can't resist shoving me along even though I'm keeping pace with his master. The attack dog is restless; he's not accustomed to taking targets in alive.

"Disappointing," he grunts. "Bullshit. Cupid ain't shit. All those stories are shit."

"My reputation precedes me, I see."

"Shut up."

"Consider yourself lucky, Cerberus. I'd put you down like the dog you are."

Hades opens the passenger door of an all-black SUV. There's a black bag resting on the seat. "Get in and place the bag over your head. Protocol. I'm sure you understand."

I smile back at Cerberus, shrug, and grab the bag. "Certainly. Just take it easy on the turns, or I might puke all over the leather."

Behind me, the dog fumes. "This is such shit. You're so lucky that bitch of yours isn't here. We'll find her. We'll find her and put her down."

Hades meets my eyes and sighs.

I turn slowly to face his pet. "Go on, take a shot at me. Rough me up. If you can manage to land a blow on me, I'll say I resisted. Then you can tell everyone that you beat the famous Cupid."

Hades shuffles behind me. I think he's turned around.

Cerberus's crazy eyes dart between me and his boss before he throws a lumbering but powerful punch. He's a stout, thick man. Admittedly, I'd never want to feel that fist crashing against my face.

That's why I catch the punch in the black bag instead. I twist his arm awkwardly, making him yelp before I silence him with the jab to the throat.

Cerberus keels over and chokes like an old dog.

Hades turns around and jiggles his keys. "Are you quite done?"

Cerberus coughs and growls before righting himself. "Yep." He may be dumb, but he's tough.

I retrieve the bag and pat him on the shoulder before I get in the car. Hades slides a silenced pistol back into his black coat. He lets Cerberus have this fun, but he would have ended me in a heartbeat if he needed to.

I put the bag on my head and bounce in my seat. "To Olympia, boys! I'm so excited. It's been years! Feels like going to Disneyland."

"Happiest place on earth," Hades drones.

Cerberus gets in the back seat. "What a prick."

We get rolling to whatever lair that white speaker is waiting for me in.

Somewhere else in the world—in a location I would not disclose to the most painful interrogation techniques—Rose Watson waits safely with her fingers on an array of triggers, eyes on the schedule I've had worked out for months.

I think about her the entire ride: the taste of her, the way she moans my true name, and the future waiting for us.

Already, things are starting to explode.

Usually, Zeus makes you wait. It's an interrogation tactic. Cops love it. Counter-terrorism units live by it. The slow tick of time and the boredom of an all white room

would make anyone grateful to hear that disembodied voice come through the speaker.

Today, he's booming before they even get the bag off my head.

Is this you? Is this your doing, Cupid? Where's Hera? What have you done!?

I rub my eyes sleepily, slide the metal chair over to the speaker, and kick my legs up on the pedestal. It rocks slightly. Huh, I always thought this thing was bolted down. "Zeus, so good to hear that weird little voice of yours. How are you?"

This is not a game...

"Everything is a game, my disembodied friend. You only say that because you're losing."

Zeus is silent. Hades took my watch, so I do a little rough math in my head.

"Let's see, it must be around seven in the morning on the East Coast." I start holding up fingers. "That means Director Anderson's vacation house in Puerto Rico is gone. Co-director Padilla just lost his collection of supercars. And the head of your cover-up division... Oh, what's her name?" I lean the chair back on two legs before I snap my fingers and bring it back down. "That's right. Veronica Stratford. She's probably wondering how her yacht caught fire in the middle of the night. I think she was planning a little Atlantic excursion soon, wasn't she?"

Enough, Zeus almost sounds like he's begging me to stop. How?

For once, the gods have to wait in silence. I stand and do a lap around the little room, running my hands along the perfectly white walls. It's even smaller than it seems. I imagine all the blood on my hands staining the walls red. But it's already red.

Underneath the white, it's all blood.

"You know when one of your assassins succeeds or fails. Of course, you do," I speak like I'm giving a lecture. Who knows, there might be a gathering of Olympia higher-ups hanging on my every word like fawning students. "You have your spies and your eyes. But you don't know the details until they're reported to you. You don't know how we kill them, how long it takes us to do it, or the things we might ask them before we take their life. You never even considered the possibility that we might speak to our target at all."

