



Lone Spy (Starstruck Thrillers #2)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: The familiar pop of a gun rings out, and I'm slammed up against the wall with Ash's giant form blocking me. All I can see is his tie pin—the eagle's beady black eyes glinting with chips of onyx.

Ash's focus is behind us, his left wrist raised as he speaks into his sleeve. His other hand is on my waist, circling half of it. All around us people are screaming and running. Totally freaked out. Which makes sense, someone is shooting at us.

Rage bubbles up in my chest. My corset digs into my sides as my lungs desperately try to expand.

Ash looks down at me with narrowed eyes. Spots are starting to dance in my vision. This stupid dress. I can't get out of it on my own. Never again will I agree to wear something this dangerous.

His hand on my waist scoops me up, and his other arm snakes under my legs—the move is effortless, like I weigh nothing. I let out a small, sharp sound of surprise. Ash is carrying me like I'm a damsel in distress, and because of this stupid dress and my inability to say no to it, I guess I am.

Ash takes off at a run. My breath is caught in the confines of the dress. My heart is pounding. I wrap my arms around his neck and try to hold on. Try to breathe. All I can see is his tie pin. All I can smell is Ash's scent: raw cedar wood, leather, and citrus.

He's running down a hallway, the lights flashing in spears as we pass under fluorescent bars. I can't get enough air. We're barreling past people—they're all a blur in my peripheral vision.

There is shouting—inarticulate words sucked behind us as Ash sprints. I'm nestled against the chest of this giant man, here to protect only me. It doesn't feel right. I'm not a helpless damsel. I'm a trained agent.

I killed a man as large and dangerous as Ash. No, not as dangerous. Because Ivan underestimated me. Ash understands me.

He spins, and my fingers dig into the back of his neck, cresting over

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:45 pm

Chapter One

At the end of the press gauntlet waits Ash Fraser, impossibly tall, impossibly broad, impossibly dangerous. Head of my security, he's trusted by my handler, Temperance Johnson, to keep me alive.

Ash stands in the shadows beyond the red carpet, looming larger than any of the other security.

At six-foot six-inches tall, with short-cropped brown hair and cobalt blue eyes, he's an imposing figure.

A scar on his chin cuts a white line through the dark stubble.

The rest of his face is sun-burnished from our regular runs on the beach in front of my house in Malibu.

Ash tracks me with a cold, calculating gaze, until I get close, then the barest hint of warmth enters his eyes.

"How'd it go?" he asks.

I take in a deep breath and my ribs press against the boning of my gown.

It's a gorgeous shimmering gold with a mermaid silhouette that hugs me in all the right places, but the corset top doesn't leave much room for breathing.

And if I tried to take a full step, I'd rip the seams. It wasn't my favorite of the options, but the stylist convinced me I had to wear it.

"They went well," I say, nodding, convincing myself the photos and interviews did in fact go well.

Ash nods as if he knows something about this, which I guess he does. After two and a half years of being my bodyguard and overall head of my security, Ash knows the drill.

He has always shown me the same deference as other celebrities' security. But underneath the guise of civility and subservience, we both know he works for Temperance. We both know where his allegiances truly lie. And they are not with me.

"I don't like these protesters," Ash says, jutting his chin toward the small crowd beyond the reporters. The moment it was announced this film was being made, the religious zealots came out of the woodwork. They grabbed a spear and started stabbing the dead horse of Hollywood corrupting the youth.

The Benefactor is a biopic of Katherine McCormick—the philanthropist who funded the research for hormonal contraception. So these protestors are protesting birth control. Birth control. I'd laugh if this wasn't President Reginald Grand's America.

"Well," I say, keeping my attention on Ash—the protesters don't deserve even a glance from me. "I doubt they will do more than shout about promiscuity or heathenism."

Ash shakes his head. The suit he's wearing is obviously well made, but the man's body just isn't meant to be collared. It looks almost like a costume. Almost.

His tie pin glints just below my eye level. Without my heels I'd be looking up at the enamel ship with billowing sails, an eagle rising up behind it like some mythical creature. But in my stilettos, the top of my head reaches Ash's collar bones.

"We may need to leave," Ash says, his voice a low rumble of warning.

I let out a half laugh. "You can't be serious. I am not leaving my own premiere."

"I just have a bad feeling," he says, his eyes dropping to meet mine. And there is real worry there. The man is usually a wall of confidence—secure in his size, his instincts, and his ability to keep me safe.

I reach up and squeeze his bicep. The thing is hard as stone—his body strung tight. "Don't worry," I say, my tone turning teasing. "I have you to protect me."

He frowns. The familiar pop of a gun rings out and I'm slammed up against the wall with Ash's giant body blocking mine. All I can see is his tie pin—the eagle's beady black eyes glinting with what I can now see are chips of onyx.

Ash's focus is behind us, his head turned round and left wrist raised as he speaks into his sleeve. His other hand is on my waist, circling half of it. All around us people are screaming and running. Totally freaked out. Which makes sense, someone is shooting at us.

Rage bubbles up in my chest. Those puritanical shit bags trying to run everyone else's lives. My corset digs into my sides as my lungs desperately try to expand.

I didn't always curse. My grandmother made it clear my language mattered and should be modeled after hers. But I've done a lot of growing in the last few years, and I'm learning to own my rage. Own my language. And whoever just shot at us is a piece of shit.

Ash looks down at me with narrowed eyes. Spots are starting to dance in my vision. This stupid fucking dress. Never again will I agree to wear something this constricting.

"Fuck," he says quietly to himself. Then his hand on my waist scoops me up and his other arm snakes under my legs—the move is effortless.

I let out a small, sharp sound of surprise.

Ash is carrying me like I'm a damsel in distress, and because of this stupid dress and my inability to say no to it, I guess I am.

Ash takes off at a run. My breath is caught in the confines of the gown. My heart is pounding. I wrap my arms around his neck and try to hold on. Try to breathe. All I can see is his tie pin. All I can smell is Ash's scent: raw cedar wood, leather, and citrus.

He's running down a hallway, the lights flashing in spears as we pass under fluorescent bars. I can't get enough air. We're barreling past people—they're all a blur in my peripheral vision.

There is shouting—inarticulate words lost behind us as Ash sprints. I'm nestled against the chest of this giant man, here to protect only me. It doesn't feel right. I'm not a helpless damsel. I'm a trained agent.

I killed a man as large and dangerous as Ash. No, not as dangerous. Because Vladimir Petrov underestimated me. Ash wouldn't.

He spins and my fingers dig into the back of his neck, cresting over the collar of his shirt and touching hot skin slicked with fresh sweat. My vision darkens at the edges, his tie pin the center of my universe.

Ash smashes his back against an emergency exit and the alarm blares as we break out into the dying light of the Los Angeles evening.

A roaring engine, then squealing brakes.

Ash hefts me into one arm and my face is pushed higher up his body, my cheek on his shoulder, my nose in the hollow of his throat.

His scent is all I know as I pull it raggedly through my lips.

The clunk of a car door opening. Ash leans down and tosses me into a vehicle. I land with a thud, tumbling half off the seat. Ash consumes the space next to me, the door slams shut, and the SUV barrels forward, throwing me against the seat.

I can't breathe. My fingers claw at my bodice, useless and numb. Ash's arm wraps around my waist and hefts me closer. Thick fingers slip between me and the gown. He rips it, buttons popping, exploding off me as the fabric gives.

Air rushes into my lungs. I hang over Ash's arm, taking in deep breaths, my vision quickly clearing. My forearms rest on the black leather seat, my gown flopped around me. Ash's hot breath hits my naked back. The tires hum under us.

"Zade and Jeremy," I wheeze out, asking after my makeup artist and publicist—my friends. "Where are they?" I'm staring down at my hands through vision blurred by tears. Ash doesn't respond, and I turn to look over my shoulder at him.

He's staring straight ahead, suit askew from how I lean on his arm. Ash's tie is loosened and collar tweaked, his jaw tight, cheeks stained with color, sweat making his skin shine.

"Ash?" My voice comes out a strained, frightened whisper. A part of my brain

automatically notes where it came from in my chest; the tortured emotion in that one word is powerful and I need to save it, use it again for my craft.

Ash swallows. I push up and he moves, seeming to break from the spell that held him. Ash pulls back, still not looking at me.

I gather my dress around my chest and shift to create space between us so I can face him, my bodice crushed against me, the back of my dress still splayed open. The diamond choker around my neck hangs heavy.

Cold air winds up my spine. "We left them back there," I say. "Are they okay?"

He finally looks at me and it burns me the way ice does. He's dangerously cold. "You are my only concern." His voice is a monotone rumble, emotionless and terrifying.

I know he doesn't mean me. Not really. The only value I hold is what his superior assigns me. His allegiance is to Temperance. I'm just an asset to him.

Ash shifts, shrugging his suit jacket off one shoulder, exposing the pistol tucked under his arm. I tense, my fingers digging into the intricate beading of my ruined dress as my heart thuds against my breast.

He sheds the jacket. I stare at Ash's broad chest, at the tie pin shining at its center. He engulfs his side of the seat. I swallow the fear trying to devour me. Ash is so big and I'm so vulnerable.

Ash's hand extends, holding the jacket, and it takes all my will power not to shrink away from him. "Angela?" he says, his voice low and edged with something that sounds like concern.

I meet his gaze—it still burns with that icy coldness. "Take my jacket," he says. I

blink, his meaning breaking through. I'm half exposed in a torn dress, and he is offering me coverage.

With one hand still pressing my dress into place, I take his jacket. It seems to grow in my hand—it looked normal in his and swallows mine. I throw it over one shoulder but can't spread it across my back without letting go of my bodice.

Ash watches me, his expression empty. One giant hand reaches out, and I can't help flinching back this time. He stills. "Let me help you?" The subtle strain in his voice shocks some part of me into submission.

That tone...I need to remember that. It sounded so desperate and yet so controlled. Like a soldier refusing to admit state secrets as his captors torment him.

I nod my consent. Ash reaches forward again, gently holding the edges of the jacket. Heat wafts off him as he wraps it slowly over my naked shoulders. The silk lining slides against my spine. "You're safe," he says, his breath brushing against my hair. "Everything is okay now."

I let out a startled laugh, and his gaze drops to mine.

We're close, our faces only inches apart, his hands still at my sides, gently holding his jacket.

"It won't work, you know?" Ash blinks his confusion down at me.

"Trying to make me feel protected, when we both know I'm disposable.

" My voice comes out as chilled as his cobalt gaze.

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Chapter Two

Ash rises from the living room couch as I step out of the bedroom of the hotel suite. The studio put up key members of the cast and crew at the Chateau Marmont for the premiere.

About an hour ago, Ash escorted me in through the back entrance reserved for celebrities, his suit jacket draped around me like a cloak. We rode up the private elevator in tense silence.

I've changed into a silk suit in a bold geometric pattern of yellow, purple, and black, designed by a young up-and-comer—someone my ex-boyfriend, Julian, introduced me to early in our romance.

We broke up over a year ago, but Julian's influence is still evident in so many corners of my life. Just last week, I found one of his T-shirts in my closet. I pulled it to my face, hoping to find a hint of his scent, but there was nothing left.

Ash's gaze runs over my body, quickly assessing my outfit. The suit is not only beautiful, it's also very easy to move in. This I can run in, fight in. I won't need anyone to rip it off me.

"Going somewhere?" Ash asks. He's in his white dress shirt, tie loosened. The tie pin remains centered on his chest, taunting me, reminding me...that ship with its eagle protector was all I could see.

"Your jacket," I say, dragging my eyes back up to his face. "Let me get it for you."

He doesn't respond as I dip back into the bedroom. When I return, he's standing right outside the door.

"Thank you." I look up, holding out the jacket—I don't need to press it to my nose to smell him. Even after a shower and putting on my perfume, Ash's scent is still burned into my senses.

"Of course." He takes it from me. "Going somewhere?" he asks again, as he shrugs into the jacket.

"Yes." I nod, holding up my phone. "Hannah texted," I say, referencing the director of the film. "She's having a few people over to her suite. I'm gonna go have a drink." My phone rings, my manager's name, Mary Genovese, flashing on the screen.

This is not the first time she's called since we reached the hotel, but until now I didn't have the energy to answer.

"I texted Mary," Ash tells me. "And Synthia.

" He reached out to my manager and best friend. I swallow a sudden need to see Synthia and my dog, Archie, who she's taking care of while I'm here. I miss her smile and his fuzzy warmth.

"That was thoughtful of you." My voice sounds unsure, but not because it wasn't thoughtful of Ash to reach out to people who care about me. It's that I don't know how to talk to Ash now.

My stark honesty in the car about Ash's true loyalty didn't go awesomely. Ash's face shuttered. One moment he was an iceberg and the next a solid wall—neither cold nor hot. Just inanimate. I didn't realize how much emotion he was showing until it disappeared. I've felt unsettled since.

Or maybe it wasn't Ash's lack of humanity upsetting me. Maybe I was just having a normal reaction to the terrifying events of the evening. To the intense pressure of the last few years.

I swipe the phone open and press it to my ear, turning away from Ash, wandering further into the living room. "Mary," I say as a greeting.

"Angela, my god, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine, fine." The words come out automatically. Assuring the world I'm fine is more important than actually being okay.

"This is terrible," Mary says, her voice pitched high with the drama of it all. "Jeremy sent me a draft statement—I tweaked it and emailed it over to you. We can wait until tomorrow to release it. I'm sure you're devastated."

Was I devastated? No. I felt like I needed to see my friends. Have a drink or two. I wanted to get numb, banish this edgy feeling that made me want to...I don't even know.

I glance back at Ash. A sudden, visceral need to move him washes over me.

I want to shake him, scream at him, break him.

Somehow force him to understand—even if only for a brief moment—how much I resent him.

Make him feel the press of captivity I feel.

Ash holds my gaze, and a flicker of something moves behind his eyes.

Maybe he's as trapped as me. He can't love being my babysitter. The man belongs on a battlefield, not following me around, even carrying me around because of my poor fashion choices.

It's not the same, though. We may both be trapped, but only one of us is the jail keeper. I turn away, letting my focus fall on the windows, staring out of them unseeing.

"I'll take a look at the statement in the morning," I promise Mary. "I'm going to see Jeremy at Hannah's—she's having some of the cast and crew over for drinks."

"That's good. You should be together. Let me know if you need anything at all. And honey, one more thing. We need to get the necklace back to Cartier. I messaged with Ash about it. He has all the details."

"Of course he does."

"You're lucky to have him," Mary says. "But we really need to get you another assistant. Did you look at any of the résumés I sent over?"

"Not yet."

"Well, nothing to think about tonight. But it is important we find someone before the international tour."

We hang up and I take in a deep breath, then turn back to Ash. "The necklace is in the safe."

He nods. "They are sending over a messenger. I will take care of it. When do you want to leave?"

"Jeremy and Zade are fine, by the way," I say, my voice accusatory.

"I know," Ash answers.

"You didn't feel the need to tell me?" Why am I doing this? Why am I trying to start a fight with him? "Never mind," I say, shaking my head.

Ash doesn't respond. Just stands there with his hands clasped in front of him, shoulders back, posture too damn straight. Always alert, always on duty.

I cross the living room of the suite toward the exit. Ash follows in my wake, speaking softly, informing his team of our movements. The door opens as I reach it, and one of his men, a tall East Asian guy named Chris, nods at me with a serious expression.

I've made him laugh twice, and both times dimples popped on his cheeks that are deeply adorable. He has tawny skin, a smooth, even complexion, and black eyes that are almost always stern.

I think his perpetual seriousness is because his dimples are so fucking cute. Even with his broad shoulders and the twin pistols hiding under his suit jacket, those dimples scream cute. And cute isn't scary.

I give him a flirtatious smile, and Chris presses his lips together even as amusement touches his eyes.

He leads the way down the hall, then me, then Ash, and it feels ridiculous.

How did I get here? How did little Stacy Melon from Kansas end up as one of the biggest stars in the world and a vital asset to US intelligence?

A woman so important she is protected by armed men ready to lay down their lives

for her.

Or turn on her if given the order .

At my knock, Hannah opens the door of her suite. She grins at me, her smile wide, lips painted crimson red. Her skin is a delicate, creamy hue. There is a flush across her cheeks and charcoal outlining her hazel eyes.

Hannah's wearing a pair of wide-leg, black ribbed pants and a flowy blouse that hangs off one sculpted shoulder. Her salt and pepper pixie haircut glints in the low light.

"Angela," she says, her tone implying how happy she is to see me, how hard it's been since we last laid eyes on each other, and how important it is that we're together again. Her arms open and I step into them, relaxing into Hannah's embrace.

"Those fuck-heads," she says. "Fuck them." She leans away from me, holding my shoulders. "Thank fuck everyone's okay."

"Yes," I agree. "Thank fuck." I am truly grateful no one was hurt by the gunman and he was easily subdued and arrested.

"The premiere could have continued," Hannah says, "if he hadn't made that stupid bomb threat. But of course, he knew that. Fucking fear tactics," she mutters, looking over my shoulder. "Hi, Ash, Chris," she says with a tilt of her chin.

I glance back to see them nod. "Evening, Hannah," Ash says.

"Let me get you a drink." Hannah loops her arm through mine.

"Yes, please," I reply as we walk down the steps into the suite.

There's a small gathering of cast and crew on the couches. Jeremy lifts his hand from where he's standing by the window, holding a martini glass. I wave back. "Julian is stopping by," Hannah says, pulling my focus.

"He is?" I ask, surprised. "I didn't know he was in town." My voice is choked and my cheeks heat.

"Oh god." Her eyes are pinched with worry.

"Is this going to be weird? I thought it was all fine." Julian and Hannah are good friends.

She's directed him several times, and they seem to have an older sister-younger brother dynamic.

I suspect he's told her about our relationship, but Hannah isn't the type to gossip.

If they've spoken about us, it would have been about his struggles with my emotional unavailability, not anything torrid or gross. He's ridiculously mature and rational. It's infuriating and deeply attractive, and I may need to feign a headache to get out of here before he arrives.

"Of course it's fine," I say. "It's just been a day." I let out a short laugh.

We reach the kitchen, where the counter separating it from the sitting area has been set up as a bar. "Champagne?" Hannah asks. "Let's not let that asshole ruin our celebration." I nod. She pours two flutes. "We made a great film, and I'm proud of you." She holds the flute out to me.

My throat burns with emotion as I take it.

"Thank you," I say, feeling gratitude for not just the role and her direction, but also for her friendship.

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Chapter Three

I wake up the next morning, my mouth sandpapery, dry, cottony, unpleasant. It wasn't the light spearing through the curtains that woke me or the sound of the shower, but rather the pounding behind my eyes.

Groaning, I pull the covers over my head, but there is no escaping my overindulgence from the night before.

The shower turns off, and, moments later, the sound of the bathroom door swinging open reaches me under the thick duvet. Footsteps circle the bed and the mattress depresses before a large hand cups my hip through the covers.

"You okay, honey?" Julian's British accent makes me cringe. Fuck. I should have faked that headache last night and saved myself from the one trying to crash through my skull this morning. I also could have avoided sleeping with Julian. Not that I didn't enjoy myself, just that...it's complicated.

"Do you want to come out and have some coffee?" Julian asks, his voice tender, caring, sweet. Why can't the man be an asshole? I groan and curl more tightly into the fetal position. "Should I take that as a no?" he says with a laugh that would be charming if it wasn't so loud.

"Leave me," I say, like a hiker with a broken leg high on Mount Everest as a snowstorm closes in.

Julian laughs again. "I do have to get going." He rubs my hip, bringing his hand down

to my thigh and back up again. "My flight to Fiji is in five hours. Need to stop by my house before I head to the airport."

"Fiji?" I ask, my voice a croak. His hand stills, and I realize he told me all about why he was going to Fiji last night.

The reason seeps through my champagne-infused memories, bubbling to the surface. Julian told me he'd been cast in the lead role of a thriller. If things went well, it could be another franchise, something like James Bond. But modern, of course.

What was modern anymore? Time seemed to be folding back on itself, realigning mistakes from the past and nailing them into the present.

I poke my head out from underneath the covers and meet Julian's soft gaze. Worry lines crease his broad brow. "You'll be gone for three months," I say, showing him I remember.

I never used to do this. I was always so controlled.

But the stress has been overwhelming. The pressure, not just of fame, but also of knowing that at any moment my life could be ripped away through violence or scandal.

With the slow deterioration of my rights as a consistent hum in the background.

I feel like I'm on the verge of shattering.

Julian nods, running his knuckles down the side of my face, and I lean into his touch. "You're so beautiful," he says. "So fucking beautiful." His voice is husky, hoarse, hungry.

There's still concern lightly etched across his brow, but his lips have parted.

His breath has quickened, pupils dilated.

More bubbles of champagne-trapped memories surface.

Julian's hands in my hair, my back against the wall.

Him lifting me so easily with just one hand.

The rip of fabric, the intimate fullness.

I swallow. Our eyes remain locked. His hand travels down my neck, thumb caressing my jaw before circling my throat. My lips part, a soft gasp escaping. The throbbing pain in my head abates, distributed to the painful points of my breasts, and a delicious ache between my legs.

"Can I make you feel good one more time before I leave?" Julian asks.

I swallow. It is impossible to deny him. His hand tugs the blanket, exposing my breasts and pulling a quiet whimper from my throat. Fingers tighten at my neck, not cutting off my air, but holding me still as his eyes rake over me.

Julian's always been so good at this. Even better than alcohol at wiping my mind, at making me forget.

Not just about my life, my identity, but my very humanity, my mortality, my singularity.

I close my eyes and sink into the sensation of him.

Slowly, expertly, he devours me, disappears me, dissolves me.

I'm sitting in the living room wrapped in one of the hotel's thick terry cloth robes—its bulk a welcome weight. Sunlight presses against the sheer curtains, flooding the space with diffused light.

My headache is gone, defeated by good sex, strong coffee, and a plate of fried eggs, bacon, and outrageously delicious toast. A cheat meal well worth it.

I'm scrolling through the headlines—there is a piece on the latest candidate to announce a run for president. A woman, Rebecca Levi. I sip my coffee, thoughts dark.

A woman can't win. Let alone a Jewish one. America is too sexist and antisemitic. She will be torn apart.

Not even when the incumbent president is also in the headlines for saying that he believes America's problems are so deep, so intractable, and the media so corrupt, that dictatorship may be our only salvation. As if an authoritarian government ever helped anyone but the oligarchs profiting from it.

Reginald Grand's latest statements are not the only news about him. Two articles outline the continued investigations he is under.

Unlike past presidents, Grand refused to place his business interests in trust. He kept his international real estate company under his control. And that company, Grand Dominion Properties, recently acquired land in downtown Moscow for far below market price.

This “unusual” circumstance has led to accusations of violating the emoluments clause, which prohibits federal officials from receiving financial benefits from

foreign governments.

These new ties to Moscow have resurrected the accusations of foreign interference in our last election. Those accusations are still just that—accusations as a special counsel continues their investigation. But I know they are true.

I know Grand is a treasonous, dictator wanna-be who I had the opportunity to kill and didn't. That's my biggest regret.

If I'd done it—pulled the trigger on that motherfucker when I had the chance—I'd be dead, true. But so would he. And the more time that passes, the more power Grand consolidates, the more I think not killing him was selfish. Horribly selfish.

I've murdered two men, both in self-defense. They coveted my body, craved control, but I wanted it more. Their blood still splashes across my nightmares and haunts the shadows of my mind.

The first was a director—my first starring role. Jack Axelrod invited me to his house to celebrate, drugged me and was about to rape me, when I woke up with just enough consciousness to grab one of his Oscars and bludgeon him to death.

Temperance Johnson strode into that crime scene like most men saunter into a club. Confident and on the hunt. He offered me a deal to save my reputation, to rescue any hope of fame rather than infamy. All I had to do was whatever he asked.

A star at the height of her fame, ensnarled by an unnamed US intelligence agency, forced into the art of espionage. It would make a good movie...

The second man, Vladimir Petrov, decided he would make me his whether I consented or not. He died just as bloody a death as Jack.

Instead of my pulling the trigger on Grand, we agreed not to kill each other.

Not to expose each other. I wouldn't tell anyone how the Russian oligarch, Vladimir Petrov, under the direction of the Kremlin and with Grand's full and willing knowledge, used a sophisticated disinformation campaign to help him win.

And Grand wouldn't tell anyone that I bashed in Vladimir's skull with my vintage phone. Or leak to our enemies that I'm a US asset.

A deal with the devil, combined with raw talent and hard work, brought me here. To this hotel room. To this life. To this golden prison.

My phone pings and a text message alert from Ash flashes on the screen. "May I come in?"

He's probably standing on the other side of the door waiting for my response.

"Yes, I'm just finishing breakfast," I text back.

The door opens seconds after the text swooshes away and Ash enters. My smile is broad and welcoming, last night's tension ignored and pushed under the rug. I'm good at compartmentalizing, and I'm pretty sure Ash shares DNA with a container store.

Both are gigantic and full of neatly labeled boxes. Though I'd bet money the memories in Ash's boxes are graphic war movies, whereas the container store's boxes are empty of everything but the purchasers' dreams of organization.

"Checkout is in an hour. Do you still want to head back to Malibu?" Ash asks as he crosses toward me. He's wearing a navy suit today with a pale gray shirt—no tie. Nothing to hang onto. I shake my head at the errant thought.

He stops in front of my table, towering over me, his expression empty. But there is still tension in the air between us. Is this left over from the way I spoke to him in the car, the truth I dropped in pique? Or is it judgment for sleeping with Julian? For drinking so much last night?

"Yes," I answer his question, offering another warm smile—I let my eyes rest on him. We can be friends. "I'm ready to head home." His eyes stay on mine, but he's giving nothing back.

There are not many men who have the self-discipline not to let their gaze drop to the V of my robe.

But Ash is not like other men. Some petulant part of me wants to test him.

Lean forward and let the robe split apart, let my breasts beckon his gaze.

I'd like to see some heat from the man. But I don't do that. I stand, pushing back the chair.

"I'll get dressed."

"I'll be here," Ash answers.

An hour later we're winding up the Pacific Coast Highway in my Porsche. It's all electric and drives like a silent dream. The exterior color is "Provence"—a rich lavender that does nothing to diminish the obvious power of the sports car.

The top is down, the ocean on our left rolling toward us, crashing against the cliffs below, loud enough we can hear it over the whistling wind.

I'm not playing any music because I love the sound of the Pacific so damn much. It's

why I bought my place in Malibu—for that rhythmic, always changing yet always the same behemoth. A reminder of what true power looks like. A reminder that I am tiny and inconsequential.

Ash sits next to me, his seat as far back as it goes, which leaves barely enough room for his long, thick legs. Beyond him hills roll away golden and ethereal.

My phone chimes, and a text from Julian pops onto the screen. An AI voice—male and Australian—reads it aloud. "Remind me why we broke up?" I steal a glance at Ash, who stares straight ahead, the embodiment of silent judgment.

I turn off the volume. The wind rushes around us and unspoken thoughts fill the space.

Ash is probably the only other person in my life who understands why Julian and I broke up.

Because I didn't want to involve him in...

my life. Didn't want him to face any of my consequences. But staying away from him is hard...

"Do you have something to say?" I ask Ash.

"No," he responds simply. The road snakes along the coast; the sound of the ocean pounds against the shore beneath us. "Do you have something you want me to say?" he asks.

"No," I reply too quickly.

Ash nods, as if the issue is closed. Which I guess it is.

My house in Malibu hangs over the beach.

It was built in the sixties when that kind of thing was allowed.

It's a masterpiece of wood and glass with a circular drive that brings me a small thrill of joy every time I pull into it.

This is mine. Mine. I still have my place in the city but am out here as often as possible.

The black SUV carrying the rest of my security team pulls in behind us. I wait as Ash climbs out first, my fingers itching to open my own door. But that's not how things go in my life now.

If Ash had his way I wouldn't even drive anymore. But that's not happening. I need to maintain some autonomy. Giving up opening my door is fine. Giving up driving my Porsche is a hard no.

I flip down the mirror and check my face—my makeup is minimal. Just a tinted moisturizer, light blush, and lip stain. Mascara and a shimmering lid brightener add depth to my violet eyes—a rare gift from my Roma ancestry.

My grandmother told me her sister had the same color eyes. There are no photographs of her or the rest of that side of the family. The Holocaust stole more than lives.

A shadow falls over me, and I look out my window to see Alesana, a Samoan agent who is even broader than Ash.

But unlike that block of ice, he has a twinkling humor in his eyes and a sweet smile.

He opens my door and offers his mitt of a hand.

I take it and let him steady me as I climb out of the Porsche—not that I need the help. But there is a game to be played here.

Even when I stand at my full height with four-inch heeled boots, Alesana still towers over me. He follows me to the back of the car, and then I'm on my own to cross to where Ash waits for me by the twin front doors.

The entrance is grand with thick wood doors twelve feet tall. Ash opens one for me, light spilling out into the shaded portico. Tension twists in my stomach, my intuition trying to warn me about something. I pause, look at Ash.

He's wearing mirrored aviators that reflect me at the center of a fisheye lens. There is a tightness in his jaw that wasn't there in the car.

I glance into my house. The entryway extends into a sunken living room, a wall of curved glass, then a deck that cantilevers over the beach.

The tide is in, so the ocean swirls under the pylons supporting the deck.

From where I'm standing there is nothing but my home between me and the vast horizon.

"Everything okay?" I ask Ash.

"Yes," he answers. It doesn't sound like a lie but it feels like one—something about his tone just isn't right. The other agents are dispersing. Alesana drives my car toward the garage, the SUV following. So it's just Ash and me standing at the threshold.

The scent of the ocean surrounds us, its rhythmic rushing close enough that the air is

heavy with salt. Ash waits silently. And somehow, some way, I know he's hiding something from me.

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Chapter Four

My heels click on the marble entry floor. The gray and white stone reflects the light of the sun glinting off the ocean.

Another echoing click of my heels, and the couch in my living room comes into view.

My heart pounds and the headache from this morning roars back to life behind my eyes as Temperance Johnson unfolds himself from its deep seat. He's smiling, warmth radiating from his eyes—golden brown tiger stones set above high, elegant cheekbones.

I take an unconscious, unintended step back, the clack of my heel jolting awareness into my body. Ash is right there, blocking me. We don't touch, but an electric spark surges between us, sharp enough to thrust me forward.

Ash follows, the space between us sizzling, as I cross the top of the steps that descend into the seating area. Temperance waits at the foot of the stairs—he only has to tilt his head a little to look up at me. His arm is long enough he can reach out and offer his hand, palm up. Shall we dance?

I let the edges of my lips curl into a smile that borders on a smirk. As if I have a choice.

I lay my hand in his—our palms press together, fitting just fine. I don't lean any weight on him as I descend the three steps, slowly going from taller than Temperance Johnson to shorter.

He's a big man. Not as large as Ash but they are about the same height. Temperance is trimmer, less bulked up. He has the body of a swimmer, a shark gliding through water.

Our hands part as we end the charade that I needed his help descending into my own living room—womanhood summed up in one false gesture. Revulsion churns my stomach and burns the base of my throat.

"Can I offer you a drink?" I ask, my voice steady, as if there is nothing uncomfortable about finding him in my home.

"Thanks, I'll have whatever you're having." His voice is a velvety baritone, not so much familiar as burned into the depths of my brain, wrapped up in all sorts of trauma. All sorts of misery. It's as if the man narrates my nightmares.

But there is kindness in those tiger eyes. He's pulling off menacing and caring—Temperance could have acted on the screen, but chose espionage, a less public kind of performance. It seems he loves the craft as much as me, but prefers shadows to stage lights.

My heels sink into the thick rug—an abstract geometric design in blues and grays reminiscent of the ocean swirling around the pylons below—as I cross to the bar. I have to give Temperance my back. But that's okay. Because a large, gold-framed mirror hangs above the walnut credenza.

My gaze flicks up to where Ash still stands, a few feet back from the top of the steps. His expression is blank. He's taken off his sunglasses and stares out toward the horizon. There is no evidence he feels guilt about letting Temperance ambush me.

Dark embers of rage burn in my chest. I'll deal with Ash later.

"Congratulations on the new film," Temperance says, still standing at the bottom of the steps as if waiting there in case any other women might need assistance. "You look lovely in the photos from last night. I'm sorry it ended the way it did."

"Thank you," I say, keeping my voice light as I focus on my task. Sliding one of the credenza's doors aside reveals a wine fridge stocked with drinks.

I bend down to snare a bottle of sparkling water, knowing what my body looks like to the two men standing behind me. Knowing that one glance in the mirror would confirm two sets of eyes incapable of looking away from what they want. Men are too predictable. Why are they the ones ruling the world?

"The premiere is being rescheduled." Temperance's voice does not tip up at the end.

It's not a question. I haven't even gotten a call about that yet.

"The European press tour will be pushed off by a week," he continues as I pour the water.

I turn back to him, holding two cut crystal glasses, sizzling with seltzer.

Crossing the space between us, I let my hips sway. The jeans I'm wearing hug my curves, but Temperance's eyes stay focused on my face. He's confident of what's there, doesn't need to look.

When I'm close, too close really, invading his personal space, he reaches for a glass. I smile and shake my head, a subtle gesture but Temperance doesn't miss it. His hand falls back to his side. "Sit," I say, pointing toward the couch behind him with my chin.

Temperance smirks as if he knows what I'm doing, recognizes how close I'm

standing, understands I'm ordering him to dance. A little bit of a quid pro quo, you might say. You came into my house unannounced, the least you can do is what I tell you to.

Temperance glances at the couch over his shoulder and then gives me his back to move toward it. Happy to play your games, Sweetie.

It's only two strides and Temperance is there, with me right behind him, crowding him. When he turns to sit I remain close, but the only effect on him appears to be amusement.

I stand over him, his knees almost brushing mine as he lands on the low, deep couch. It's meant for lounging, curling one's legs up, and staring out to the sea.

I hand Temperance his glass, leaning over so that my breasts fall together and push at the top button of my blouse.

He doesn't glance at them, but when I turn around, crossing to my chair, I check in the mirror to see his eyes exactly where I expect them to be.

My gaze is drawn back to where Ash stood. He's gone—slipped away quiet as a mouse. Sneaky as a snake. I've never caught him looking. Not once. But I don't doubt the way I affect him. I'm just that arrogant.

I sit in a high-backed chair to face Temperance. The view isn't as good as the one from the couch, and I rarely take this seat. It also makes me feel like a guest in my own home, a feeling I now force away. I belong here. This is all mine. I earned it.

But could I have done it without Temperance Johnson? Probably not. Beating your first director to death—with his own Oscar no less—is the kind of thing that makes others shy away from working with you. No matter how much the director deserved

it.

Crossing one leg over the other, I meet Temperance's waiting gaze.

"How can I help you?" I ask, keeping my voice light, as if I'm only mildly interested.

The crystal tumbler looks almost small cradled in his large hands. "I need you to deliver something for me."

I sip my seltzer. The headache throbbing behind my eyes is starting to form talons. In the last few years Temperance has only asked that I listen and report back to him on all the rumors swirling in my world. He's directed me to attend parties, to accept roles.

"You need me to deliver something?" I prompt when he doesn't continue.

"You'll be in England for the press tour. You'll attend a party hosted by the Duke and Duchess of Balmoral for the Globe Kids Trust. I need you to give something to the Duchess."

I blink a few times. I'm not surprised Temperance knows about my connection to the Globe Kids Trust—a nonprofit associated with the famous Globe Theatre in London that gives access to theater training to underprivileged youth.

When I set up something similar, though much less prestigious, in my home town, their program director was very generous in sharing insights with my team.

Victoria Elizabeth, the Duchess of Balmoral, is a major supporter of the Globe Kids Trust. She's always had an interest in the theater.

Her husband was an actor before giving up his career when he married into the royal

family.

Benjamin Arthur isn't the first one of my profession to sidestep into royalty.

The news here is I'll be attending an event that, to my knowledge, I have not been invited to yet. Before the gunfire at my premiere, my schedule wouldn't have allowed for it.

A tickling at the back of my neck makes me wonder if the attack on the theater last night was somehow orchestrated to revise my schedule, allowing me to act as Temperance's courier.

Silence draws out. Should I say it? Or just let it go? "That's convenient for you," I say, broadening my smile. We are in on the same joke.

His eyebrows go up. I don't get your meaning.

"My schedule changing the way it has, works out for you." I push the point.

He shakes his head a little and drops his gaze to his glass, as if just now understanding my meaning. A soft sigh eases out of him. Now I'll have to say something I didn't want to say. "I did warn you."

The ridges of cut crystal dig into my hand as I tighten my grip on the glass. He warned me not to accept this role. Warned that it would make me a target.

"I don't regret it." I had to do something.

"Yet," he says, his eyes rising to mine. There is sympathy in the swirling depths. "You don't regret it yet." Temperance isn't threatening me. He's warning me. Again.

I don't respond. Can't. Have nothing to say. Nowhere to go. No one different to be.

Temperance reaches into his pocket, all casual predator. He leans forward to lay something on the glass coffee table. It's bronze and round with a coiled chain. I resist the urge to scoot to the edge of my chair and get a better look. It looks like an old pocket watch from where I'm sitting.

Silence descends. The ocean crashes against the shore. "Is there anything else?"

Temperance shakes his head. He leaves his glass on the coffee table and rises. I settle deeper into my seat, sipping my drink. "I guess you can see yourself out, then." My tone is droll. You showed yourself in, after all.

He offers me a subtle yet infuriatingly arrogant smile in return. "Yes, of course."

His unannounced presence was all just a mind fuck. A reminder of who holds the power. As if I could forget. Tears of rage burn my eyes but I blink, forcing my body back under control, taking a slow breath and letting a satisfied smile spread across my lips.

You wasted your time, I'm not intimidated by you. I know my body does things to yours that you can't control. You're not the only one with power in this room.

Temperance ascends the stairs out of the sunken living room, his broad shoulders square. He crosses the marble entry to the towering front doors, his shoes quiet on the hard surface.

The door he chooses closes behind him with a soft thud and a second later the lock automatically thunks into place.

I take a few breaths, looking at the closed doors, then stand. Crossing to the coffee

table, I put my glass down next to Temperance's and pick up the object he left.

The chain uncoils as I lift it. The whole thing is smooth bronze, no inscriptions or decorations. There is a button at the top and when I press it the lid pops up, revealing a compass. I run my thumb over the glass protecting the face.

Slipping it into my back pocket, I stride purposefully into the west wing of the house, my heels clicking a sharp staccato. It's time to deal with Ash.

I pass the gym, a glass box cantilevered over the beach with a magnificent view of the ocean. I pass the closed bedroom door of my housekeeper, Madeline, and push into Ash's room without knocking.

He's standing by the bed with the shimmering ocean and cloud-crowded sky behind him. Ash is wearing workout clothing, a black pair of loose shorts with spandex peeking out underneath. Tattoos snake from the tight material, drifting down his thick thighs.

His tank top is made of the same shimmering moisture-wicking material as his shorts. Ash's bulging shoulders are also patterned with tattoos that twine down and around his massive biceps. The man is an inked, muscled giant.

My breath is coming fast, and I take a moment to let it settle. We both wait in the silence. His expression is blank. The sound of the ocean pounds against the closed windows at his back.

"I understand that Temperance is your boss," I begin.

Ash doesn't move. No agreement. Not a nod, not a flick of his eyes. He just stares at me with that cold, cobalt gaze.

"But if I ever find him in my home again without warning," I take a pause, take a breath, drop my gaze to Ash's chest rising and falling. I wait for a slow inhale, a measured exhale. Time stretches. He still doesn't speak.

I meet his gaze again. "I will kill you." The promise comes from my gut, from my heart. It is a promise from my very fucking soul. I take another breath. He does the same.

And on the exhale, Ash replies, "Understood."

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Chapter Five

I storm into my bedroom on the far side of the house, slamming the door. It doesn't make enough noise. Some kind of pneumatic stop turns the crack I want into a gentle thud.

Fuck.

A lump of emotion threatens to choke me. Dropping into a plush armchair, I unzip my boots and kick them off. Soft brown leather with a heel designed to kill, the pair sink into the pale lilac shag rug. They look like strange animals in an alien land.

Beyond them my bed is a temple of pillows and puff. I wish I could climb into it and cry.

But I'm way past sad. Crying won't cut it.

I'm enraged.

And the only way to break myself free is to run. I need to pump my arms and legs, feel my muscles burn, really let my lungs breathe.

I take the two steps down from the lounge area—all on my own, imagine that—to where my king-size bed faces the turmoil of the sea.

Grabbing the clicker from the bedside table, I turn on the TV.

Then I continue toward my closet as the 24-hour news channel sparks to life. The anchor's voice follows me.

"Rebecca Levi, noted billionaire philanthropist and social entrepreneur, has officially entered the race for president. Levi, who made her fortune through pioneering social ventures in housing, healthcare, and clean energy, is the first..."

I don't know why I torture myself like this. The news will only feed the yearning inside me. This painful urge to do something when there is nothing to do. No way to escape.

My closet is huge, almost as big as my first apartment when I moved to LA. The clothing hanging in here probably cost more than the house I grew up in. The house I still own.

My grandmother died a year and a half ago, but the modest three-bedroom with its haunting memories and meticulously maintained front yard is still in probate.

The homeowners' association, taking advantage of new religious freedom laws, has decided to enforce "Biblical male headship" principles. Those bastards claim it is essential to preserve their community's values. Such bullshit.

Memories of the men who now reside on that board salivating over my teenage body—their eyes roaming over it like I was a landscape to be admired instead of a child to be protected—roils the nausea in my gut. Values. Fuck them.

The new religious exception laws allow the HOA to override state inheritance rules, arguing that property within the community must remain under male stewardship to align with their faith-based covenants.

The fact that my grandmother wasn't a male doesn't seem to be penetrating their

religion-addled brains. So it's not about remaining , it's about taking. They are trying to move the property under a man's power.

My grandmother lived there because it was the house she could afford, and we attended the local church because it was what everyone did. I never felt my grandmother felt a closeness to God—more that she followed religious rules because she didn't want to be punished.

The community I grew up in didn't want women having abortions and was suspicious of any kind of birth control; didn't think speech should be so free that rappers could say whatever they wanted; and viewed gay marriage as an abomination. They claimed not to hate the sinner, but rather the sin.

And yes, the community believed women should be submissive to men, but the idea of taking their property? No.

But now. Now. My legal right to inherit my grandmother's house is being challenged. The HOA insists the title must pass to a male family member or be held in trust by the association itself until an acceptable male heir can be identified.

I'm my grandmother's only living relative—her brothers and sister all died in concentration camps during the Holocaust. My grandfather passed before I was born. And my parents' car accident happened when I was eleven.

Eleven...tears burn hard at the back of my eyes, the loss of my mom suddenly a fresh wound. I can't. I can't.

This shouldn't be legal! I yank open a drawer. It didn't used to be legal. I let out a slow breath but my chest remains tight. The Supreme Court will decide within the next month. Just another bomb waiting to explode.