You, Zeus stammers. You've been conversing with your targets before you eliminate them?

"I've been interrogating them."

Somebody keeps their finger on a button because the mic is hot for a full two seconds before it shuts off. Zeus's panicked voice was more than one.

I smile at the speaker and pat it on its little head. "I've been surprised by how much some of them actually knew. You lot have made some enemies out there."

They are evil, Zeus booms. We are ridding the world of—

"Evil. Right. Right." I roll my eyes and wave him off. "Truly, I don't care which of you thinks you're wrong or right. You're all cut from the same cloth. You're all parasites. That's all this is: the wealthy at war with one another. The obscenely rich playing and paying in blood for more power and control. Your motivations mean nothing to me."

Again, I count in my head.

"Except, of course, self-preservation. Now, that's a motivation I can work with. I assume you don't want to find out what will blow next if you keep me here for too long."

Zeus, whoever they are—one of them, all of them—comes back softly, What do you want, Cupid?

"Simple: to not be Cupid anymore," I say sternly. "And for Hera to not be Hera. We want to be nobody. Nobody to you , that is. All you have to do is let me go, leave us alone, and never come looking. Nothing else will explode. Your identities will be safe with me."

That's a risk we can't take. We don't let people go.

"Well, what a toxic work environment you created. Is it any wonder that someone is shooting up the office?" I plop back down in the chair and rest one foot against the pedestal like I'm about to topple it. "Your choice, Olympia. Keep me here, and it's only going to get worse. We spared lives up until this point. The more the clock runs, the deadlier things are going to get. You'll call us Titans before this is over. And the best part is that you'll never find her."

The only shitty part about this plan, from my perspective, is that Rose doesn't get to witness Olympia taking it on the chin. Well, at least she gets to pull the triggers.

Zeus politely asks me to wait.

"Take your time." I glance at the non-existent watch on my wrist. "Well, take it at your own peril. And send in someone with an espresso, would you? I'm beat. Vegas, baby."

The chair grows uncomfortable, so I plop down on the floor and lean against one of

the walls. Eventually, the nearly-invisible door opens, and Hades walks in. In all black, he's a blotch on the room.

He doesn't seem to mind serving me the espresso.

"Are you kidding?" I laugh, examining the little mug. There's a red thunderbolt on it. "Olympia has merch? God, I wish Hera could see this. Can I take this?"

Hades shrugs. "Not my division."

I sip the coffee and raise the cup to him. "Damn good."

Hades pulls a black flask from his pocket. "Want a little something to spice it up?"

"Oh, no," I scoff. "I quit."

"You seem certain that they're gonna let you slide." He takes a pull from his flask. "If that speaker tells me to, you know I'll blow your brains out right here."

I smile, thinking about all the things Olympia still has to lose.

My bombing schedule has just begun, and they won't risk seeing just how deep it goes. They'll let me go because only I can stop it, and they won't come looking because they know I'll start it up again.

Me? I've only got one thing to lose, and she's the one thing now completely out of their reach.

"And ruin these pretty white walls?" In one gulp, I down the espresso and smirk at Hades. "I don't think so."

It's a cool night in the desert.

The stars are out, blanketing the sky and shining down on me like spotlights. Zeus isn't up there watching me anymore. None of them are.

As it turns out, Olympia did not want to ruin their white walls. By the time I'd ordered and finished another espresso, the speaker let me know that they were accepting the deal. The voice of Zeus didn't sound so big surrendering to my demands.

No more Cupid.

No more Hera.

They forget about us, forever.

Hades and his dog dropped me off back at the casino, insisting on the bag over my head as if I don't already know all the organization's secrets. Their black SUV speeding off is the last bit of Olympia I'll ever witness.

Unless you count the cup I took.

From Vegas, it was a nine-hour drive to her hiding place.

Out here, in a wasteland where no one would ever come looking, Rose flipped switches and raised hell. I'm parked outside the trailer, praying that she's still in there. I know she is. I know my plan succeeded, but I can't shake the fear that something could have happened to her.