I pull out running clothes and try to slam the drawer back into place. I'm thwarted again by the pneumatic softening, and it closes with a gentled sigh.

I pause, breathe. Close my eyes. Notice the tightness in my chest, the sharp pain throbbing at my temples, the heat behind my eyes. I inhale, cool air passing over my lips. Then I exhale, the breath warm.

Opening my eyes, I'm staring at the sneaker section of my closet.

And I just want to fucking scream. But I reach for socks instead, my hand brushing against an old worn paperback.

I pause, forgetting the footwear and staring down at the edge of the book.

The Twentieth Day of January... a gift from Vladimir Petrov.

I pull it out. On the cover a Soviet sickle and a pistol rest on a spread of hundred-dollar bills.

The pages are yellowed, the scent that classic old book smell.

I read it in one night. It's hard to believe that was me.

That I am her. The woman who didn't know.

Didn't understand the machinations of influence and power.

I swallow the fear that haunted me the first night I read this novel—this gift from a Russian oligarch—about a presidential candidate under the control of the Soviet Union.

Published in 1980, *The Twentieth Day of January* is a classic spy novel about an American businessman from a wealthy East Coast family who, with very little political experience, and spouting populist rhetoric, manages to win the presidency against far more experienced opponents.

Check.

A CIA operative discovers the plot and realizes that the Kremlin is in control of the President-elect. This creates a crisis for the intelligence agency: let a man with hidden ties to the Soviet Union become President, or create a possible Constitutional crisis by exposing the plot?

Check.

A no-win situation. The book, however, has a satisfying ending. The President-elect's wife is shown the compromising materials being used to blackmail her husband and confronts him. Overwhelmed with shame, he commits suicide before his inauguration.

Grand's wife is his biggest supporter—in the real world, the morality of women can't save us. Too many of them stand by her man even as his boot presses on her neck.

Vladimir left this short book on my apartment door in a black bag—something you'd expect to find jewelry in, not an out-of-print spy novel that seems to be the basis for a Russian plot that was unfolding. Unfolded. It's done now.

Petrov is dead, I cracked his skull open. But like any good evil monster, it just grows another head.

Chris looks up at me as I start down the steps to the beach. The wood is warm under my bare feet. The wind whips, pressing my shorts and T-shirt flush. Chris's eyes

bounce from my hips to my breasts and finally to my face. Our eyes meet.

I saw you looking.

Chris clears his throat, and his cheekbones flush pink. The ocean wind toys with his pitch-black hair and presses his blazer tight to his side, exposing the outline of a gun beneath.

The beach spans away on either side of him. The tide has pulled back and while the strip of beach in front of my house is still narrow, it widens where the newer zoning keeps the homes at bay.

"Good afternoon," Chris says with a wary smile. He's not sure what I'm doing down here in my jogging clothes without a security agent to escort me.

"Hey," I say, my tone friendly. "I'm going for a jog."

His brows raise. "We're not prepared for that. But if you give me just a few minutes I can arrange it."

I don't wait.

Chris starts to follow as he speaks into his comms unit. "The Golden Bird is moving."

Actually, a smirk steals over my lips as I reach the wave line, I'm running.

Taking off at a sprint, my bare feet dig into the cold hard-packed sand. A wave froths over my toes, swallowing up to my ankles. I run through it—cold wet grit splashing up my calves.

I don't slow, I don't stop. Each wave surges and I relish the drag, relish the challenge.

Chris can't keep up. It's not his fault. He's in business attire. He's wearing shoes. He shrinks every time I look back.

But then over the pounding of the ocean I hear an engine. A dune buggy buzzes in my direction, the wide tires eating up the beach. It slows to pick up Chris and then, sand spitting in its wake, churns toward me.

I keep running and the whine of the engine closes in, clamoring as loud as the sea. But then it slows, settling into a rumble before falling silent. I glance back.

The dune buggy sways as Ash swings out of the driver's seat. A black baseball cap shadows his eyes but I still know when our gazes touch. Something like raw fear seizes my chest with an electric jolt.

I run faster, focusing on the beach ahead, heart hammering, adrenaline pounding through me. The rumble of the dune buggy starts up again.

It closes in. Then it passes me. Chris stares stoically ahead, allowing me the privacy I so obviously crave. He continues up a hundred yards and then starts to match my pace.

Ash follows thirty yards behind.

The panic subsides and embarrassment creeps over my cheeks. Ash isn't hunting me. He's trying to protect me. That could change. But right now, I'm safe.

My pace slows to a steady jog. Ash and Chris keep their distance. No one tries to hurt me—or stop me.

Forty minutes later when I turn around to head back, so does Ash. And glancing behind me, I see the dune buggy switching directions to follow. Clouds block out the

sun and the chilled wind coming off the ocean keeps my heated skin from burning.

I'm steady on the way home, my mind settled into that place where my breath and the waves fill my consciousness, all my fears and worries buried under the present moment.

Ash slows a half mile from my house—which is a reasonable thing to do. I should walk to cool down. But the idea of following his leadership makes my skin itch.

So I keep running, closing the distance between us. I have a childish urge to shove him from behind, maybe knock him into a wave. It would be real fun to knock Ash Fraser off balance.

He glances back and then picks up his speed to match me. I can almost hear his thoughts—something technical about the importance of cooling down after exertion, but I'm not sure I can ever cool down again.

The world is slipping into a ditch—I have so much power but not nearly enough. And it feels like I'm burning alive.

Ash waits for me at the bottom of my steps. The tide has receded further, the beach wider. Sun pierces the cloud cover and hits the horizon line. It glows suddenly gold.

I turn from the water line toward the house. The sand is deep and soft. My legs burn and my lungs are scorched. But I keep my pace steady.

Ash scans the surroundings, looking for threats. When I'm ten yards away and still running, his focus finds me. Ash's expression doesn't change. He doesn't take a step back to give me more space or move forward to block my path. He doesn't start up the steps ahead of me.

The man just watches me come.

When I run past him my shoulder brushes his bicep. He doesn't flinch. And neither do I.

Chapter Six

The sliding glass doors of my kitchen are open. My friend and personal trainer, Synthia Taylor, stands at the island—security knows to always let her in. My Vitamix blender whirls in front of Synthia, a bright green drink whirring up its sides.

My dog, Archie, scrambles across the tiles and out onto the deck. His fluffy body skids into my ankles and he jumps up, paws tapping my bare thighs as he whines with excitement.

I bend over and scoop his squirming body into my arms. Part Dachshund and part mini-poodle, Archie has the long body of his mother and the white curls of his father.

His face is round, and I keep his fur fluffy. He resembles a throw pillow with teeth. The dog has zero protective instincts but is an excellent cuddler and destroyer of accessories.

I would have taken him into the city with me, but Archie couldn't attend the premiere. Leaving him for so long alone in the hotel room would have made him mad enough to eat an untold number of shoes. So Synthia watched him for me, as she often does.

"Hello, you ridiculous creature," I say, holding him up to my face. Cradling him in my left elbow, I scratch his chest with my right hand. "Hello. Hello, my adorable little love. Oh, I love you so much. Yes, I do. Yes, I do."

Archie's eyes roll back from pleasure, and I grin down at his silly little face with its perfect dot of a black nose. His ears are flipped back, and he looks like he's going

through a wind tunnel.

Synthia draws my focus with a laugh. Her hands rest on the counter, the blender now silent between them. Synthia's muscled shoulders are dappled with freckles that also bridge her nose. She's grinning at me. You're ridiculous with that dog.

I shrug, smiling as I cross the deck. I'm not ashamed.

The whole front of the house is glass, reflecting the ocean behind me, except where the kitchen doors are open. The tiles—white with indigo flower designs—are cool and smooth under my bare feet.

Pale yellow peonies bloom from a powder pink vase on the round, glossy white kitchen table. The six matching chairs are all pushed in. The cutting board on the alabaster marble counter, littered with green stems and an empty avocado shell, is the only thing out of place.

The kitchen, like the rest of the house, is kept immaculate by Madeline, who manages to be visible in every corner of my home, yet never in my way.

"Hey," Synthia says, the skin crinkling around her brown eyes. You've been through it. The tightness in my chest loosens. Archie's furry body snuggled in my arms and the empathy in Synthia's gaze soothe me. "You okay?"

"Yeah." We can both hear the tears in my voice.

A gust of wind pushes on my back, bringing the scent of Ash with it. This time it's like a mix of sun-warmed wood and lavender. How can it change and yet be so damn consistent? To have a scent burned into my brain yet always be changing?

Ash didn't follow me right away—he was probably waiting to speak with Chris. Or

he understood enough to give me space.

The room seems to shrink when Ash enters. My muscles are buzzing with endorphins, and it feels like there is an electric field crackling between us.

"Good afternoon, Synthia," Ash says. His deep timbre sends sparks skittering along the circuits between us, making the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

"Ash." Synthia nods a greeting.

His focus shifts behind Synthia to the left, which is when I see the giant Samoan, Alesana, in the shadows of the hall that leads to the living room. "You can go," Ash says. Alesana gives me a brief smile before turning away, disappearing down the hall.

Ash moves to follow him. But I'm in his way. He expected me to step aside, to just let him pass.

I don't move, and his only option is to turn around and circle the other side of the table. I turn my head to meet his gaze. His intense focus almost startles the breath out of me.

Ash wets his lips as if to speak but then turns away instead. Synthia catches my eye. Then she looks to Ash's broad back before returning her attention to me and raising one brow. What was that?

I grit my teeth.

"Should we have our green meanies on the deck?" Synthia suggests with a smile. You are going to talk.

The ocean wind tugs at Synthia's hair, pulling wisps free. They curl around her face

as she eyes me over her pint glass of greens, avocado, blueberries and, if you ask me, not nearly enough banana—but apparently sugar isn't good for you no matter what your taste buds claim.

We're sitting on the curved deck outside the living room in two of the chaise lounges that face the view. The cushions are an angry red—the color after you've been struck but before the bruise blooms.

The Pacific roars so loudly that Synthia has to almost yell when she says, "What is going on with you and Ash? A Vitamix couldn't get through the tension a few minutes ago."

My laugh is nervous and slightly hysterical. Archie raises his head from my lap. His expression condemns me. I should know better than to disturb him with my body when he's using it as a bed.

"It's nothing." I shake my head, the last wisps of humor fading.

"Didn't look like nothing to me."

A sigh escapes. "It can just feel a little stifling sometimes—to have this much security." My answer is a cousin to the truth and as much as I can tell Synthia.

Her face softens. I'm not Synthia's only client who needs protection. She understands what it's like to be high profile enough that desperate people latch onto you. "I'm sorry, sweetie, but thank god you had them last night."

The memory of Ash carrying me out of the theater comes back so vividly that my breath chokes off and my senses are filled with his smell—it mixes with the ocean, evolving again yet remaining achingly familiar.

Swallowing, I take in a deep breath, forcing myself back to the present.

"Yeah, definitely," I say. "It's just a lot. "

Synthia leans forward and puts her hand on my knee. "You know you can always talk to me. About anything."

I nod, tears burning my eyes, wishing it was true. How much easier would my life be if I could share more with Cynthia, if I had anyone in my life I could confide my full truth to? Cynthia waits for me to speak, and I need to tell her something. "I slept with Julian last night."

She barks out a laugh. "Well, that's not what I expected you to say, but I can't blame you. I'm not even sure why you two broke up." Cynthia leans back in her seat, propping up long tanned legs. She's wearing a pair of white cotton shorts and a casual gray tank top.

"Too much time apart." I recite the lie with ease, but Cynthia shakes her head—not that she doesn't believe me, but that she thinks it's a crap reason.

Which it is. But my real reasons are solid, even if I can't share them with anyone but Temperance Johnson or Ash Fraser.

Neither of whom are exactly girlfriend material.

"With your life, Angela, you're never going to have a relationship with someone you share a schedule with unless you start fucking one of your security men."

I choke on a sip of green meanie and sit up, sputtering. Archie, incensed, departs from my lap to curl up at the bottom of the chaise with a flick of his short fluff of a tail and a look of disgust. What kind of a human?

"I don't recommend it," Synthia adds, her voice teasing.

Movement behind her draws my focus. Chris appears at the top of the stairs and crosses the deck toward the kitchen. Synthia glances back, following my attention. "It is kind of like a Chippendale show around here. Do you insist on them all being super hot, or is it just a coincidence?"

I laugh, shaking my head, and Synthia turns back to me grinning.

"Speaking of hotties," I say. "How's yours?"

Synthia's eyes flick away, concern etching itself around her eyes. "He's having a lot of anxiety."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I feel like everyone is, it's all just so...

uncertain. And scary." Synthia sips her drink and I wait, letting her take her time to figure things out.

"I mean." She shakes her head. "This is a shitty time to be a librarian, especially a trans one.

" She pauses for another moment. "These restrictions are so fucked.

" Her voice is venomous and tear-roughened.

Last year, Congress pushed through a law defining certain types of content—including discussions of same-sex romantic relationships and transgender identity—as obscene and harmful, basically putting books about the LGBTQ+

community in the same category as pornography.

So now "Jimmy Has Two Dads" is considered as dangerous as "Jimmy Takes Two Daddies."

The law also created a centralized list of banned books and words, which was distributed to all public schools and libraries.

Complying with the demand to remove every book that illustrates systemic racism or mentions homosexual relationships has created all manner of moral dilemmas for librarians and teachers around the country.

My stomach clenches thinking about the dangers of our government trying to erase people. Kids reading stories about different kinds of lives is the most basic way to create a society that has compassion and wisdom.

"I'm so sorry," I say.

Synthia gives a soft shake of her head. "Hey, it's better than being a doctor not allowed to save a woman's life." Her smile is wry, dark. Sad. "Can you imagine?"

I nod because I can—it's my job to step into other people's skins. And besides, I'm a spy forced to gather intelligence for this administration. I understand how it feels to be compelled into immoral acts.

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Chapter Seven

Buckingham Palace looms out of the foggy London night—the lights illuminating the building haloed by mist. It's massive, opulent, everything I ever thought a palace would be. And I'm an invited guest. Wild.

I resist pressing my forehead against the limousine's window to see it better as we inch toward the grand entrance.

The building is so tall I can't see the top of it anymore—just the lower floors with their massive windows and the pillars that stretch out of my view.

Hannah leans over. "You're not in Kansas anymore. "

"Shut up." I laugh, looking over at her. "You've been saving that one, haven't you?"

"I admit nothing," Hannah says, an obvious twinkle in her eye.

"I hope not because that's terrible," Zade says, faux disdain in their voice even as their dimples peek.

Hannah's laugh is deep. She doesn't seem nervous to be attending a party at the world's most famous palace. "Is this your first royal event?" I ask.

"Of course not, I'm here most weekends," she teases.

"Same," Zade says, examining their nails—which are painted a metallic blue that

matches their chunky heels.

Their dress is gorgeous. The material is a shimmering black that hugs their body; a slit on the left side shows off a long, toned leg wrapped in a sheer stocking dotted with crystals.

One strong shoulder is exposed. Peacock feathers flair off the other.

Zade's lashes match the blue, green, and gold.

They flutter them at me, a teasing grin slipping into place.

My dress is straight up boring in comparison.

It's a black silk halter top with a low back and loose skirt.

I could hike it up and sprint if I needed to...

after I kicked off my red heels. My lips match my shoes and the heart-shaped clutch I carry.

Inside is the "gift" Temperance gave me to pass on to the duchess—the compass with a bronze cover and chain. No context. Just the object.

I doubt I'll have time to slip it to her tonight without being seen. But leaving it at the hotel felt too risky. I'll see Victoria again tomorrow when we tour the Globe Theatre. I imagine we will find time to be alone then.

The thing may look like a compass, but it feels like an explosive.

Hannah's burgundy dress spills over my skirts as she crowds toward the window,

trying to catch the same view as me.

The rich color of her gown sets off the silver in her hair.

She looks so elegant and composed—the cap sleeves and square-cut neckline at once sexy and commanding. I let out a shaky breath.

Hannah catches my eye. "Don't worry." She smiles. "Just act like you belong. Here, I'll give you a character. You're an internationally renowned actor on the cusp of her first Oscar nomination. You're drop dead gorgeous, stylish, and kind. Oh, and you're rich AF."

I laugh, the tightness in my chest loosening.

Piano music infuses the air. Warm yellow light fractures off the four-tiered chandelier hanging from the gilded domed ceiling. The walls are lined with gold-framed mirrors reflecting the elegant crowd bathed in glittering light.

The scent of floral perfume and baked puff pastries mingle—the signature perfume of these types of affairs.

Royalty, politicians, successful business people, and those of us in the arts stand in small groups as waiters expertly navigate through the crowd, their trays carrying champagne flutes and canapés.

The conversation and clink of glass is almost louder than the music coming from the ornate Erard grand piano.

It fits the room perfectly, adorned and embellished on every surface except the keys.

The three legs look like they belong on a mythical beast—pawed and feathered.

Paintings of cherubic angels trumpet along the sides.

I sip my champagne, resisting the urge to tilt my head back and stare at the intricate ceiling. Zade catches my eyes and raises one brow. Not in Kansas anymore.

I grin back. Definitely not Kansas.

My gaze tracks back over the crowd until it lands on Ash. He stands against the wall, hands clasped in front of him, eyes on me. I swallow an unnamable emotion and offer a soft smile. His gaze falls behind me and a faint line of concern etches into his brow.

Turning my head, I scan the crowd—tuxedos, gowns, and heavy jewelry. My breath stalls. There is a man staring at me.

Ebony eyes under black brows. Obsidian hair gilded by the room's golden light. Full lips a few shades redder than his amber skin—as if they are slightly embarrassed by how good-looking he is and what a heavy look he's giving the stranger across the room. I turn away, feeling heat crawl up my chest.

I don't blush at men's looks. I take power from them.

"Oh my god," Hannah says, leaning close. "That man wants to eat you for dinner."

"They all do," Zade points out.

"Yes, but that one." Hannah is looking past me at the hauntingly beautiful stranger. "He doesn't look afraid to try. They usually look scared."

"That's because Ash is usually mean-mugging them." Zade takes a sip of their champagne before raising their flute to Ash in a salute. "Like he's doing now."

I glance over at Ash again. His expression doesn't seem much changed—the man is in an almost constant state of mean-mugging—but the line in his brow that first drew my attention to Hungry Eyes has deepened slightly.

"That's just his face," Hannah says.

"Maybe," Zade admits. "But I've gotten a smile out of him more than once."

"How?" Hannah asks, her tone breathless—as if Zade has accomplished some great feat. I laugh.

Zade shrugs and tips their chin down coquettishly. "A lady never tells."

Hannah and I both laugh. The crowd shifts around us and we all follow the movement to see Victoria Elizabeth and Benjamin Arthur—aka the Duke and Duchess of Balmoral—approaching.

Victoria Elizabeth is one of those wispy women—all long limbs and elegant movements. Her blonde hair is swept up with a diamond tiara nestled in the thick locks. A glitter of copper eyeshadow brings out the honey tones of her brown eyes.

Her husband walks slightly behind her, almost like a bodyguard.

But with a nicer tux. He is broad, strong, and wearing his penguin suit like he was born in one—which he might have been.

A member of the aristocracy and a noted actor, Benjamin Arthur is handsome in a classic sense.

Strong jaw and nose, full head of brown hair, and straight, white teeth.

The princess offers me a warm smile and extends her hand.

I take it and resist the urge to curtsy.

She is third in line to the throne. Her grandmother occupies it now and her father will be next.

Then Victoria. One day this woman will be the queen of England.

And she's smiling at me like we could be friends.

Her grip is just the right amount of pressure. She's not squeezing the life out of me but also isn't afraid to make contact. "It's such a pleasure to finally meet you," she says, her accent as crisp as a fall morning.

"The honor is mine," I say.

The princess shakes her head as if she's embarrassed by her power. "Please," she says. "I'm a huge admirer of your work. We watched *The Benefactor* last night. A masterpiece." She turns to Hannah. "You did a wonderful job."

"Thank you," Hannah says.

"So true," the duke says, his voice a boom compared to his wife's soft purr. "I loved it. Exceptional work. Did you do the makeup?" he asks Zade.

"Yes, I did," Zade says, their expression surprised. The duke notices makeup? It makes sense, though, as he was in the industry.

Benjamin turns his attention to Hannah and starts to compliment her on the film, going into detail of what he likes about her work.

Hannah glows under the praise. The princess and I stand next to each other on the periphery of the conversation.

She leans close, creating an intimate space between us.

"Thank you so much for attending and donating your time. It means the world to the kids."

"I'm happy to do it," I reply, surprised by the earnestness in her voice. She seems to actually care. "Your organization really helped mine. I'm very happy to return the favor in any way I can."

"That's kind of you. I know your schedule must be mad."

I let out a surprised laugh. "Yes, something I'm sure you know a little about." She gives me a self-deprecating smile. "Do you think we could find a moment alone together tomorrow?" I ask.

"I'd like that very much. We should have some privacy during lunch. I very much look forward to it. I feel we have a lot in common." Her focus is pulled behind me before I can respond to that wild statement.

My mind whirls as the truth of her words strikes me. We share a passion for the theater, lost our mothers young, share the benefits and drawbacks of fame...but we could hardly come from more different worlds.

A trickle of awareness rides up my bare back. I turn to see Hungry Eyes making his way toward us.

The crowd parts for him the way it did for the royal couple, but there is an edge of danger to this man. The princess's family history and country's love create the aura

around her and her husband. This man...it's not that everyone knows who he is, it's that they sense his power and bend to it.

I turn back to the princess. She's offering Hungry Eyes a warm smile.

My gaze can't help but skitter to Ash where he still stands at his post. His hands are unclasped, loose at his sides, ready to grab Hungry Eyes by the throat and show him what a dangerous man really looks like.

A slight smile pulls at my lips to see so much emotion on Ash's face. Sure, it's just a deepening of the crease on his brow and a slightly different light in his eyes, but I can see it. I can read him.

I turn to Hungry Eyes with a teasing smile and a head tilt, angling my body to allow him access to our group. He eats up the space and drops into a slight bow to the princess. "Your Highness," he says, his voice a rich baritone.

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"Your Highness." The princess drops into a reserved curtsy. Shit, was it rude of me not to offer one to the princess? Wait, did she just call Hungry Eyes Your Highness?

"Omar," the duke booms, his long arm coming out to clasp Hungry Eyes' hand. "Wonderful to see you. We still on for the hunt next month?"

"I wouldn't miss it," Omar says, his slight accent sexy as fuck. His gaze tracks back to me, and it feels like being under a heat lamp.

"Omar," the princess says. "This is Angela Daniels. Angela, this is His Royal Highness, Prince Omar bin Rami of Jordan."

Our eyes meet. I offer my hand and he takes it, sliding his fingers around so that he can bring my knuckles to his lips.

I stop breathing as Omar's exhale caresses my skin.

His eyes continue to hold mine. Lips—soft as the silk of my dress but warm, so warm—press.

His eyes close, onyx lashes fan over bronze skin, in what looks like bliss.

My whole body lights up, and it takes every skill I have to keep a blush from blooming across my cheeks. "An absolute pleasure," he says, lips and breath brushing my skin. He straightens and lowers my hand but does not release it.

A tinkling bell pulls our focus to a pair of open doors at the far end of the room.

"May I escort you to dinner?" Omar asks. "As long as your date does not mind." He turns to Zade and Hannah, his eyes going between the two to see if either is attached to me.

"That would be lovely," I say. "Thank you." He moves gracefully next to me, and wraps my hand under his elbow and around to rest on his forearm. The duke and duchess do likewise. Hannah and Zade follow suit, giving each other a look that has me suppressing a smile.

We follow the crowd out into a wide hall where voices echo and stern portraits watch our procession to the ballroom.

"Is this your first time at Buckingham Palace?" Omar asks, voice low and intimate.

"Yes," I say. "It's stunning. Do you come often?"

"Yes. I've known Victoria since we were children. I think there was a time when our parents hoped we might wed."

"Really?" I say. "And why didn't you?"

He casts a devastating smile down at me. "She likes tall, handsome actors. And I like tall, stunning actresses with violet eyes."

I let out a surprised laugh. "Do you?" I tease.

We cross the threshold into the ballroom.

Round tables set for ten fill the front half of the room.

Beyond them is the dance floor. Red-cushioned bleachers line the walls on either

side.

Two thrones sit on a stage in front of it.

Crystal chandeliers bathe the room in the same faceted gold as the music room.

"Yes," Omar says. "I'm quite enamored."

"Is that so?" I ask. "I imagine you meet a fair number of actresses with violet eyes in your line of...work?"

His laugh is a low rumble. "I'll have you know that being royalty is quite a bit of work."

"I understand. Truly, I do." The teasing falls away from my tone. "The weight that accompanies this kind of life, the invasion of privacy, the expectations. I chose this life. You had no other option."

I glance up at him as I finish speaking. The prince is looking down at me, his head slightly cocked, as if he's examining me in a new light.

"Yes," he says. "You're very perceptive." I break away from his gaze, my own falling to where my hand lays on the arm of his dark suit. The gold chain bracelet circling my wrist drapes across the fine fabric. The sapphire ring on my middle finger sparkles.

"It's a professional attribute," I say as we reach a table covered in a cream cloth and decorated with a flower centerpiece that climbs three feet high, bursting with red, yellow, and white blooms. The royal crest is stamped on the dinner plates.

Silverware fans out like children lining up by size.

The goblets and water glasses are rimmed in gold.

"Empathy," Omar says, his voice thoughtful. He releases my arm, and moves to pull out one of the ornate dining room chairs. They look related to the piano—clawed and feathered gold legs hold up the white-cushioned seat and back.

"What do you mean: empathy?" I ask.

Omar's hands gently rest on the back of the chair. "Isn't that what allows you to imagine someone else's life?"

"Yes," I agree. "I suppose it is."

We stare at each other for a moment longer than is polite. I'm not imagining what it's like to be the prince, but I am picturing how good it would feel to be under him. From the subtle tug of Omar's lips, I'm pretty sure he's imagining the same thing.

"Unfortunately, we are not at the same table tonight, but I'd very much like to take you to dinner another night--just the two of us.

" Omar holds my gaze. There is no arrogance in his eyes.

He doesn't know what my answer will be. But there is confidence—a spark that tells me he wouldn't accept a no easily.

This is a man who pursues—and usually gets—what he wants.

"Are you asking me out on a date?" I tease.

"Yes." His smile widens.

"I'll consider it," I say, tilting my chin down as I look at him from under my lashes.

"Wonderful," he says.

The feathers on Zade's left shoulder shudder as they sit next to me. Hannah sits on my other side. She raises her half-empty champagne glass at me and winks. I shake my head, pretending that a prince didn't just ask me on a date.

Our table fills with bejeweled women and tuxedoed men. Sharp English accents and narrow noses. I smile and look pretty, pretending like I belong. Like I'm perfectly comfortable. Pulling the character Hannah described in the limo around me.

Zade leans over. "So," they say, drawing out the word. "A prince. How very Grace Kelly of you."

I shake my head. "You're already planning the wedding look, aren't you?"

"It's going to be stunning. Simple but elegant." Their eyes roam over my face. "Sasha can do the hair," they say, referencing the stylist who we worked with on my last Star Wars film. She's currently very pregnant.

"Let's hope it's not too quick a courtship, so that Sasha doesn't have to cut her maternity leave short."

"Of course. You have to make him work for it."

"Oh, I will."

They nod, totally confident in my wiles.

The room quiets, pulling our focus to the front of the room. The queen steps up onto

the stage, her granddaughter following. The princess pauses at the edge while the queen continues to the podium. She is short and round with pale skin. A tiara of diamonds nestles in her short, white curls.

She smiles out at the crowd. Her power electrifies the air—silencing the room. Such a small, dour figure, yet...

"Good evening," she says, then clears her throat. The queen brings a hand to the pearls ringing her neck. Her eyes bulge. She stumbles back a step.

The princess rushes the short distance to her grandmother. The queen turns to her, then collapses—knees folding, body dropping. The princess lunges, letting out a sharp cry. She isn't fast enough. The sound of the queen's body hitting the stage fills the silence her presence created.

Chapter Eight

The gray sky hunkers over mist-sheened limestone buildings—stalwart and grand, impervious to the morning chill pressing against my wool sweater and pants. I'm finishing my second cup of coffee on the balcony of the Presidential Suite.

A text from Ash pings.

May I come in.

Apparently they don't teach knocking in spy school.

Yes.

I hear the hotel suite door swoosh open. The view of it is blocked by billowing linen curtains on either side of the balcony doors.

I sit back in my chair, taking the lukewarm coffee with me. Ash appears between the curtains almost like an apparition but so much more solid. "There's someone coming to see you," he says.

I wait. Sip my coffee. His eyes scan the table, pause on the untouched basket of pastries. "You want one?" I ask, some instinct knowing the question will bait him—wiggle just a little under his skin—though I'm not sure why.

Ash's jaw tightens almost imperceptibly. Just the slightest wrinkle of skin. If I wasn't studying the man, I would have missed it. It dawns on me: acting as though he might

consider his own needs gets under Ash Fraser's skin. He wants to be seen as selfless.

I file that away.

"Have you eaten?" he asks, still frowning at the croissants, cinnamon rolls, and scones that came with my coffee order.

"So who's my mysterious visitor?" I ask, ignoring his question the same way he ignored mine.

Ash brings his focus back to me, and I take in a measured breath, bearing the weight of it with grace—hiding behind an impenetrable mask of confidence. I can handle whatever you've got and a lot more.

"An MI5 agent named Elliot Kendricks. He's a part of the team investigating last evening's incident."

My eyes flick to the paper next to my coffee carafe. The queen smiles from the front page. Her blue eyes twinkle under the caption: Queen Collapses at Charity Gala: Dehydration Blamed.

The article implied the queen was on death's door. And that her son, His Royal Highness Prince Edmund Arthur George Philip Windsor—Victoria's father—was ready to become king. More than ready.

The author hinted that Prince Edmund resented that his mother had not already abdicated the throne in her "weakened" state.

The article noted some believe that the accusations of Edmund's late wife—that he was physically abusive—were why the queen continued to cling to power. It also managed to squeeze in a brief recap of the tragic boating accident Victoria's mother

died in soon after the divorce.

Leave it to the British press to air all the royals' dirty laundry while reporting on the queen fainting.

"Be careful with Kendricks," Ash says, drawing my focus.

"Why?" I blink up at him. "We both know I had nothing to do with this. She was dehydrated." I wave a hand at the paper. "She's fine, they are just keeping her for observation."

Before Ash can respond, there's a knock on the door—quiet because of the distance, loud because of the implications. A man, whom I must be careful of for unknown reasons, has arrived.

"Does he..." I pause. "About me?"

"It's a possibility." Ash's gaze holds mine.

"Anything else you want to share?"

A tightness around his eyes. Wonder what that means?

"I can't." Ash doesn't flinch at the denial. But I don't think he likes it...there is a subtle strain in his voice. Not very noble to keep a woman in the dark, is it?

Selfless. Noble. Synonyms.

Ash leaves to answer the door. My gaze falls to the rain-shined pedestrians below, their jackets and umbrellas slick with drizzle. A slight thrill of voyeurism comes over me. They don't know I'm up here watching them.

Men's voices float from the other room. Footsteps approach. My gaze falls to the coffee cup in my hands—bone china hand-painted with pert pink flowers. I place it on the table with a soft clatter.

As the two men reach the threshold, I rise.

Elliot Kendricks wears a three-piece suit and an affable smile.

His hair is summer mud brown, straight and floppy.

The MI5 agent's eyes are a bright ocean blue, friendly and slightly awed.

He does not look threatening. He looks like the kind of man I could eat for breakfast.

"Absolute pleasure to meet you, Ms. Daniels." He offers me a hand. "Elliot Kendricks. Sorry to come see you so early, really a terrible inconvenience, I do apologize." His skin is soft, nails trimmed, grip confident but not dominating.

"Please." I wave to the seat across from me. "Coffee?"

He moves toward the offered chair as I sit. Elliot's movements are fawnlike, legs too long to be graceful, but the man is still agile. "I have to tell you I'm a big fan of your work. You're brilliant. Just brilliant."

"Thank you," I say, dipping my chin, and folding my hands in my lap. Demure, nonthreatening, charmed.

"Sorry to be more of a bother, but would you mind terribly, chap, if we could just have some privacy?" Kendrick looks up at Ash and then to me, his smile an embarrassed grimace.

I give a small nod and Ash leaves us—as if he needed my permission. "Coffee?" I offer again.

"No, no, please. Thank you. I just have a few questions, just routine." His hands flap around like baby birds not sure how to land.

"Of course. It's terrible. I'm not sure what I can tell you, though; I never even spoke with the queen. From what I've read, she was dehydrated. That happened to my grandmother quite a bit as she aged."

"Well, you know, it's always good to get multiple points of view. Just due diligence really." He waves away any objection I might have with his fluttering hands.

Fine. We can play this game if he wants. "I'll admit, I don't know much about your profession. Eyewitness accounts are vital to an investigation?" I lean forward, adding a subtle eager note to my voice. Please teach me something. There is so much I don't know.

His eyes light and he nods, eager to share his knowledge. "Very. While each individual account is colored from the personal perspective, when we have a large group, the more points of view we have, the easier it is to create a clear picture."

"I see. How interesting."

"And besides," he says, now almost preening. "You have a habit of being in the room when people collapse." His expression doesn't change—still a fawn. But turns out this one's got sharp teeth.

The night Vladimir Petrov crashed onto the dance floor—dragging me onto his seizing body—comes back to me in vivid color. The swell of power I felt at his distant gaze, at the horror I had wrought.

I also felt guilt then, too. Not now. I didn't kill Vladimir Petrov the night he "collapsed.

" It would have been easier if I had. Instead, I was forced to bludgeon the man to death in my home.

The sickening memory of his skull cracking and the wet spatter on my skin snaps me back to the hotel balcony.

"What an awful way to put it," I say, my brow falling, my pretty lips turning into a sad frown, my eyes growing distant.

"Ivan Petrov collapsed in your arms. Poisoned." He picks up one of the scones, pulling it onto a small plate and then reaching for the butter, his attention apparently completely on the task.

"Are you suggesting the queen was poisoned?" I ask.

He smiles down at his pastry, now cut in half, as he slathers butter over one side. "I'm just making an observation."

"Is dredging up sad memories important for your investigation?" I ask, my tone as light as his, my teeth as sharp.

He takes a bite and then waves with the rest of the scone, as if scattering away my words. "I do apologize, didn't mean to upset you. I'm sure what you witnessed last night was quite a shock."

I don't answer because he didn't ask a question. Instead, I stare into his eyes and wait for him to speak again. He stares back, takes another bite of the scone, jaw working, gaze locked on mine.

"You know, I knew Temperance," he goes on. "It's terrible what happened to him." My expression remains totally blank. I am behind a wall and no one can see through it. "If you ever need to get him a message, you can always call on me."

He breaks eye contact to find a napkin and wipe his hands before reaching into his breast pocket and pulling out a business card.

"I won't take up any more of your time." He places the card next to the coffee pot—the same bone china and pink flowers as the cup.

"Please don't hesitate to contact me if you need anything at all, Ms. Daniels. "

Ash appears in the doorway again. "Our car is waiting downstairs."

"I was just leaving," Elliot says, pushing back his chair to stand. I also rise. He turns to me. "An absolute delight to meet you, Ms. Daniels. And, again, please never hesitate to reach out."

I smile but don't speak. Elliot gives Ash a curt nod and then moves past him into the suite. Ash turns to follow. I stand on the balcony, the chill air biting my cheeks and the tip of my nose. The curtains billow, blocking my view of the hotel room door, but I hear it open and then close.

Ash returns and I'm still standing in that spot. "What happened to Temperance?" I ask.

"You'll be late if we don't leave now."

"Answer me."

"Alesana will be here any second, and we can't discuss this in front of him."

I step forward, closing the space between us to a mere foot. Craning my neck to look up at him, I'm reminded again of Vladimir—he was a giant like Ash. He made me feel small. But I felled him.

The hotel room door opens and Alesana's voice reaches us: "All set?"

"Yes," Ash answers for me.

Chapter Nine

Fear grips me in the elevator as I stand between and slightly behind Ash and Alesana. If something has happened to Temperance, and he's no longer Ash's superior, then who is? And what about me? Do I even have a handler? Is it possible I'm free? Or have I simply lost my main protector?

I slip my hands into the satin-lined pockets of my wool pants to hide the tremble in them. The two men flank me as we leave through the hotel's secured VIP entrance. Alesana opens the back door of a black Bentley sedan with tinted windows. I climb in, and he closes the door firmly.

The interior is black leather, shining walnut, and copper accents. The carpet at my feet shows lines of a small vacuum. With both hands I clutch my brown leather crossbody purse that holds the compass I'm meant to give to the princess—if that indeed is still my mission.

The other door opens, and Ash slides in next to me. Alesana takes the driver's seat. The privacy glass—tinted smoke gray—creates an opaque wall between us.

"It's only a ten-minute drive to the Globe Theatre. I've confirmed with the princess's staff that she will be there. Her grandmother's condition is stable, and she doesn't want to disappoint the children." Ash tells all this to the back of Alesana's head.

I stare at his profile. Silence balloons between us as the Bentley navigates through the congested city in stilted traffic.

"I'm not at liberty to share information with you," Ash says into the silence, still not looking at me.

"Ash." I reach out and grab his forearm, gripping his suit jacket, uncertainty making me desperate.

He finally looks over at me, but his eyes hold no comfort. Just empty cobalt glass. God, he's good at this. At giving no fucks. Is there anyone in Ash's life who he's spent as much time with as me since we met? This robot of a man has been my most constant companion for over two years.

"Who do you work for?" I ask, not even trying to hide the tears threatening to ease from my eyes. I won't let them. But I don't need to hide these feelings from Ash. Lord knows, he doesn't care.

"Sentinel Security Group." His voice is even—no hint that he wants to elaborate.

"Can I fire you?" My heart flutters at the thought. If I'm free, then I can hire my own security. People loyal to me.

"You have a contract with my security agency. You're certainly welcome to speak to the office about personnel changes." He looks forward again, as if that finishes this discussion. I stare at his profile. There is a subtle tightness around the eyes.

Ash shifts, his attention moving to his window.

"But I think you'll find that I'm the best man for the job," he says as the car slows to a stop.

In the window beyond Ash, photographers crowd metal barricades lining the path to a set of stairs.

The Globe Theatre looms at the top of them—white and medieval looking. I'm out of time.

"Do I still need to..." My sentence dies.

"Complete the mission." Ash answers my unfinished question, then opens his door. Light and sound spill in. He reaches back for me. Palm open, thick fingers curled gently. I place my hand in his and he traps it, holding me steady as I leave the car.

The Globe Theatre stage is open to the sky but surrounded by curved walls housing private boxes and stadium seating.

Rain gently soaks the thatched roofs. Weak sunlight illuminates the stage and standing area in front of it—the cheap seats.

The Duchess of Balmoral, a princess, third in line to the royal throne, stands next to me on the stage. It all feels surreal.

"When it rains, the actors and anyone in the standing area get wet. No umbrellas allowed," the director of the Young Bards program explains.

The princess's assistant approaches. She's the kind of white woman who exudes proficiency, propriety, and all the other trappings of imperialism that make it so damn insidious. The director falls silent at her approach. Gangly, passionate, and clothed in tweed, he's no match for her.

The princess excuses herself, and the two walk far enough away that their low conversation does not reach us. "This place is amazing," I say, smiling.

"It truly is." He nods his agreement.

"I'm sorry, but I must leave early," Princess Victoria says as she crosses back to us, her low heels clicking on the wood theater floor. Her black pantsuit is misted from the light rain, her hair dewed with it.

"I hope it's not your grandmother," I say, stepping closer, my instincts wanting to protect her from the pain of possibly losing such a close relative.

"Yes, but it's good news. I can't share it with you, of course you understand." She reaches out for my hand as if we are old friends who might touch each other for comfort or when asking for understanding.

I squeeze her hand. "Completely. Please, don't allow me to keep you."

She turns and leaves me alone with the director. Our tour continues. I can't pay attention to anything, not the museum in the basement with its exhibits about costumes and blueprints of the theater. Not the view from the private boxes down onto the stage. My mind is churning over my problems.

How will I get the compass to the princess now?

What the fuck happened to Temperance?

Should I try firing Ash? They will probably set someone else up in his place. He knows I'm supposed to finish the mission. Or he may know nothing and just be acting on a noble belief that a mission should never be left unfinished.

We're walking down a cement hall on our way to the classroom where we'll meet with the kids before they start their dress rehearsal. My heels echo; Ash and Alesana flank me as we follow the director.

A crash followed by shouts comes from somewhere close. Alesana is suddenly in

front of me, Ash behind. His hand grips my hip and he's pushing. I follow the pressure as he swings open a door and herds me into a tight dark space.

He slams the door shut, blocking out all the light. Cleaning products scent the close space. He pushes me behind him, placing himself at the door.

My heart beats like a trapped hummingbird.

The wire in Ash's ear crackles but I can't understand what the voice is saying.

My eyes begin to adjust. There is light spilling under the door, illuminating the outline of Ash's shoes and the bottom of his pant legs. Soon I can make out shelves and the rest of his looming figure.

"They are doing a security sweep," he says. "Shouldn't be more than a few minutes. They think it was a prop mishap."

I nod even though he can't see me.

"You okay?" he asks.

"No." The honesty shocks us both, I think, because his body goes still and mine gets flaming hot. "I'm not okay, Ash. Are you kidding me?"

He turns fully to me, his broad shoulders a black line in the darkness, his face nothing but shadows. I have an insatiable urge to strike out at him. My hand flies, aiming up at his face. Ash catches my wrist, his finger shackling it.

I strike out with the other hand, just as sloppily. He catches that one too, just as easily.

A sob sticks in my throat. Ash lessens the pressure on my wrists, as if asking if I can be trusted. When I stay still, he releases. My skin feels branded from his.

I swallow the emotion in my throat as I lower my hands. They're shaking. Anger wells up again, and it's like someone else is in charge of my body when I lunge at him.

Ash captures both wrists again. I struggle, thrashing in his grip. "Stop it," Ash seethes, his hands like manacles. I kick out, hitting him in the shin. He grunts. I kick him again.

Using his hold on my wrists, he pushes me sideways until my back knocks into one of the shelves, then he presses close, not so that he's touching me but so that my kicks don't have any power.

My chest heaves with each breath, my wool sweater brushing the button of his suit jacket.

"If you want to hit me, I'll let you. But realize that if you slap my face right now, I will walk out of this closet with your handprint on me. Is that what you really want?" His voice is so cold it burns.

My breath saws, tears burn. I lean my head back against the shelf, all the fight draining out of me. There are photographers out there.

Fuck.

He releases my wrists and fumbles briefly by the door until an overhead light blares to life. I close my eyes against the glare.