The door opens, and my future walks out.

She's wearing that same flannel from our safehouse in the mountains. Her pale legs gleam in the starlight.

Finally, I'm home.

"It's a good thing you're here," she says as I get out of the car. "Forty-three more minutes, and I would have flipped another switch."

I pretend to calculate in my head as I saunter over. "Which one was that?"

"Deputy Chief Morel's house in Aspen."

"Oh, yeah." I mimic an explosion. "That one would have been bad."

She's standing on the trailer's metal steps, biting her lip and rocking on her heels. I wrap an arm around her waist and press my face into the flannel. The longest, most relieving sigh leaves my body.

"I can't believe you were right," she whispers.

"Told you," I mock. "Look, I even brought you back a souvenir."

I plant the white cup with the red thunderbolt in her hands.

Her jaw hangs. "You're kidding. They actually make cheap shit like this? Do you think they have team building weekends, too?"

"The coffee was fantastic, though."

Rose turns the cup over. "You... you don't think there's a tracker in it, do you?"

“Who cares? They’re afraid of us, now.” I shrug before yelling into the cup. “You hear us in there? You want more boom-boom ? Come and get us!”

They wouldn’t dare.

Besides, we won’t be here for long.

Rose smacks my chest and rolls her eyes. “Knock it off, psycho.”

“Now that we’ve taken care of that mild annoyance...”

“ Mild? ”

“It’s time to decide where we’d like to go.”

Rose considers this. “Where can we go?”

I smile and wink. “Anywhere.”

“Well, first,” she hums and slides her arms around my shoulders. “To bed .”

“That goes without saying...”

“And then...” Rose hurls the cup, shattering it against the shed next to the trailer.

“Why don’t you take me somewhere warm?”

I glance back, losing the white pieces of ceramic in the darkness.

“That was dramatic,” I say.

She shrugs. “I figured it was my turn.”

We don't even make it into the trailer.

I take Rose in my arms, lie her down on the hood of the car, and rip off that flannel under a blanket of stars. Her body is moonlight spilling between my fingers. No matter how hard I try, I can't grab enough of her at once to be satisfied.

I've been all over the world.

I've been shot, stabbed, beaten, and brutalized.

I've killed. Boy, have I killed.

All of that seems like a dull, distant memory to me now. Another life I'm ready to forget. With her moaning my name, clawing at my scars, and urging me deeper with her feet hooked behind me, nothing else in the world matters. Not money. Not power. Not control.

We're free, and I've never felt so alive.

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ROSE

Three years later...

The sound of lapping waves stirs me. A cool breeze sneaks in through our house, bringing the smell of salt and the promise of another day in paradise.

I roll over in bed, but Alexei isn't here.

Of course not. Another early day out in the surf.

There's no schedule to keep, so I get up when I'm damn good and ready. If I wanted to, I could lie here all day and read one of the books piled up on my end table. But I should move, maybe take a walk on the beach and find Alexei catching waves.

It's good for the baby.

I slip into a flowing red dress, not bothering with shoes as I step out onto our porch through the sliding door. The wood is cool beneath my feet, and the sand of the beach looks inviting.

During high tide, the water comes right up to our little house on stilts.

Where we are in the world doesn't matter. It's an island in a place most people have never been, filled with friendly people who speak languages most people will never hear. We're not hiding, but our travels took us here, and we simply haven't left yet.

That is how our path is decided. Every day, we move on the whims of our desires.

Usually, that simply means eating good food, going for long walks, making love in-between it all, and sleeping so deeply that my dreams seem light years away.

I step down into the sand. It's still wet from the tide.

Palm trees lean in toward the surf, providing some shade as I stroll along the shore. Out there, other islands wave hello in the distance. The water is so clear that I can see the ecosystems that are usually hidden.

Hardly any waves today, so I'm sure I'll find Alexei out there just floating on his board, smiling up at the sky. He's become quite stoic now that he has no one to kill.

The sand warms as I walk, and I pick out pretty shells here and there to take back with me. I pass a few neighbors, fishers, and friends who all smile and wave.