Digging my nails into my palms, I try to use the pain to ground me. It doesn't. I am a

tornado of emotion trapped in a body. "Ash." My voice shakes.

He's standing by the door, a few feet away. Breath rougher than normal.

"I don't want to fight you." I swallow. It's so true.

"I don't know why you do."

My eyes fly open. He's half turned toward the door, giving me his profile. "Are you kidding? You seriously don't understand why I want to slap you?"

"My mission is to keep you safe." He doesn't look at me.

"For them!" I scream-whisper, pushing off the shelves behind me and pointing an accusing finger at the closed door, at the world outside this closet, at the forces pulling my marionette strings.

The same ones pulling his. "Your mission could change to killing me, Ash. " My voice drops to a true whisper.

He turns to me, leans forward, his quiet response loud in the intimate space between us. "I will keep you safe." There is no warmth in his tone, no tenderness in his eyes. But there is grim determination in both.

Chapter Ten

Prince Omar bin Rami waits for me outside the Globe Theatre. He's leaning against a classic sports car—something from an early Bond film—his ankles crossed. The prince wears a sport coat over a sweater with a collared shirt and black jeans.

The prince smiles at me as if he doesn't have a care in the world or anywhere to be except standing in the rare London sunshine waiting for me. Parked on a pedestrian-only street—except, of course, for those of us with special dispensation.

The photographers are gone. They probably followed the princess to the hospital. My Bentley waits at the curb, purring. Chris now sits in the driver's seat. Alesana opens the back door for me, but I don't move to get in. Ash stands at my back, waiting just as patiently as the prince.

Omar rocks to stand and crosses the street, his long legs eating up the space between us, his intense gaze holding me in its thrall. Alesana shifts his position, blocking me slightly.

Omar smiles, as if it's cute that such a large man thinks physical strength is anything to his aura. "It's okay, Alesana. This is His Royal Highness, Prince of Jordan, Omar bin Rami," I say. Omar grins as he rounds the Bentley's front. "Are you stalking me?" I tease.

"Mildly," he responds, his accent, combined with a smirk, doing things for me.

"Victoria told me you'd be here." He stops a few feet from me, one hand in his

pocket.

The man is casual elegance embodied, and I am here for it.

"I understand you two were meant to have lunch.

I hope you'll accept my invitation instead. "

"Thank you for the invitation," I say, not sure if I'll accept yet.

A casual dalliance with a handsome prince might be just what I need.

Or it might be a terrible idea. Hard to say which way is up and which is down...

adding a date with a powerful man sounds like an awesome way to stir up my snow globe even more.

"The Tate Modern is just down the way," he says. "Have you been?"

"No," I admit.

"I took the liberty of requesting a private tour—we'd have one of the galleries to ourselves."

"Confident I'd say yes?"

He grins and it's pretty devastating. "I figured if you said no, that nothing heals a broken heart like modern art."

I laugh and his smile broadens. "I'd hate to break your heart."

"Then join me." He holds out his hand. I'll have to take a step toward him to accept it. "We can walk." He looks over at Ash. "Assuming that is acceptable to your security."

"Whatever Ms. Daniels wants, we can accommodate," Ash answers, his baritone gravelly—coldly polite but not exactly accommodating .

Omar's hand waits, palm up, for me to take it. His eyes sparkle with amusement and excitement. The man is chasing and enjoying the hell of out of it.

"I don't know if I have time for an entire tour," I say. "I have commitments this afternoon."

"Cancel them?" Omar suggests, teasing but not.

"How much time do I have?" I ask Ash, glancing over my shoulder at him.

His focus is on Omar, and his scowl is securely in place. Omar's ability to ignore it is impressive. Actually makes him even hotter—not being nervous under Ash's scrutiny is quite a feat.

"You have commitments starting in two hours. And we need time for transportation. An hour and half had been allotted for your lunch with Princess Victoria."

"Thank you," I say, remembering that my “commitments” after lunch were a massage in my room, followed by a bath before getting ready for a dinner. "You have an hour and half," I tell Omar as I step forward to take his hand.

"I promise not to waste it." He twines our fingers.

I'm standing in front of a urinal. It's enclosed in a glass box. In thick black letters the name R. Mutt is scrawled on the side. The year 1917 is marked under the signature.

Behind it is a blank white wall, the better to focus on the urinal.

"Some people say they can see a veiled woman's face in it. Others say a seated buddha," Omar tells me.

"How poetic. What do you see?"

"A replica of a urinal."

I laugh and the sound bounces around the large, mostly empty room. Omar kept his promise, and we have this section of the museum to ourselves. It's strange to be in such a large space designed for crowds without any. "The original is lost," Omar continues.

"Funny to think about where it might have ended up. Did someone throw it away thinking it was trash?"

Omar laughs and I feel his sparkling gaze on my face. He has a good laugh, deep and honest. "I like that," he says. "Adds another layer to the 'what is art' conversation."

"Ah, yes, that debate." As if it's one I've engaged in regularly.

"You didn't discuss the nature of art with your tutors?" Omar asks, teasing. I laugh. "How very common of you." He's obviously joking and it's endearing. "We can argue about it at lunch, I'll bring you up to speed."

"I appreciate you taking pity on me."

"Always happy to help."

My eyes drift down to the label under the box. Fountain by Marcel Duchamp . "It is

an interesting piece," I say. "Asking the question of what makes something a sculpture? Does putting a urinal on a stand make it art? I guess we know the Tate agrees it does."

"It's almost like asking what is acting?" Omar says. "Must it be done on a stage or in front of a camera? Or is any pretense a part of your craft?"

"Another debate I've never had." I smile at him.

"Tell me what you think." He shifts, taking his lingering attention off "Fountain" and narrowing his focus to only me. He's playful but powerful—the force of his gaze potent.

I tilt my head, looking up at him. In my heels I'm 5'10, and he's still at least four or five inches taller. And so much broader. Just bigger than me.

But not bigger than Ash who stands about twenty feet behind him—his dark suit stark against the white wall. His cobalt gaze scans the empty space, avoiding falling on us. Like a good, invisible security agent.

"Where is the line between acting and just the normal lies of human interaction?" I clarify the question. Omar nods. A subtle smile tugs at his lips—they are so ready to smile for me. To laugh.

I shrug. "I don't know. Maybe you should call up your tutors. I bet they've got ideas." Omar's smile broadens but he doesn't speak, waiting for me to say more.

"I think we are all acting all the time, Omar." When I say his name, his pupils widen—that spark of attraction igniting.

"Are you acting now?" he asks.

I drop my chin so that I can gaze up at him through the lace of my lashes. "A girl never tells." He laughs, eyes ablaze. I'm giving him the kind of challenge he likes. Am I acting like a woman he wants, or am I actually that woman?

Exactly an hour and a half after we left my Bentley, we walk out of the Tate. Our lunch was simple but delicious in the museum's restaurant kitchen at the chef's table—a jovial man who hugged Omar and bowed to me like I was royalty.

Omar poured me chilled white wine and we dined in the busy atmosphere, the clang of the commercial kitchen background music to our conversation about the meaning of art and acting.

The prince was charming, handsome, and funny. What more could I ask for in a date? He was also punctual, checking his watch to make sure to get me back within the limits I'd set. "I respect your time," he said when I teased him about it. "I want to make sure you'll agree to that dinner."

"You're definitely earning it."

"That's what I like to hear."

We stared at each other across the table.

My eyes dropped to his lips first, but it was his hand that reached out and cupped my cheek.

It was Omar who closed the distance between us.

He's the one who deepened the kiss. The one who made me want to climb into his lap and the one who pulled back—the prince left me wanting more.

Outside the Tate a fresh drizzle has started, the recent bout of sunshine gone. It feels especially cold after the warm embrace of the kitchen. "You'll have dinner with me?" Omar asks again as Alesana opens my door for me.

Still flush from the wine, kiss, and general awesomeness of the date, I bite my lip. Do I want to start this? It's just another Julian—another amazing man I could never be close to, not really.

Another heartbreak. Or maybe just a few quick fucks to get him out of my system and then move on with my life. "Do you want to come back to my hotel with me?"

"Yes." Omar's answer is fast and sure. He takes a step closer to me, moving into my space, his hand reaching out to rest on my waist. His eyes bright, eager. Ready.

He's on me the moment we are through the door, his hands in my hair, pushing me up against the wall. He tastes good, so fucking good. He smells amazing—like frankincense, wine, and something all him.

Omar bin Rami might be a perfect gentleman on the street, but in the privacy of my hotel suite, he's an animal. A beast. Just the way I like my lovers.

He pulls back, holding me in place, pressing his forehead to mine. "I'm sorry," he says.

"For what?" I'm panting, each breath pushing my chest into his.

His eyes find mine in the gloom—the shades are open but the lamp's off so the only light is the weak rays of a cloudy afternoon. Rain patters against the windows, quiet compared to our harried breaths and the beating of my heart thudding in my ears.

"I don't want to push you."

I laugh. "You're not. Trust me. I can handle you."

Oh, he likes that. His eyes glow with a dangerous glint. When his lips come back to mine, it's slower. Gentler. But his grip on me has tightened. The mad passion replaced by calculated seduction. I shiver from the shift. From his control.

"You'll have dinner with me?" Omar asks, his voice deep, using this intimate moment to go after what he wants...because I guess this, his hand trailing up my side, his tongue pulling my earlobe between his teeth, isn't all he's after. I hiss, press against him. Fuck, I need this.

"Maybe," I answer, my voice hoarse.

He stops, pulls back, meets my gaze—dark eyes serious. "Angela." My name comes out quiet. "I want to get to know you. Not just fuck you." The smile that steals over his lips isn't shy.

I swallow. "Our schedules. I'm not really... it's hard."

"That was very eloquent," he says, the hand in my hair slowly massaging my scalp, that not shy smile toying with his lips.

I huff a laugh. "You know what I mean."

"I don't let schedules or anything else get in the way of what I want." His voice is stern. As if I've challenged him. "I want you to have dinner with me."

"What if I say no."

He smiles, those lush lips of his spreading, showing just a glint of teeth. "I'll say please."

Fuck, why is that so hot?

One hand still tangled in my hair, the other slides up my side, slipping under my sweater. His fingers brand my naked flesh, turning my words breathy. "I do like a man unafraid to beg."

His smile grows. "I beg you, please, agree to dinner with me."

"It means that much to you?"

"It does."

I can't tell if it's a genuine desire to extend our relationship beyond an afternoon in a hotel suite or just that my reluctance to offer my continuing companionship has him so hungry for it. Pulling against his hold in my hair, I reach for his lips.

He lets me capture them. Lets my hands wrap around his neck. Lets me press my body flush to his again. Hands run down my body and grip my ass, lifting me up, so that my legs wrap around his waist. Then he walks, still kissing me, into the bedroom.

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Chapter Eleven

"I'm sending someone," Mary tells me. "This has gone on long enough. You need an assistant."

"Mary—" I start but she interrupts me.

"Angela, I gave you months. Now you're on a press tour without help, and it's making my job harder.

Your training for The Last Guardia starts in eight weeks, and we need someone taking care of you.

" Mary references my next film project—a sci-fi thriller about a female sword master on a mission to save her brother.

It's nothing like The Benefactor —there will be no Oscar talk or protestors—but it couldn't exist without the birth control pill. It's hard to imagine a sexy, independent, sword-wielding heroine if she can't fuck without getting pregnant.

When we talk about strong female characters, we are talking about women who have agency. Women who have power over their own bodies. Without contraception the sex scene on page sixty isn't hot, it's stupidly dangerous...for the woman.

"But—" I try again.

"Remember when I gave you Archie?" Mary doesn't wait for me to reply. "You didn't

think you wanted a dog, and now what would you do without him?"

Have a total emotional breakdown. Maybe attack my head of security in a supply closet. Fuck a prince. Hard to say.

"Well, you're going to love Lloyd just as much."

"Lloyd?" My tone implies I think that name is something—not what I expected for my new assistant. My last one was named Sarah. She married a producer twice her age and is having babies in Calabasas now. I liked her fine. We were never friends, but we worked.

"Yes, Lloyd Sinclair. He's an Oxford graduate."

"Why would he want to work for me?" I ask, glossing over the fact that she compared hiring him to gifting me a puppy.

Mary sighs like I don't understand anything. Especially not about how the world works. "Angela. Sometimes I'm shocked by your naiveté."

I huff a laugh. I may not know why an Oxford graduate wants to be in charge of my schedule, but I am far from naive. Elliot Kendricks's affable face comes into my mind's eye.

It's been a day since he showed up. Since I learned that "something" happened to Temperance. Since I had mind-blowing sex with Omar—which totally worked to take my mind off the whole Temperance thing.

I'm back on my balcony again. Today is warmer; pale sunlight caresses the surrounding buildings and pedestrians below. My coffee is still hot and the pastries untouched.

I hadn't bothered getting dressed yet since I have the day off—well, from the press tour. I have a photo shoot for my fragrance Violet Kiss today. I'm also going to the London office of my cosmetic company, Violet Glamour. Can you see why my eyes are insured for so much?

But none of that starts for at least another hour. I think.

"Lloyd will be there in thirty minutes. I let Ash know," Mary says. My call waiting beeps. I hold the phone away from my face to see an unknown number. I send it to voicemail. "Angela, are you listening?"

"Yes, Lloyd will be here in a half hour. I better go get dressed."

"He's gay, so you don't have to worry about him, you know?"

"Falling madly in love with me the way all my straight employees do?" I joke.

"Exactly." Mary doesn't think I'm joking. "At least I can count on Ash." She says it like every other man on the planet is powerless against my charms.

"Yes, I agree, you don't have to worry about Ash falling in love with me. He doesn't seem to like me much."

"What?" Her voice is sharp. "If he's not treating you with respect, he needs to go."

My coffee churns in my stomach. "I..."

"Angela, he's very good but if you're not comfortable with him, you let me know. There are other agencies out there. We can find you a replacement." I don't answer fast enough. "I do think Ash is very good, though. Is he just cold or is the man rude? Because we can't have that."

"He's just..." I swallow. "He's fine. I'm sure it's a part of the job to be somewhat robotic." Though Alesana isn't. That guy is a like a giant teddy bear who'd kill for me. And Chris has a sense of humor even if he tries to hide it. But I can't say I'm afraid one day Ash will be ordered to kill me .

Even if he was as affable as Elliot Kendricks, our relationship would be strained. Because it's not us , it's this fucked situation.

"Look, Ash has been a real godsend since Sarah left. He's an excellent communicator." I stifle a laugh. "But the most important thing in this business is relationships, and if you don't want to work with his company anymore, we can find another."

"It's his company?" I ask, knowing I sound like a bit of an idiot. I never even read the contract I signed—Temperance simply put it under my pen.

"Yes, Angela. Of course it's his company. He has an excellent reputation, but if he makes you feel bad, we can't have that."

"You were just praising him for not falling in love with me," I remind her, a smile pulling at my lips.

"Well, there is a fine line between professionalism and undermining your confidence. I won't allow that. You're the most gorgeous woman on the planet, and anyone who makes you feel differently shouldn't be in your life."

Zade's voice floats in from the other room. "Speaking of people who make me feel gorgeous," I say as they come into view. They grin at me as they cross to kiss my cheek before taking the chair Elliot sat in yesterday.

"I'll let you go. Say hi to Zade for me. Get dressed. Lloyd will be there soon."

We hang up, and a voicemail alert pops up from the unknown number. "Mary says hi," I tell Zade as I click on the message. Omar's voice plays over the speaker. "Angela." The prince saying my name sends tingles of pleasure through my bones.

Zade fans themselves dramatically, making me laugh.

"I hope you'll still consider dinner with me. I await your call."

"Oh," Zade says. "A prince with a voice like that. My god, woman, can I be you for a day?"

"No."

Zade cackles as they grab a croissant. "Fine, the world couldn't take my fabulousness in that." They gesture to my body.

"True." I'm staring down at the phone at the message, X-rated memories playing across my mind's eye.

"Oh my goddess!" Zade yells. "Did you fuck the prince? Yesterday? Is that why you skipped that dinner? How? When? Fuck you, tell me everything."

I laugh, Zade's tsunami of questions releasing something in my chest. "He met me at the Globe Theatre and then took me for a private tour of the Tate Modern. The princess had to cancel lunch, and he showed up to offer an alternative."

"He just showed up?" Zade sounds impressed. "A prince who takes initiative. We like that."

"Yes," I agree. "We do." The smile that sneaks onto my face has Zade cackling. Waving my hand, I change the subject. "Mary is sending a new assistant for

me—Lloyd Sinclair."

Zade's lips purse.

"He's an Oxford graduate."

"I hope he's not a snob." Zade pours themselves some coffee.

"I can't imagine Mary would hire someone who's going to look down on us."

Movement in the corner of my eye turns into Ash, standing in the curtains, doing that solid ghost thing he does. How is a man that big that quiet? "Lloyd Sinclair is here."

"He's early," I say, looking down at my phone.

"That's probably a good thing for a man in his role," Ash points out.

"Is he hot?" Zade asks.

Ash ignores the question. Zade grins wickedly at Ash who...wait, was that a...did his lips curl? Zade did claim to have the magical power of making Ash smile.

"Do you want me to have him wait outside while you dress?" Ash asks.

"Yes, I suppose I should have a bra on when we meet for the first time," I say. Zade snorts. Ash nods.

Jeans and a cotton white button-up blouse, collar up, sleeves rolled.

My hair piled up into a messy bun. Simple strand of pearls, a watch from Patek Philippe—sent over this morning as part of our negotiations for me to become their

next "face.

" Mary told me to wear it today and be sure to let the paparazzi get a shot.

It's 18k gold, simple and elegant, and probably costs more than the average car. I stare at it for a long moment. They are paying me to wear this...

A knock on the bedroom door pulls my attention. Zade enters without waiting. "He's hot in a nerdy way," they announce once the door has swung shut behind them.

"Good to know. We're talking about Lloyd, right?" I cross to my closet, pulling out a pair of ankle height brown leather boots with low heels.

Zade shakes their head. "No."

"No?" I look down at the boots.

"You need a stylist to be picking all your clothing."

I look down at myself. "Pretty sure this outfit works."

"If you're boring."

I laugh. They join me at the closet to review the selection.

"Zade, we can't all be as fabulous as you, the world would explode."

"True, but we can at least put in a little effort." I laugh again. They reach down, pulling out a pair of bright red patent leather heels and hold them up to me. Looking at the stiletto makes my toes ache. But Zade is right, they are better than the boots.

I take them and head to the bench at the end of the bed. "Tell me more about Lloyd."

"Don't worry, I'll make sure he doesn't fall in love with me." Zade is half in the closet, flicking through my clothing.

"Impossible, Zade." I slip on the shoes, instantly feeling sexier, more powerful. Taller.

Zade shrugs like they know I'm right. "We need to get started if you want to be on time."

"Did Ash send you in here? Or is Lloyd already so empowered?"

"The two of them may be conspiring against you. Or for you, depending on your perspective."

"I see you're their willing accomplice."

"I like hot nerds with posh accents."

"Who doesn't?"

"See, this," Zade says, "is why we're friends."

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We head back into the suite's living room where Zade has their makeup table set up.

Lloyd stands from the couch. He's tall and lanky, wearing a fitted suit too stylish for the corporate world but not wild enough for fashion.

It's dark blue with pinstripes of gold and lighter blue.

The colors bring out the warmer tones in his brown eyes.

Lloyd offers me a broad smile. I return it. "Hi," I say, offering my hand. Lloyd takes it. His palm is warm and dry, his grip the right strength. "Thanks so much for being here."

"I'm very excited for this opportunity, Ms. Daniels."

"Please," I say. "Call me Angela."

"Thank you, Angela."

Zade clears their throat from where they stand next to the chair they've placed in front of one of the large windows.

Lloyd follows me over and takes a seat nearby as Zade covers me in a makeup gown.

"I've been going over your schedule and thought you might like a run-down of what's on the docket for the next few days with an overview of the following weeks. "

"Sounds good," I say as Zade starts to apply base to my skin.

"Today we have the photoshoot in Soho and then your meeting at Violet Glamour, which is in the same neighborhood.

We should be done by six. You've had an invitation from Prince Omar bin Rami of Jordan to join him for dinner.

"Lloyd looks up from his iPad. "He says he is free anytime that you are. He is at your disposal."

"Oh, I like that," Zade says, their brush fluttering over my nose.

"I'm free tonight?"

"Yes, it's your only free evening before we leave England.

The prince's equerry made it clear the prince would be willing to make any arrangements necessary to dine with you, including meeting you anywhere along the press tour that would fit into your schedule. "Lloyd says all this like it's normal.

Zade meets my eyes and totally gets that all those sentences are just insane. From prince to equerry, to the offer of meeting me anywhere in the world that works for me.

"Your next free evening is in Rome. It sounds like he'd be willing to meet you there as well."

Zade turns away to get another tool, and I look over at Lloyd.

He waits patiently for my response to tonight's invitation.

Zade comes back holding an eye brush. "Don't pretend like you don't want dinner with that sinfully hot prince, Angela.

Come on." They sound pretty outraged at how long I'm taking to answer.

"I don't know," I say, closing my eyes so they can work on them. "He's..."

"Was he terrible?" Zade asks.

"Definitely not." I'm smiling again as memories of his body heat my cheeks.

"So?" Zade asks. "What's the problem?"

"It's Julian 2.0," I say. "Any relationship is doomed."

"My goddess, woman," Zade says. "You are dramatic." I laugh. "Stop moving," they admonish me. "And have dinner with a gorgeous royal who is willing to follow you around the world."