Until I spot someone who clearly doesn't belong.

The lean, handsome man wears sandals, a white shirt, and white shorts. He's standing in the sand, staring out at a figure floating in the water. He's staring out at Alexei floating on his surfboard.

The man, unfortunately, is someone I recognize.

I quicken my pace but stay silent, moving behind him and plucking up the sharpest shell I can find. It's no knife, but it would be enough to open his throat with one curt movement.

I make that known as I reach him.

"Don't fucking move," I growl, digging the shell into his neck from behind. He's so

tall that I have to stand on my toes. “Alexei! Here!”

My husband pops up, spots us, and dives off his board.

“There’s no need for the... erm... weapon?” the man laughs. “Truly. You know me—I’m just a messenger.”

“We have nothing to say to you, Hermes.”

Alexei trudges out of the water, eyes bulging as he recognizes the man, too. All those buried instincts flood back to the surface. His killer eyes flash wildly.

“Hermes,” Alexei sighs and shakes his head. “Whatever message you bring, Olympia has violated our agreement. Maybe we should kill you to send a message right back?”

I know he doesn’t want to kill again, but he will.

He would for me.

He would for our family.

“Hardly necessary.” Hermes holds his hands out to his sides. “May I sit? I assure you, I’m no threat. My position within Olympia has not changed.”

Alexei meets my eyes and nods.

I step around, standing behind my husband.

Hermes breathes relief and plops down in the sand.

“To put things simply,” he says, staring up at us. “There’s been restructuring. Olympia, as you knew it, is no more.”

“But you’re still you,” I say.

He shrugs. “My job hasn’t changed. Messages still need to be delivered, now more than ever. Now that things are changing.”

“What does any of this have to do with us?” Alexei asks, fists balled.

“Olympia,” Hermes says, “the new Olympia, would like to hire you. Both of you. As consultants.”

Alexei and I share a glance before we burst into laughter.

Hermes’s face falls flat. “I assure you, this is not a joke.”

“I’ll give them some free consulting.” Alexei drops to one knee and stares the messenger in the eyes. “Dismantle. Divest. And do not, under any circumstances, ever come looking for us again.”

Hermes tries to recover the negotiations. “They are prepared to offer you salaries you cannot imagine. It’s not the old gods. You could have brought down the old guard. You intrigue them. Zeus... there are new people in charge...”

Alexei holds his gaze, growling so deeply that it sounds as if a typhoon is building. “And if they ever pull this shit again, if we see one more of their assets, messengers, assassins, anyone, I will find out who the new gods are, I will learn every little secret about them, and I will not stop until all of you are destroyed. That is our response. Do you understand, Hermes?”

Standing behind Alexei, I feel more powerful than a goddess.

With his baby in my belly, I feel safer and more protected than I ever thought possible. Even with this agent of Olympia at our feet, I know they can’t touch us.

They won't. Because even with new people in charge, even when Cupid's actions have become myth, Olympia is still afraid.

Hermes starts as if he's going to retort, but thinks better of it. He nods, slowly standing and wiping himself off. "I'll deliver your response. My apologies for disturbing you. As the messenger of Olympia, I can assure you that you will not be hearing from us again."

Alexei claps him on the back and smiles. "I always knew I liked you, Richard."

Hermes goes so pale that I take a step back in case he vomits. I wonder how long it's been since he's heard his true name?

He nods again, and again, stutters, and stumbles off.

"Poor guy." I shake my head. "Did you really have to gut punch him like that?"

"Yeah, to make sure the message is sent." Alexei watches him go until he's out of sight. Finally, he turns, and I know I have him back. Cupid is buried again, always waiting in case we need him.

He smiles like that day in Paris.

He kisses me like that night in the hotel.

And, as always, I lose control like it's my first breath of fresh air in years.

We wade out into the water. My dress soaks, and I wrap myself up in Alexei's strong body. Here in the shallows, he takes me, his handler, his lover, his wife, and the mother of his child.

He'd die for me.

He'd kill for me.

He fought the gods so he could live for me.

The end...