"Isn't that a bit much?" I ask. Their brush lightly floats over my lids, soft as a butterfly.

Zade makes a sound. Idiot. "If you don't have dinner with that elegant hottie, I'll kick your ass." They back away, but I keep my eyes closed knowing they'll be back soon. "Don't tell Ash," Zade says to Lloyd in a teasing voice. I can practically hear them wink.

"Your assault plans are safe with me," Lloyd says, deadpan.

Zade laughs. "I like you." Their brush returns to my eyes.

"You're right," I say.

"Always," Zade confirms.

"I'll see him tonight. His coming to Rome—that's too much."

"Oh, yes," Zade says, their voice dripping with sarcasm. "We wouldn't want a beautiful, royal man who's a sex god to follow you around the globe. That's awful. Just way too much."

"Shut up."

"Never."

"I didn't say he was a sex god."

"I inferred."

Lloyd breaks in. "I'll let the prince know and work with Mr. Fraser to arrange the location and time."

"Thank you," I say.

"My pleasure."

"Open," Zade commands. They stare at me with an assessing eye. "Now that we have an assistant again, can we please get a hairdresser back on the team? This," they wave their hand at my head, "needs help."

"There will be someone at the shoot," I point out. This is only for the walk from the hotel to the car, and then the car to the building where the shoot is happening. This is

just for the paparazzi.

"What about tonight?" they ask.

"I'm sure my hair will look good enough for tonight. I don't want to turn this into a thing."

"A thing?" Zade is outraged. "Angela. This is dinner with a prince. This is a thing if there ever was one."

I shake my head. Zade leans away from me, crosses their arms. I laugh at the seriousness in their expression.

"Angela." Oh, they're very serious. "Do you remember the theme of this shoot?"

"I do not. "It's a jungle Jane theme. You're going to have a violet snake, your hair is going to be wild.

You're going to look like you spent the afternoon swinging from branches—I'm willing to bet there will be leaves and twigs in there. Is that what you want?"

Zade does not wait for my response. They turn to Lloyd. "Please get a hair stylist for tonight. I won't have her going to dinner with a prince without hair properly done. And let's start looking for someone to travel with us. Having to bring in these newbies is tiresome."

Lloyd looks over at me, a question in his eyes. Do I take orders from Zade?

"Fine," I say, knowing Zade is right. "But for the record, don't do everything they ask."

"Understood," Lloyd says, a smile tugging at his lips. His eyes flit to Zade before going back to the tablet in his lap.

Chapter Twelve

I'm alone in an elevator with Ash. We are in our customary position, him in front of me and slightly to the right. I can see the door, while he shields me from anything that might come through it.

My hair, still sticky from the product used in today's shoot, is stuffed under a Violet Glamour ball cap. I'm back in my jeans and white shirt. And I'm exhausted.

The day went by in a blur. And now we are returning to my suite so that I can get ready for my date. Pain throbs from my feet and brews behind my eyes. I just want to crawl under the covers and watch TV, convince Zade to join me.

Ash smells like himself, and it's overpowering the scent of my new fragrance, which seems impossible.

The way he promised to protect me...the memory of that tight space invades this one. The set of his jaw, the determination in his gaze. I almost believe him. My exhaustion makes me vulnerable to wanting to trust him.

The elevator slows at a lower floor. That's not supposed to happen. We are supposed to be going straight to mine—no stops. My body tenses for a fight.

"It's okay," Ash says as the golden doors part.

"What is this?"

"Temperance's replacement."

A woman stands on the other side. She's shorter than me with a helmet of blonde hair, wearing a red pantsuit with an American flag pin on her lapel. Subtle.

She steps in with us and smiles, reminding me of the snake I worked with today. There is something reptilian and creepy about her. I get the sense she wants to wrap around me and squeeze until all the breath leaves my body.

"Angela," she says. "I'm so happy we could meet." Her voice is high and scratchy, like she's been yelling at people and it's worn out her vocal cords.

The doors close and we begin to climb again.

"You have me at a disadvantage, I don't know who you are." My voice is even as if I meet new handlers daily.

"I'm Linda Whitmore, and I'll be your contact moving forward." It's like she's reading the news.

"Contact?" I ask, playing dumb.

Linda's eyes flick to Ash who hasn't moved. In the mirror I see his gaze drop to her, it's that cold one he uses so well. Linda's lips slip into a smile that is first cousins with a sneer.

I don't think they like each other much.

Linda's focus returns to me and her mouth straightens. "Where is the package? Did you deliver it to the princess?"

Every instinct I have wants to lie to this woman. I also want to smack the back of Ash's head and ask him why in the actual fuck he didn't warn me this was going to happen.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say.

Linda's upper lip twitches. She's not good at her job. The thought strikes fast and hard. This woman could get me killed with her ineptitude. Fuck.

"Give it to me." She takes a step forward as if to intimidate me. But I am too tired for this shit.

"I. Don't. Know. You." I bite out each word, anger rising, taking away the pain in my feet and head, granting me new energy. This is such utter bullshit.

"Temperance is gone." Her smile turns smug.

I cross my arms and let out a half-amused, half-annoyed huff. "That doesn't mean I know you." I leave off the bitch. "I don't even know what you're doing in this elevator with me. As far as I'm concerned, you're an obsessed fan." I tilt my head and shrug. Who knows what's true these days?

Anger sparks hot in her gaze, and she steps toward me again—this time Ash shifts, blocking her. My heart surges at the subtle movement, which speaks volumes. Maybe he is on my team.

"You will give me the compass," Linda announces.

"You're giving major first day vibes," I say. Linda's nostrils flare and her cheekbones flush pink. "I'm not giving you jack shit. Now get the fuck off this elevator." I step around Ash to push the next floor button.

Linda pivots to follow my movements, brow drawn into a frown. Ash's bulk between us is reassuring, but I think if we fought, I'd win. She's an amateur. How the hell did she get Temperance's job?

The doors open behind Linda. I hold the stop button.

She tries again. "You need to give me that package."

"Get off." I jerk my chin at the empty hallway behind her.

"We're not done," Linda promises.

I raise my brows and look pointedly behind her. Step the fuck back .

Linda huffs a laugh. Another head shake like I'm the idiot on this elevator and then she flicks her gaze to Ash. "Get her under control." Condescension drips off each word.

Her eyes return to me, and Linda walks backward off the elevator wearing an arrogant smirk.

As the doors slide back into place she says, "I'm looking forward to hearing about your contact with the prince." Her smirk glides into a grin as the doors fit into place.

I take a deep breath: cedar, warmth, roses, and her. Linda's putrid floral perfume. Sweetness gone rotten.

I raise a ferocious glare up to Ash.

His eyes wait for me. Deep sea under cloud-darkened sky. Something I can't read written behind them. "I'm sorry." His voice rumbles low and sincere. It makes me

swallow. "We need to talk."

I choke on a laugh, surprised to find the edge of my rage dulled by his apology. "Captain Obvious."

Ash's eyes flash with amusement before his focus shifts to the opening doors. Chris waits for us on the other side.

They escort me to my suite where Chris stays outside and Ash follows me in, closing the door behind us.

A glance at my watch tells me I only have a little more than an hour to get ready for my date. Shit. Fuck.

"She's not experienced," Ash says as I cross to the couch, dropping my purse and kicking off my heels, anger and confusion and the pressure of time messing with me.

"I picked up on that." I turn to him, crossing my arms, sore toes cushioned by the thick carpet. Ash waits by the threshold. "Why didn't you give me more of a heads-up?"

"Habit."

"You're joking."

He's not.

The light in the room is low—just one lamp by the overstuffed chair between us. The drapes are all pulled, the shadows long and dark.

I pace toward a window.

"Don't open the curtains," Ash says, his tone flat.

I stop, turn back to him, all the electric energy buzzing inside of me freezing. "Why?"

"We're not on US soil, and you just told your handler to go fuck herself." A chill rolls over my skin. "It's illegal for the CIA to kill US citizens on US soil. The rules become murkier when abroad."

I take in a shallow breath. "You're saying they are going to try to kill me?" My voice sounds as suffocated as my body feels.

"I'm saying it's easier to kill someone outside of the United States." Ash's voice remains even. This is just a simple fact. I'm easier to murder in London than in L.A. No need to get dramatic.

"Jesus, Ash. What the fuck is going on? You need to tell me something." He's still standing close to the door; there are shadows at both our backs, the only lamp between us.

"You are aware of the personnel changes the Grand administration has made in the civil services?" Ash asks.

"I mean." My mind races around trying to gather information. It's hard to keep track of all that has happened. "I know that Grand fired tens of thousands of federal employees at the beginning of the administration."

That was scary, my body remembers with a shiver, all the articles about the mass layoffs, the logic they used to defend it, acting as though it was all so reasonable.

"They replaced the employees with ideologues—people who had to pass a loyalty test," I say.

Just common sense , they claimed. The President can ' t work with people who aren't loyal to him, no one would do that.

As if running a government is the same as running a middle school girl's clique.

All hail the queen bee or sit alone at lunch.

"Yes," Ash says. "This is the second wave. Temperance didn't pass the loyalty test."

"Jesus, Ash." My heart has climbed into my throat. "She's going to get me killed." He doesn't respond. Just stands there in the half darkness staring at me. "Did you pass the loyalty test?" it occurs to me to ask.

"I'm not an employee. I own my security company. They can't fire me."

"So why do you work with these people?"

As the silence stretches, time presses in on me. I can't stand still.

Starting toward Ash, I stop next to the chair, under the ring of lamp light. My fingers find the arm, and I lean on it, suddenly needing the support. "You said you would keep me safe," I say, my voice strange—sad. Sad that I need him to keep me safe. Sad that I can't trust that he will. Just. Sad.

"I meant it." Ash nods, his eyes fierce.

I chew on my bottom lip. His eyes drop to it. Then flick away. I nod. What choice do I have?

The words Linda spoke as the elevator doors closed flash into my mind. "What did she mean about my 'contact' with the prince?"

Ash's jaw flexes. "Angela," he pauses. "You must realize that building a relationship with such an important member of a foreign government is an excellent opportunity."

"He's not going to tell me state secrets on a date, Ash." My voice is incredulous even though I know that's not what he means. If the last few years working with Temperance have taught me anything, it's that secrets are never buried as deep as you think.

"No," Ash confirms. "But he might come to trust you." I don't respond. Ash takes a breath. "He might leave you unattended in the same hotel room as papers that could be useful to us. You might overhear something. Angela." He says my name like he knows I know this.

"Isn't Jordan an ally?" I keep arguing, trying to cover up how stupid I was for not noticing what a glaring shitstorm this was going to be.

"There is a long history of cooperation between Jordan and the United States," Ash says in that super annoying way he has of saying obvious shit. "But even friends have secrets worth knowing."

I sigh and rest my hip on the arm of the chair, my exhaustion from earlier returning with a vengeance. "I didn't even want to go," I say. "Zade convinced me."

"Zade was only thinking in romantic terms."

"Do you think I should cancel?" I look up at him.

"I think it's too late for that."

"Ash, if you could try, for just a hot second, not to be such a cryptic fuckhead that would be awesome for me."

He frowns.

I'm guessing it's the first time anyone has called Ash a cryptic fuckhead to his face, but I guarantee I'm not the first person to think it.

"Angela," he clears his throat. "I understand this is difficult for you." I resist the urge to slap him. "The fact is that you are an important asset, and if you do not perform or become recalcitrant, you will be a liability." My chest goes tight again.

"Is that a threat?"

His brow furrows. "It's a fact." Simple math. Assets that don't perform are purged from the portfolio.

"So I have to go on this date? And spy on him?"

"You don't have to do anything," Ash says, looking almost affronted.

"But you think I should." Why is he like this?

"Are you asking for advice?" Ash holds my gaze.

"Jesus, yes." I throw up my hands. "What do you think I should do?"

"Tonight should just be for relationship building."

"My plan was to get laid again, and possibly have the kind of relationship with the prince where when we were in the same country we'd hook up." I laugh, surprised I just said that out loud.

Ash swallows. "That sounds advantageous to you both."

I laugh again and have an urge to mess up Ash's hair. To tug on his collar. Wrinkle his tie. Shake some of the propriety out of him. "What do you think is going to happen?" I ask.

He blinks a few times. "I believe he will agree?—"

I cut him off with a barked laugh. "Not with the prince. Jesus, Ash." I laugh again—sounding almost hysterical. Almost.

I shake my head, the humor quickly fleeing. This isn't actually funny at all. "I'm not worried about what he will agree to. I mean, with this Linda woman. With this," I wave my hand around the suite. "This whole thing. What is going to happen?"

"Nothing good."

"You're so comforting."

"I assumed you didn't want me to lie."

"I don't." And that reminds me. "But I do want more of a heads-up when shit like that is going to happen."

"I apologize." His lips twitch and for a second I think he's going to smile.

"What?" I ask, my eyes riveting to his mouth.

"Nothing."

"No," I argue. "You almost smiled." His lips part. They're full and lush and surrounded by a dark shadow of stubble.

"You're mistaken," he says.

I shake my head. "No, I'm not. You almost smiled, and I want to know why."

Amusement dances behind his cold facade. I point at his face. "There again, you think something about this is funny." He presses his mouth into a frown but there is still a playful light in his eyes. "Ash! Tell me!"

He swallows, lips quirked. "I was just thinking about when you threatened to kill me." Ash clears his throat.

Heat explodes in my chest. "And that's funny to you?"

"Not funny but..."

Anger forces my feet to move, I get an arm's length away from him. "But what?" I ask, my tone deadly.

"Charming."

I blink rapidly, trying to understand what he's saying. "You think it's charming I threatened to kill you?"

He takes in a breath, lets it out slowly. Seems to come to some kind of conclusion. "Yes."

"So you decided to keep things from me so I'd threaten you again so that what? You could be charmed by me?"

He does not like that assessment. "No."

"You think I'm charming when I'm so pissed off I've gone homicidal."

"Yes." His answer is quick and simple. His voice deep and true.

"That's fucked up, Ash. This is all fucked up."

"Life is fucked up, Angela. But I didn't keep Linda's arrival a secret to anger you, I did it out of habit. Out of protocol. I wasn't authorized to tell you."

That gives me pause. "But you will next time? Even if you're not authorized?"

He nods, something new coming into his gaze. Not amusement or anger. Something burning hot that isn't rage. "Yes."

"Why?" My voice is low, just above a whisper almost like I'm scared of the answer.

"Zade, Lloyd, and the hair stylist are here," he says, turning to the door as if he's going to answer it and not my question.

I take a few steps toward him, which causes him to turn back to me. I keep coming, grabbing his arm, staring up at him, making my eyes big and wide and desperate. "Why?"

He frowns down at me. "Because I don't want you to kill me."

"Is that, was that...a joke?"

He grins at me, and I almost fall over. I've barely seen the man smile, and now he's flashing me this.

Ash's eyes are bright with humor, he's got fucking dimples high up on his cheeks.

It feels like I've been in a dark room and just yanked open the drapes onto a dazzling day.

The grin is gone as quickly as it came and Ash is turning toward the door. I'm still gripping his forearm.

He looks down at where I'm holding him. His attention brings awareness back into my body and I let go quickly, as if the touch was burning me. He winks. He fucking winks.

Chapter Thirteen

Ash at my back, Chris leading the way, we are walking to the elevator. Chris leaves us as we descend alone. I inspect myself in the reflection of the doors.

My hair is swept into an elegant updo, the better to see my throat, now wrapped in a gold chain.

The neckline of my skin-hugging black shirt scoops down, exposing the tops of my breasts.

My skirt is short and pleated, a dark tartan of deep purple and raven.

New suede boots reach past my knees. The heels are high but chunky.

I'm carrying a clutch—beaded black, the texture just sharp enough to help pull focus when I squeeze it.

Inside is my phone, a lipstick, and the compass.

Ash doesn't know I've got it with me. But some instinct made me pull it from the safe.

I know Chris will be guarding my room while Alesana covers me with Ash. But still, somehow it seemed safer.

We leave through the front entrance. I drop my gaze and stride between the two giants guarding me as the cameras' lights flash, making sure the watch I'm being paid

to wear is obvious.

The cool, misty London night air breaks goose bumps across my skin. I should have worn a coat. Alesana opens the door for me. I'm mindful of my short skirt as I climb in. The door closes, muting the world outside. The flash bulbs are dimmed by the tinted glass.

Ash joins me in the back while Alesana drives. We don't speak as the Bentley weaves its way through evening traffic toward the restaurant. Paparazzi follow us on motorcycles, darting around like moths circling an enclosed flame.

We pull into the parking garage of a tall building, leaving the paparazzi outside. Alesana navigates the brightly lit cement space, circling up to an elevator bank flanked by two men in all black, wires curling from their ears.

Ash gets out first and comes around to open my door. He offers his hand and I take it. His expression is totally shuttered. Iceberg Ash back on duty. But now that I know the man who hides underneath, I can't stop searching for him.

Ash greets the men by the elevators and soon we are inside, riding up into the sky.

The elevator opens onto an elegant lobby.

A chandelier sparkles above marble floors.

A striking woman stands under it. She's wearing a one-shoulder black gown that hugs her slim figure.

Her short, dark hair falls straight and silky to sculpted shoulders.

She smiles at me, red painted lips parting over perfect teeth.

Ash steps off the elevator first and pivots to the side to create a space for me to take the lead.

"Good evening, Ms. Daniels," the woman says, approaching, her heels clicking rhythmically on the hard floor.

"My name is Samira Rahman, I'm one of the prince's assistants.

He is so pleased you were able to join him this evening. "

"Thank you," I say.

"If you'll follow me." She turns and begins walking toward French doors on the far end of the room. I trail after her, Ash close behind.

The doors open as we approach. A tall, exquisitely dressed man with pitch black hair and dark brown eyes offers a soft smile. "Ms. Daniels." He bows. "I am Rashid Talib, equerry to His Royal Highness, the Prince of Jordan, Omar bin Rami. We are honored to host you this evening."

"Thank you," I say again. This is all so much. My outfit suddenly seems too casual. Should I be wearing a ball gown? Perhaps glass slippers?

"If you would please come in." He steps aside, revealing a restaurant dining room.

The tables are bare except for one two-top.

Draped in white linen and lit by two candles, it's set up next to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows.

There is nothing but glass between it and the misty night draping the lights of the

city. The view looks almost apocalyptic.

"If you don't mind, Ms. Daniels." Rashid gestures toward my purse as if to check it.

"I do mind." I smile at him.

His placid expression stays in place. "It is protocol, I'm afraid. We must check your bag. And your security agent will need to leave any weapons with us."

I smile at him. "Understood. We can show ourselves out." I turn to leave, Ash shifting out of my way so that I can pass him.

"Please, Ms. Daniels," Rashid says. "I do apologize. I understand this must be new to you."

I turn back to him; Ash is to the side but definitely between us. "Rashid, was it?" I ask, even though I know. He nods. "Do you know who I am?"

"Of course."

"Then you know the premiere of my most recent film was shut down because of a shooting and bomb threat?"

"Yes."

"So if you think I don't know about safety protocols, I think you are the one confused here."

"I apologize—" Before he can finish the sentence, a door on the other side of the dining room opens. Ash turns and steps closer to me, facing the movement, blocking me from it. He's close, only inches away, and his scent pulls me back to being carried

through that theater. To being helpless. Held.

"Rashid." I recognize the prince's deep voice. "I don't think we need to worry about Ms. Daniels assassinating me."

I take in a steadying breath. Ash doesn't move. He's still blocking me from that side of the room, from the prince, from any dangers the restaurant might hold.

"Of course not, Your Highness. It is protocol."

"Let's ignore it for this evening."

"As you wish."

Ash steps aside, revealing the prince standing next to Rashid.

He smiles at me and butterflies take flight in my stomach.

Omar is wearing a dark blue tailored suit.

The top button of his white dress shirt is undone; a thin gold chain sparkles against his burnished copper skin, dipping into the hollow of his throat.

A vivid memory of licking that part of him floods my mind and it takes all the skills I've gained to keep a blush from stealing over my skin.

"You look stunning." Omar steps forward and leans in for a kiss on my cheek. His skin is smooth, his scent familiar; warm, and woody, slightly sweet, earthy, with a hint of citrus.

He steps back, keeping his hand at my waist, his face still close. The space between

us is intimate and simmering with promised pleasure.

Ash and Rashid stand to the side, spectators to our sport. Omar turns to them. "You can wait outside; I think we can dine without chaperones." His tone is teasing, but the command is clear. Ash looks to me and I nod.

"We promise not to kill each other," I say. "Right?"

Omar smiles down at me. "Agreed."

Neither Ash nor Rashid look amused but they leave, pulling the doors closed behind them. "Alone at last," Omar says. "Can I offer you a drink?"

"Yes, please."

"Champagne? Or something else?"

"I'll have what you're having."

We cross to the table, and he pulls out one of the gray velvet dining chairs for me. I take a seat and he helps push the chair in. All very proper except I can feel his eyes on my cleavage. I glance up at him, and his gaze finds mine. I saw you looking.

Good.

He steps away, leaving a chill at my back, then takes his seat across from me. Reaching over to where an iced bucket of champagne waits next to his seat, he pours a glass for each of us, then raises his. "To not allowing schedules to stand in our way."

"And not killing each other." He smiles and our glasses clink. "So," I start. "Do you

come here often?"

Omar laughs. "Yes, it's owned by a friend. I thought it best to dine alone."

"Yes," I agree, sipping my drink. "We don't want to start rumors. Though the paparazzi did follow me here. I imagine they will ferret out our clandestine meeting."

"But at least they won't have photographic proof." I nod, sip more champagne. "I understand you're traveling the continent for a few more weeks. Where do you plan to go?"

"You make it sound so leisurely. I'm on a press tour—it's grueling answering the same questions over and over again and being charming every time."

"I can't imagine that's much of a challenge for you." He gives me a very charming smile.

"You might be surprised."

"Oh?" He smiles like he's a fan of surprises.

Candlelight flickers off my wine glass, dances over Omar's face, and reflects in the window.

It's all so romantic?—

Chapter Fourteen

My head throbs in the darkness behind my closed lids. A hissing sound seethes close. I cough on air thick with the scent of burning plastic. Rain-scented wind rushes over my heated skin, pushing the smoke away.

Prying my eyes open, I'm forced to blink dust from my lashes. Through a haze of smoke I'm looking at a white ceiling stained with streaks of soot. Fire reflects in a crystal chandelier—or what's left of it. The thing is canted to the side, half the armature hanging precariously.

I need to get up.

Rolling to the side, glass tinkles off my body. It's all over the floor. I raise up on one elbow. The scene in front of me is almost incomprehensible.

Moments ago, I was sharing a drink with a handsome man in an elegant, romantic dining room. Now I'm trapped in a hellscape, prone on the floor, alone.

Several of the large window panes are broken.

Diamonds of safety glass litter the hardwood floor, reflecting the fires that have sprouted around the room, feeding on the overturned tables and chairs, licking up the walls, consuming the space, spitting embers out into the air that float like glowing dust motes.

Adrenaline floods my system, clearing my confusion. There was some kind of

explosion. I've lost time. I need to get out of here!

My body aches as I shift to stand. My skirt is singed, ash streaks my skin, small scratches bead blood on my legs and arms—from the glass?

I take a tentative step, and my balance shifts, head going woozy. I reach out, grasping a still-standing table to steady myself.

I'm about ten feet from where we were sitting, the gaping window making my dizziness worse. It's at once terrifying and also the only source of breathable air. Wet wind whips through it, making the flames hiss.

The French doors we entered through are open wide. A red exit sign glows from the gloom beyond. Smoke curls around it. I glance back at the broken window.

The mist shrouding the city twirls, mimicking the smoke. I don't want to leave the fresh air but can't stay here.

Where is Ash? Omar? Anyone?

Ash wouldn't leave without me. Unless this was an attempt on my life and he was somehow complicit. He warned me...

Just get out of here, then worry about what's next. The compass. I can't leave without it.

What a stupid thought. I need to live. Fuck the compass. But I'm scanning the ground for my purse. Taking a step back toward where we sat, toward the shattered window, and the twenty-eight-story drop beyond it.

The table is overturned. My chair lies broken to the right. My napkin—with a shadow

of red lipstick on its edge—is crumpled between me and the chair. I bend to pick the napkin up. Wrapping the cloth around my nose and mouth should help filter the smoke. Staying low, I scan for my purse.

There it is! Under a chair...that's on fire. Flames dance on the upholstery, spitting and crackling, dark smoke pluming up. The shiny beads faceted in orange glimmer at me.

Leave it. This is ridiculous. Are you really going to risk dying for this bullshit? You don't even know what it is!

I'm already crossing toward it, though. Air rushes in the broken window making the flames dance and sputter. The fire feasts on the seat, some kind of plastic blend upholstery that is dripping down to the floor in long, molten drops.

I lower to my knees, my thick leather boots protecting me from the glass and debris littering the floor.

My clutch is trapped under the chair. The heat of the fire breaks sweat across my brow and upper lip.

Tears burn tracks down my heated cheeks, catching on the napkin.

My breath comes in short, scared pants. My head spins.

This is so fucking stupid. I reach under the seat, the crystal face of my Patek reflecting yellow and orange. My fingers wrap around the beaded purse. A scorching heat sears my forearm. I scream and wrench back, dropping the purse at my knees.

My arm is shaking. A hot wad of whatever was melting off that chair flings away. In its place, a red welt the size of a small slug burns. "Fuck." My voice trembles. "I'm okay. It's okay." My skin blisters before my eyes.

I scoop up the purse and stumble to my feet.

The smoke up here is harsher. I choke and drop back to my knees.

A gust of night air pushes into the room, clearing the space around me.

Through tears I see the ice bucket holding the bottle of champagne still upright next to Omar's overturned chair, the shattered window behind it.

It's beaded with condensation—a lone survivor in this wreck of a place.

I crawl toward it, glass digging into my knuckles wrapped around the clutch. The closer I get to the window, the easier it is to breathe. I reach the stand and raise up, sinking my arm into the cool water next to the still chilling bottle.

I'm at the window's edge. A dizzying height. The city looks the same, shrouded in mist, lights haloed. All of it undisturbed. The wet air whips against me, pressing my sweat-soaked clothing against my skin.

Keeping my injured arm submerged, I open the clutch one-handed. The compass is still there, the bronze glinting in the eerie light next to my phone and lipstick. Pulling my injured arm from the water, I pull out the compass, and click open the cover to stare down into its simple face.

The thing isn't fancy but its needle trembles in my unsteady hand, finding north over and over again. It's pointing out the window. My gaze is drawn to that empty space again. And there is some dark part of me that wants to step out into it.

That exhilarating, terrible instinct causes my stomach to clench. I should throw this thing out. Let it dash onto the street below. But I don't think it's the compass itself that has any value. There must be something hidden in it.

I slip it between my breasts, pushing it down until it's out of sight from prying eyes. Then I pull out my phone. There is no service—could it have been knocked out by the blast?

Slipping the phone into the waistband of my skirt, anchoring it at my lower back, I'll just have to hope it stays there.

I look back at the smoky exit. At the red glow in the gloom.

I need to get the fuck out of here. And yet the idea of moving away from this window and into that darkness terrifies me.

There is a cloth napkin over the champagne bottle, and I dunk it into the water, wrapping it around my wound.

I take in a final deep breath of the fresh night air and turn to face the smoke-swirled exit. Time to leave.

What if there are people out there waiting to shoot me?

No. All this destruction can't be for me, it must be for the prince. There's no way any US entity would risk a member of a royal family of an allied nation when going after me. Right?

I don't have to figure this out now, but I do have to get the fuck out of this burning building. The entire wall leading toward the kitchen is covered in flames. The heat is intense, the ceiling almost invisible through the dark smoke. I'd rather get shot than burned alive.

Decision made, I move quickly through the dining room, the air thickening, darkening. When I step through the French doors I cough against the napkin over my

mouth. My eyes burn, blurring. I need to get lower.

Dropping to my hands and knees again, the air is a little clearer but the space still looks like a charcoal drawing of a tempest. I shuffle across the grit-lined marble floor, the red exit sign my beacon.

An ember bites the skin at my waist, bared by my shirt riding up. I swipe at it, hissing through the cloth. Fuck, that hurt.

The smoke twirls and dances. Each blink sends a tear down my cheek. There is something in front of me. A darker shadow in the swirling sea of them.

I crawl closer and the outlines of a body form. A giant is slumped against the wall.

It's Ash. Adrenaline surges. Fuck.

He's lying on his side, back against the wall, legs splayed in front of him. I reach out. His hair is silky and thick, his scalp warm. I lower my head, laying my cheek against the floor, putting my face down in front of his.

Smoke films between us. His soot-streaked face is slack in unconsciousness. How strange to see him so defenseless. My chest tightens. He can't be...

I place my fingers on his throat. A pulse thrums against his skin. Relief surges through me.

His heart is beating but I need to get him out. If I leave him, he'll die. No time to think. I just need to do this.

I shift to get my hands under his lower shoulder and push. Fuck, he's heavy. My breath catches as I haul him into a sitting position, his back against the wall, chin on

his chest, legs straight out in front of him now.

Slumping against the wall next to him, I use my own body to keep him upright while I take a precious moment to catch my breath. It doesn't work. The smoke seizes my stressed lungs and I cough hard, bending forward. There isn't time for this!

Tears pouring, I get my legs under me, crouching next to him. I need to drag his giant ass to that exit, and I need to do it now!

Pushing between Ash and the wall, I hook my arms under his armpits and slide my hands up so I'm grasping the top of his broad shoulders. Shuffling along the wall, dragging his body with me, I begin to move toward the exit.

Glancing over my shoulder, it seems I've made no progress. Closing my eyes against the smoke, I keep going. Shuffling. Dragging. Coughing. Shuffling. Dragging. Coughing. Checking. A little closer but it still feels like there is an entire nightmare between that red beacon and me.

Labored step. Sweat runs down my spine and pools at the back of my knees. Dizziness threatens to turn to unconsciousness. And then I'm at the door.

Resting Ash against my thighs, I turn to slam into the push bar. It swings open. Smoke rushes into the space of the stairwell, polluting the cooler air brushing my skin. Keeping one foot cocked to keep the door open, I bend back down to grab Ash again.

Taking tiny, almost impossible steps, my back against the door. I get us mostly into the cement stairwell, the bright emergency lights illuminating the smoke we are escaping—a black seething swell billowing after us.

Ash's legs never seem to end. I hit the stairwell's metal railing, and his calves are still

propping the damn door open. The charcoal tempest delights in flooding the stairwell.

Tears blur my vision as I shuffle out from behind Ash's heavy body and lean him against the railing. My legs buckle, and I land hard on the cement. Fuck!

I grab at Ash's pants and get my hands under a knee, bending the leg closer to me. The door hits his other calf. Black dots spiral at the edges of my sight.

I crawl to Ash's other leg and clutch his thigh with both hands. I lean back, practically crawling into his lap lifting it. The door swooshes closed and clicks into place.

A sob escapes, quickly turning into a raging cough. I sit up and fold forward, ripping the napkin off my face, sucking in big lungfuls of the quickly clearing air.

We need to keep going, but how?

My gaze is drawn down the stairs. Harsh cement under bright lights with metal banisters—a fireproof space not designed for carrying giants down.

Twisting around, I face Ash fully, knees between his legs, our bodies as close as they've ever been. "Wake up." My voice comes out a croak. "Ash." His name is a plea. "Wake up! Please, Ash. I cannot drag you down these stairs." And I can't leave you here.

His face is so still. Blackened from the smoke, slick with sweat. His suit is filthy, dotted with burns from the floating embers.

My gaze falls to his mouth. His lips are soot-stained and slightly parted. I raise my hand to touch them...to check for breath. They are warm, firm. Smooth. Air pulls over them, pushes out.

He moves so quickly I don't realize what's happening until my wrist is trapped in Ash's bruising grip. His eyes, sharp and narrowed, find mine. There's no spark of recognition in his gaze.

Ash swallows, blinks. "Fuck, you're beautiful," he rasps.

Chapter Fifteen

His fingers engulf my wrist as his thumb slides down. And then back up. Petting me. The contact is gentle. Comforting. Drugging. Ash's eyes roam over my features, his gaze as intoxicating as his thumb's caress.

I need to focus.

"Ash." My voice is smoke-roughened—quiet and pained. "You have to get up. We have to go." He breaks eye contact to look around, his brow creasing. "I don't know exactly what happened, an explosion. We just need to go. There is a fire."

A fire makes it sound innocent. There is a spreading inferno on the other side of that door, and I can barely fucking breathe from the smoke and the fear and the way you're fucking petting me.

He nods but doesn't release me. His thumb pauses on my pulse point. My heart slams against my skin. I tug—not hard, not a protest. Do you see what you're doing? Remember who you are?

His gaze falls to where he's holding me. Ash's fingers open, as if he's just realized his grip had turned tender.

I lean back, having to use one of his knees to create space between us. Ash blinks hard. He reaches up to touch the back of his head. Winces. His fingers come back wet with blood.

Ash's eyes track over my body. I follow his focus. My skirt and thighs are smeared with soot, grit, and blood. I didn't realize he was bleeding. "Let me see. Maybe I can..." There isn't anything I can do.

"I'll be fine," Ash says, his voice roughened from the smoke. "We need to go." He starts to shift.

Forcing my legs to work, to stand, I step back but stay close enough to help if he needs me.

Using the railing behind him Ash rises, towering over me.

"Can you walk?" I ask.

"Yes." But his big body wavers. I move close, wrapping my left arm around his waist, steadying him. The side of my chest bumps against a holstered weapon. His scent hits me hard. Still there under all the burning. He looks down at me.

"Ash? Do you know who I am?"

He frowns. "Of course." But he doesn't elaborate.

With one of his hands on the railing and his other arm hooked over my shoulders, we begin to descend, our steps echoing in the cavernous stairwell. Bright emergency lights illuminate every corner of the stark space.

A door clangs, the sound reverberating up to us. First responders? Or someone else? Visions of armed masked men storm my frazzled mind.

Ash's body tenses.

Running bootfalls pound, growing louder. Getting closer.

"Behind me," Ash says. His arm drops from my shoulder and crosses in front of my body. Hand on my far hip, he pushes me back. I go up a step but then resist.

"I can help, you're barely standing." I duck, pushing his suit jacket aside, going for his weapon. But Ash grabs my forearm. I twist to look up at him, eyes hard, heart pounding in my chest, fear making me reckless.

"They are most likely first responders. We don't want a TMZ report about you greeting them with an illegal firearm." He loosens his hold. "Get behind me." I don't move. "If they are not first responders, I have another gun on my left side. Use it."

I back up another step and move over so that Ash is between me and the booming approach. Peering down the stairwell, I see hands on the railing just one floor below us. There are a dozen of them. There is clanging—oxygen tanks?

Please let it be fire fighters.

My prayers are answered when the first one comes around the bend, his uniform bright and obvious. I let out a stifled sound—something that no one can hear over the surprised yells of the firemen.

They quickly surround us, some continuing up to the devastated restaurant, while the others tend to Ash and me. "Are you okay?" one of them asks me, his face close, eyes concerned. "Any injuries?"

I shake my head, the ability to speak suddenly stolen.

My hands are shaking and my lips numb. Others are already moving with Ash, helping him down the stairs.

I start to follow, and my escort takes my elbow.

I try to tell him I don't need help, but that's an obvious lie.

Now that his guiding hand is there I don't know how I could stand without it.

We continue down, spiraling toward earth, the stairwell unfurling beneath us. And then we are out. In the night. In that cool mist. Flashing emergency lights reflect off the wet pavement and the windows of the buildings surrounding us.

Goose bumps break over my skin. I can feel all those little cuts. And the burn on my arm starts to throb. The napkin I wrapped around it is gone.

The hand on my elbow leads me to an ambulance, and I lose track of Ash. A woman takes over my care. She's blonde with dark eyebrows and an intense gaze framed by mascara-caked lashes.

She leads me into the ambulance and seats me across from her on a gurney. "My name is Fiona Blake, I'm going to take care of you. What's your name?" she asks me, her sharp brown eyes holding mine.

"Angela Daniels," I answer, my voice sounding far away. Through the frame of the open doors I can see fire trucks and other ambulances. Crowd control barriers are set up and people are pressed up against them, including paparazzi. One spots me. His face lights up.

As he raises his camera, I turn my back, shifting to stare at the front of the ambulance and shield my face. Fuck.

"Angela Daniels?" the woman asks, her eyes darting between me and the flashes strobing at my back. Recognition dawns. Awe slackens her jaw and she blinks.

Fiona doesn't strike me as the type to fall over herself now. She'll reel it in and act like it's not a big deal. But she will tell this story for the rest of her life—and, in all likelihood, she will tell it to the tabloids.

I drop my gaze, feigning humility even as anxiety is riding up my spine with each flash of light that hits it. "Do you know where the man I came out with is?" I ask, the sentence ugly, my thoughts jumbled.

I need to pull it together. This is a performance as much as anything else. "I'm concerned about him, he had a head injury. Do you know if Prince Omar made it out? I didn't see him?"

"I'm sorry, I don't have that information.

I do know several people were taken to hospital already.

" She puts a hand on my shoulder. "From what I know everyone is in stable condition.

Let's get you checked out and then we can find your friends.

" I lift my head to meet her gaze. She's smiling softly, reassuring.

"Okay, thanks." I let the tears in my throat affect my voice. She should see me as scared, concerned, and normal. That's the story I want told.

"Let me see your arm please."

I hold up my injury for her inspection. Latex-gloved fingers gently cradle my forearm. It's streaked with black smears and blood. The blister has popped, the skin white and deflated over the wound.

Pain pounds up my arm with each heartbeat. Nausea tingles along my jaw. The adrenaline and other chemicals that kept me going are fading from my system.

"I'll take over here. The chief needs to see you," a man says from the doorway. He's tall with a long nose and brown eyes behind round, Santa Claus-style glasses.

He doesn't look at me, just keeps his focus on Fiona.

"What are you talking about?" Fiona asks, her tone annoyed.

"Chief just said to take over. They want you at the exit. They've got major injuries coming out." My chest tightens. Is it Omar?

Fiona makes a face, brow scrunching. Very much a what the fuck are you saying expression. "Chief asked for you by name," he adds. Fiona cocks her head slightly, clearly skeptical. "You want me to tell him you're not coming?"

"Nah, fine," she says, standing. "You'll be okay," she assures me with a smile, her eyes wistful. That time she met Angela Daniels cut short....

"What's your name?" she asks as she steps out. "You new?"

"Martin," he tells her. "Yeah, just started. I'm with the 856."

Fiona huffs her annoyance but heads toward the building. Martin climbs into the back of the ambulance, his gaze only skimming me, and then he turns and slams the door shut.

Suddenly, it's just me and this strange man in a tight, alien space. He comes closer, seeming to suck up the air, as he settles himself onto the chair where Fiona was sitting and picks up my chart, his eyes scanning over it. The engine rumbles to life,

making everything hum.

Chapter Sixteen

It's cold. The gurney under me is hard through the thin mattress. The tools and medications vibrate in their cabinets, as if rattling a request to be released. The stark light defies the night darkening the only window—a black oval above Martin's head.

He sits across from me, his short auburn hair dewed with raindrops. Pale brown eyes dart behind his glasses. The man's shoulders are hunched forward, almost protective.

The posture strikes me as strange. This guy is strong, really strong. The broad expanse of his chest seems like it should be pushed out in the peacock fashion of most gym enthusiasts. A tingling awareness leeches the pain from my body, filling me with a nervous, flighty energy.

"If you just lie back," he says, still not looking at me, "I'll get an IV started."

"I'd rather sit up." My voice is raspy, throat raw from breathing in all that smoke.

"I'm sorry, but it's regulation. You have to be lying down if we're moving."

But, of course, we are already moving. A hysterical laugh bubbles up in my smoke-ravaged throat. "I understand," I say, forcing my tone to be soft. I need to sound weak, not on the edge of my sanity. "I'm just too frightened to lie down right now. That was so..."

My gaze traces the space as if I'm searching for words, but really, I'm looking for something, anything I can use to defend myself.

My eyes slide from the intercom on the wall behind his head, to the tinted white cabinet faces on either side of his chair.

They leap to the equipment for monitoring vital signs over my right shoulder, down to my hands briefly, then over my left shoulder to the tinted cabinets labeled in red with things like Maternity Kit, Burn Pack...

"You're in good hands," he promises me. "Now, I just need you to lie back."

There is a syringe in his hand. How did he get it? I didn't see him remove it from any of the cabinets.

I shake my head, wordless. Fear rushes through me.

The skin at the corner of his mouth tightens. "Please," he says, frustration edging into his voice.

He's bad at acting. The thought rings through my mind like a bell. This man is pretending to be an EMT, and he's not good at it.

The ambulance turns, then accelerates. The siren starts up, adding a layer of sound so thick that Martin, or whatever his real name is, has to raise his voice to ask me again to lie down.

"No," I say. It comes out loud and sure. I am not lying the fuck down.

He leans forward like he couldn't hear my answer. His free hand, the one not holding the needle, shoots out and grabs my injured one.

Shit, shit, shit.

I yank away from him, but he doesn't let go. Instead, he just falls forward with me. The scent of body odor and sweat fills my nose. I kick wildly, crazed now.

He grunts as my knee connects with his ribs. I twist my arm, pulling against his thumb, breaking his hold, and scramble away. I half crawl, half fall off the end of the gurney, catching myself on the closed doors.

I twist around to face him, my knees bent, hair falling into my eyes. He stands to face me. We sway in unison, shifting weight to stay balanced.

The ambulance takes a left, and we both are thrown to the right. His thick thigh leans into the cot I just evacuated. I trip until I hit the wall, grabbing onto one of the cabinet handles.

He rights himself and takes a step toward me—one more, and he'll have me cornered. Sweat beads his upper lip, victory shines in his eyes. He's big and armed. I can't win.

I grapple with the cabinet my hand is on, ripping it open, rifling through it. Plastic-wrapped tools tumble out, crashing onto the ambulance floor.

Martin takes another step. The needle comes up—the thin metal glinting in the bright lights. The siren blares.

I give up my search and just grab his wrist, but he's much stronger than me. His weight bears down, my back presses into the open cabinet behind me.

Metal digs into my lower back, scraping my shirt up as I slide down it. Sweat stings my smoke-strained eyes. His other arm comes up, a sharp fist to my stomach.

I bow over it, taking his hand holding the needle down with me, forcing it suddenly close to his thigh. I jam it forward, desperate, crazed, and with enough momentum

that it pierces through his pants.

"Fuck!" he screams.

His forearm tenses to pull it out, but I jam the plunger home. He rips it out and his fist opens, dropping the empty syringe. Then that hand grabs my throat. He lifts me, slamming my head into the cabinets behind me so hard that stars dance across my vision.

He's glaring at me, glasses askew, lips pulled back. I scratch at his forearm but it's like digging nails into a tree limb—all I'm going to do is leave marks in the bark.

I bring my knee up into his groin. He grunts and his hold loosens enough for me to tear free. I throw myself onto the gurney—the only place to go—but before I can get anywhere he's got a meaty fist in my hair. I scream, the desperate sound burning my injured throat.

He drags me back; my nails claw at the rough sheet. The cool crinkle of a plastic-wrapped tool touches my fingers. I clutch my fist around it. My back presses to his front. He growls in my ear and something inside me breaks.

It snaps.

No fucking way.

I am so done with this bullshit.

No more.

Hard knuckles grind against my scalp, fingers twisted in my hair, controlling my head. My body bows away from the man behind me. The harsh sting of antiseptic

mixes with the rank musk of him. Of us. Of two people fighting like the reaper is in the room—and only one of us will escape him.

The siren wails, bathing the rattling space in its cacophony. I rip at the plastic packaging in my hand, unseeing.

Cool metal meets my heated skin. A sharp blade slices the tip of my middle finger. Yes! My heart rages against my rib cage. I grip the roughened handle of the scalpel, the sharp blade meant for precision facing up.

Martin's large hand wraps around my throat, his thumb knotting under my jaw. He squeezes. Air cuts off. I don't give any more fucks.

I stab the blade up over my shoulder, digging it into him—nothing precise about it. A sharp sound of surprise. Rip it out. Blood spurts, hot against my cheek. Stab it in again. He snarls.

The hand around my throat loosens. Wrenching the blade out again, I try to twist away but his fingers are still tangled in my hair.

The back of my left shoulder presses against his heaving chest. I can see his throat now—sweat-slicked and peppered with black stubble.

Adam's apple bobbing—a moving target I don't plan on missing.

I slash at it, manic, desperate. Done.

A line of skin opens, blood flooding from it. He throws me. My right side hits the gurney's thin mattress hard. My teeth clack. The scalpel, slick with blood, jerks free, skittering across the floor—the sound of it lost to the siren—and under the chair Martin was sitting in.

Fuck.

Martin's hands are on his throat, blood eases between thick fingers. It's not flowing fast enough to kill him. His glasses are gone, eyes lit with rage. Welcome to my world, fucker.

I roll off the gurney, hitting the hard vibrating floor and crawl toward where I saw the scalpel disappear.

"What's going on back there?" The driver's voice comes through the intercom. A hand wraps around my ankle. It starts to drag me back. I grab for an oxygen tank velcroed next to the chair.

A strangled sound escapes me as my arms strain to hold on. Martin doesn't relent. The tank breaks free from the wall. I slide, turning onto my back, bringing the tank around.

Martin's bent over me, blood dripping from his wounds onto my legs. I swing the tank at his head. It connects with a clang loud enough to hear over the siren.

The blow knocks his head into the metal rail of the gurney hard enough it bounces off. Rage and pain contort his features. I try to hit him again but he swats the tank away. The cylinder thwacks the wall and rolls out of my reach.

Martin lunges, his hands again finding purchase around my throat.

His weight bears down. My vision tunnels.

Panic seizes my chest. I flail, trying to scratch his face, but with his arms straight I don't have the reach.

I dig my nails into his forearms, dragging them down, shredding skin and drawing blood.

His eyes meet mine. They lose focus. Martin's grip falters—the bruising strength of his fingers lessening. He blinks once, twice. Shakes his head. Blown pupils search my face.

The syringe. The drugs are taking effect.

I get in a wisp of a breath. He teeters, then collapses, head colliding with mine, our faces close, his breath on my cheek, hands loose.

Some strange noise escapes me—a terrified, triumphant sob. I can breathe but barely. Martin's weight covers me. His legs longer than mine, shoulders broader. I turn my face to the side; Martin's parted lips fall to my neck, and the man's breath caresses the bruises left by his fingers.

The space we are in is narrow, sandwiched between the wall and the gurney. I grab for the metal legs of the seat with my right arm, pulling to twist my body so that his weight is on my side instead of flush.

Hot tears of frustration burn my eyes. The scalpel glimmers at me from the darkness under the seat. I pull myself closer, creating more space on my right side. Martin rolls off, releasing me.

My breath comes in harsh pants. Sweat slides down my spine. My fingers touch the scalpel, sticky with blood. I wrap my fist around it and then haul myself up, climbing onto the chair.

Martin lies prone, blood easing from his wounds and pooling on the floor. The bright lights reflect in the puddle's vibrating surface.

The siren cuts out, and the rumble of the engine sounds like a purr in comparison. Wait, we're slowing. Oh shit. The driver is coming for me.

This fight isn't over. I climb back on the gurney to navigate around Martin's prone form. His back rises and falls, the bellows of his lungs still working. Should I end him? Finish what I started?

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:45 pm

I pause—still on my hands and knees, the blood-stained white sheet of the gurney crinkling under me.

The coppery tang seems brighter without the siren.

It's splashed on the walls. Crusts in the wrinkled skin of my knuckles.

There are stripes across my chest, the dark brushstrokes drying with the rest of the grime and sweat coating my skin.

It doesn't disgust me.

I want more.

My fingers itch to end Martin. To make it so he can't come for me again. Can't come for anyone.

My vision fills with his defenseless form. I could stand over him, one booted foot on each side, dig my fingers into his hair. Use it to expose his throat and run this blade across it, finish what I started.

The ambulance is slowing. I don't have time. And killing an unconscious person? Is that who I want to be?

Yes.

A voice, quiet but sure, whispers from the darkest part of me.

The part that kept me company when my grandmother locked me in the closet.

The part that woke up from a drugged sleep when Jack was poised to rape me.

The part of me that beat him with that golden statue until his brains littered the carpet.

The wild in me wants to bathe in my enemy's blood.

Fuck. I need to go.

I reach the doors. The latch is obvious, and I yank it up; the right side comes loose. I shove it away. It flies to the side and then clicks into place—leaving an opening to the outside world. I inhale deeply, taking in the fetid air of the narrow alley we are driving down.

The ambulance hits a pothole. Filthy water splashes up, spattering my already ruined boots. We pass a row of dumpsters hunkered under yellow security lights.

When I first moved to Los Angeles, I was seventeen. Working as a model but craving to be on the silver screen. I spent a lot of time at castings. While in the waiting room for one I met a ruggedly handsome stunt man named Dane. He was a decade older and drove a Camaro.

Dane took me to dingy, fun bars that didn't care about my age.

We made out in his car. And he told me about his work.

"The key to leaping from a speeding train is to stay relaxed.

" His deft fingers slid up my calf, hooking under my knee.

"You want to move where your body needs to move.

Stay loose." Dane tugged, pulling my thigh around his hip.

Hot breath whispered against my neck. "And always be ready to tuck and roll if you lose your footing. "

He'd probably warn against leaping from a moving ambulance with a deadly weapon gripped in your fist. I drop the scalpel. It bounces and glints on the rough pavement before disappearing into the darkness.

The ambulance is slowing. If I wait for it to stop, I might miss my chance to escape. If I jump now I could break a leg and be at the driver's mercy.

I turn and lower myself backwards out of the ambulance. My right foot hits the pavement, the impact reverberating up my body. Stay loose. Stay loose.

My left foot finds purchase. I'm running in the same direction as the ambulance, but, even so, my weight shifts too far forward. My arms pinwheel. I'm staring down at the gritty, wet pavement. Inhaling, I will myself to find balance. I won't fall now. No. Not now.

My feet keep going, catching up with my momentum.

I skitter to a stop. Turning around, my gaze finds the mouth of the alley where it intersects with a busier street.

Bright headlights attract me like a child to a nightlight.

Hope springs that I will find refuge there, but that wild part of me knows there is no safety in the light.

Lungs burning, arms and legs pumping, I race toward the trafficked street, away from the slowing ambulance. I'm not feral yet.

I'm half way there when I hear: "Hey!" I glance back. A man dressed as an EMT is standing at the back of the now stopped ambulance, his orange jacket's reflective stripes shimmering in the light spilling out of the bright interior. "Stop!"

I refocus ahead of me, leaping over another water-filled pothole, landing on a crunch of glass. The whistle of a bullet zings past me. Shit! Another one—this one so close I feel its heat at my ear.

Diving to the side, I dip between two dumpsters. Shit. Shit. Shit. All this move accomplished is to trap myself in reeking shadows. A rat's furry body scuttles out from under the chest-height metal box, running over my booted foot, sending a shiver of disgust up my body.

I'm going to die here, and rats are going to eat my body.

Fuck no.

I take in a deep breath of the rancid air, my eyes scanning for a weapon. The ground is littered with broken glass, bits of refuse all turned dingy gray by the environment.

A chain connects the dumpsters to each other. The padlock lies broken—half under one of the wheels. I crouch to grab the chain's grimy links. Pounding footfalls grow louder. He knows I'm trapped.

The metal scrapes against the ground, the sound ricocheting between the dumpsters bracketing me. The chain is about two feet long and heavy enough to catch my breath as I heft it.

The rev of a motorcycle engine breaks from the trafficked street, zooming down the alley. What the?

A sharp crack of a pistol. The startled cry of a man. A body hits the ground. The motorcycle engine roars closer. I grip the chain, swinging it by my side gently, building up momentum, each pass going higher, harder.

A headlight illuminates the slice of alleyway I can see from my vantage point. The engine settles. A silver motorcycle—something fast and dangerous—rumbles to a stop in front of me. The driver, a tall, broad man wearing a leather jacket and worn jeans, puts a long leg down, balancing the bike.

His helmeted head faces me. Tinted glass shields his identity. But I recognize the man's lethal grace. "Get on." Temperance's voice rumbles across the space between us.

Chapter Seventeen

Frigid, wet air rushes around me—mostly blocked by Temperance's big body. But it plays with my hair, whipping it around my shoulders, and pulling it out behind us like a flag. And it catches my skirt, hiking it up my thighs and fluttering the pleats wildly.

My arms wrap around Temperance's warm body, fingers linked at his stomach. The man is settled into the V of my thighs.

The burn on my arm relishes the cold, damp air blowing over it. The scratches and cuts on my exposed skin go numb under the night's assault. I lay my cheek against Temperance's broad back, the leather soft over warm, hard muscle.

The smooth edge of the compass presses into my breasts. But the rectangle of my phone is gone from my low back. I have no idea when I lost it.

Scattered thoughts kaleidoscope. I can't seem to hold a thread, and soon I give up. Letting the bike's vibrations lull me into a state of calm.

I need a plan.

The thought bumps up against the sensations drugging me. Pain. Cold air. Warm body. Everything humming. Hmmm.

We break away from the buildings and are crossing over a bridge, the Thames below us, black and roiled. Westminster Abbey, glowing gold in the misty night, greets us on the other side. Big Ben stretches up into the cloud-thick sky, the clock face barely

visible through the fog.

None of this was visible from the restaurant, all of it shrouded, all of it just a glow under the gloom.

We continue, weaving between traffic. The buildings slip back into the modern era. Glass and metal. Sleek rather than grand. My brain settles into the rhythm of the rumbling motor again.

What happened to Omar?

Is Ash okay?

That one pulls me up, lifts me past the haze. I yell the question to Temperance. He nods. I rest my cheek against his back again.

Where are we going? I can't muster the energy to ask. I'm trusting him out of exhaustion. This is not a good plan...

The city zips past as we weave through traffic. Temperance navigates London's complex web of streets and squares like he was born here. We dash down narrow side streets and merge into crowded thoroughways, cars seeming to part for us.

My eyes slip closed, the grip I have on reality fluttering as urgently as my skirt. A warm hand covers mine. Squeezes. "Stay awake." Temperance's voice vibrates through his back to me as much as it spills from his lips.

I blink rapidly, clawing my way back to consciousness. I'm not safe with this man. I'm in danger. But the adrenaline refuses to come. My body is all out of urgency.

"We will be there soon." Temperance's rumble reaches me. I nod against his back,

rubbing myself against the soft, hard warmth of him. My body refuses to acknowledge that this wall of muscle is not to be trusted. It wants to curl up in the heat of him and sleep for days.

Ash's soot-stained face swims into my mind's eye. The awe in his eyes when he first opened them. He looked at me like I was a goddess. Like I amazed him.

My body zings at that memory, flickering at the sensation of his big arm draped over me, leaning on me. How solid his back felt against my forearm. The sensation of his big hand on my hip, pushing me behind him. Protecting me. Still stunned from the explosion, but fearless nonetheless.

The streets turn residential, stately townhouses four and five stories tall crowd the narrow streets.

We slow to turn down a cobblestone alleyway barely wide enough for a car and much cleaner than the one I recently escaped.

The air is sweeter here—fresher, scented of wet earth as much as wet cement.

We purr to a stop in front of a three-story brick townhouse.

The black garage door slides up and we roll into darkness, our single headlight illuminating a bare cement space.

The door closes behind us and Temperance puts his foot down, tipping the bike.

I grip him harder. The engine cuts and silence cocoons us.

I unclench my hands and sit up. Every muscle in my body protests. The burn on my arm rages. The pain slowly consumes my consciousness. Temperance dismounts and

pulls off his helmet.

I'm still on the back of the bike when his eyes find mine. The headlight bouncing off the wall in front of us illuminates his one side, throwing the rest of his face into shadow.

His eyes are as intense as ever. There is no humor in his gaze, no teasing, and no testing.

Without a word he grabs me around the waist, lifting me like a child, and sets me down on the floor, my aching feet taking my weight.

Temperance keeps his hands on my waist for a long moment, waiting to make sure I can stand.

I can.

"We don't have much time," he says.

The hysterical laugh that's been caught in my chest since Martin tried to tell me I had to be lying down for us to be driving when we were already driving and I was sitting tumbles out of me. The force of it doubling me over. I have to lean against the bike to keep from falling to the garage floor.

Tears blur my vision. My stomach aches from laughing. When I look up at Temperance, he's watching me with a disapproving frown. His eyes are molten gold in the strange light. Then it clicks off, sinking us into pitch black. My laugh echoes in the darkness.

Temperance's feet scrape on the floor, and I sense him moving away. I lean on the bike, catching my breath, my laugh winding itself down to hiccups of giggles. Light

floods the space from a fixture in the ceiling. I close my eyes against the brightness.

Temperance returns, his warm hand landing on my back. "Come on," he says. "Let's get you inside."

"Oh yes," I say, doing a posh British accent. "Let's!"

Temperance half carries me up the steps through the garage door into a small room with a washer-dryer and empty hooks on the walls. A mud room. Empty of mud. The place smells like cleaning products.

We continue into a darkened kitchen. The cabinets are hulking shadows, the only light spilling in from the wall of glass leading to a manicured backyard—topiaries trapped in a brick square.

Temperance flicks on a light, bringing the kitchen into focus. He directs me to an attractively worn wooden farm table that fits in with the traditional cabinets. He leaves me for a moment to grab a first-aid kit and then returns.

He gently pulls my arm toward him, laying it on a clean towel. Temperance spills a solution over the burn that wipes any traces of humor away. I try to pull my arm back, but his grip is stronger than my resistance.

"Trust me," he says.

"Trust you?" The humor-turned-pain alchemizes into rage.

"Trust you!" He lifts his attention to my face, still holding my wrist tight.

"Are you fucking kidding me? I just—" I wave desperately with my free arm toward the garage in an attempt to encompass the shitshow of the last however many hours.

But really, it goes back further than that. This man. This man!

"You," I sputter. "Trust you!"

"I understand?—"

I cut him off because I cannot for one second hear him tell me anything. "You," I seethe.

His frown is condescending, as if I'm missing the point.

"Where the fuck have you been?" is what comes out. It's not what I was trying to say. I have no words for what I'm trying to say.

"I'm here now. I'm sorry. But we need to get you cleaned up and to the hospital.

" I blink at him, my brain unable to catch up with the words.

"The paparazzi know you were in the building during the explosion.

They saw the ambulance carry you off. We need you to be at a hospital so that no one questions where you've been. This can't be linked to you."

"This. Can't." My tongue isn't working.

"They were not going to kill you," he says it quietly.

"Seemed like it to me." My voice is shrill.

"Linda was trying to scare you. Show you her strength." His voice is a low murmur of disapproval.

"Oh, my new handler had me kidnapped to show me how strong she is and how weak I am?" Disbelief infuses my words, but that explanation actually makes sense when I think about that insecure woman and the way I treated her.

"Something like that."

"But did she blow up..." My mind wheels. That doesn't make sense.

"No. She took advantage of a situation. Which I would admire if it wasn't so short-sighted." A smile flickers at the edge of his lips. "She underestimated you."

"That guy was shooting at me. The other one was going to inject me with something."

"I think the driver panicked."

"You killed him."

"Something like that." Temperance's gaze drops back to my wound.

He starts to apply some kind of cooling gel to it.

I flinch but it actually helps. My arm is filthy except for the square of clean skin Temperance has created around the wound.

The awareness of the grime awakens sensations—suddenly my skin is crawling.

"I need a shower," I say.

"After I bandage this you can clean up. Then we need to talk. Then I'll get you to the hospital."

"Ash is okay?" I ask again.

"Thanks to you," Temperance says without looking up. He lays a bandage on top of the burn, sealing the edges, then meets my gaze again. "You can take that shower now." He smiles gently. You ' ll feel better after you clean up .

Temperance stands, and I follow him through the kitchen into a living room decorated in browns and beiges. He leads me up carpeted stairs and through the first door we reach.

Temperance flicks on the overhead lights, and a bedroom comes into focus.

It's a nice size with a queen bed made up with white sheets.

Blue scrubs lie neatly folded on the bench at its foot.

"The bathroom is through there." Temperance gestures at a closed door to the left of the bed.

"I put a layer of plastic on top of the bandage but be careful with it."

I start to walk past him, and Temperance stops me with a hand on my bicep. I look up at him. We're standing close. His eyes have a new edge to them. The gentle healer from downstairs replaced by the calculating spy I've known all along. There is a sense of relief in that.

"The compass, Angela. Where is it?"

My brows raise. "What makes you think I have it?" I ask, infusing my voice with disbelief. Because it is ridiculous to assume that I have it on me considering what I've been through and my complete lack of pockets.

"You're good, Angela. We both know it. You have all the right instincts. And I'm betting a lot on knowing that you wouldn't let it out of your sight once you knew Linda wanted it."

I don't answer right away, my exhausted brain trying to decide what to do. It just keeps clicking over, coming up with nothing new. "Why does the compass matter so much?" I ask, my curiosity winning the talking contest.

Temperance cocks his head. "You really want to know?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

His eyes graze over my face, searching for...I don't know what. "It contains a memory card loaded with evidence that can bring down Reginald Grand."

"Oh."

"Oh," Temperance echoes, a smile sliding into place.

Chapter Eighteen

The hospital room is private with a view of a courtyard garden. I'm standing next to the window, wearing two gowns—one open to the front, one to the back, so it's almost like I've got on one whole dress. But not. The nurse who greeted us took the scrubs Temperance gave me last night.

I'd traded a compass holding a memory card for a shower. That the card contains evidence that will bring down Reginald Grand seems like a false hope to me. There is already ample evidence he's corrupt, but so what? His supporters only believe him.

That is how autocrats hold power—by convincing people they are the only source of truth. No contrary information can shatter that kind of belief. If anything, it further solidifies the leader's support. In the end such blind fealty never turns out well, but that's only in the long term.

Temperance didn't give me any details of what he planned to do now with the compass and its kompromat. "Another time," he promised. But I gave him the compass with its hidden information regardless. So when Linda comes back, she won't have anything to take from me.

"Tell her you lost it with your purse in the explosion," Temperance advised. "Don't mention the ambulance ride. Or me. She won't bring it up because she can't link herself to the incident."

The incident.

God, what a way to put it. My hand wanders up to my throat where Martin's fingers are bruised into my skin. I'll need to wear a scarf. Fashion saves the day. A rueful laugh gets caught in my throat and forms a lump.

The police will be here in the morning to interview me. "You have nothing to worry about. You're the victim here," Temperance said.

"What about Elliot Kendricks?" I asked about the MI5 agent who came to see me after the queen collapsed.

Something flickered behind Temperance's eyes—something I couldn't quite read. "He won't be involved in this investigation."

I blink away the memories, staring down at the hospital's small sculpture garden below.

Most pieces are just shadows in the slowly brightening dawn but a modern, abstract, twisting metal monolith at its center is lit from below, the stark light creating dark shadows. Strength isn't always a straight line...

Lloyd will be here before the police with new clothing, including that much-needed scarf. But right now I'm watching the darkened garden turn to gray as the sun rises.

I still haven't slept. My eyes are sandpapery, but my brain is firing in all directions at once.

A sudden, intense urge to see Ash swells inside me. Did he know what Linda had planned? How much contact does he have with her? Does he know what the compass holds...held...whatever the tense is, I want the answer. I want to see him. Need to see him. Now.

My socked feet are quiet on the linoleum floor, the sticky underside grippy on the smooth surface. I ease open the heavy door and pad my way down the fluorescent-lit hall. Temperance told me Ash was on the same floor. A VIP wing for people like us—who need privacy and have the money to pay for it.

“Get some sleep, trust me, Ash is fine. The concussion was minor. He'll be released tomorrow.”

Omar was taken to a different private hospital, removed from the shattered restaurant before I even woke up from the blast. He's also fine. No one was killed. Omar's female assistant—the stunning woman who greeted Ash and me when we got off the elevator—is in intensive care but expected to survive.

I didn't ask Temperance any more questions about the explosion and who might have caused it.

Didn't insist on speaking with Ash. Didn't want Temperance to know how screwed up in the head I am about the giant I can't seem to trust or not trust. The man who makes me feel like I'm caught in an electric grid with him. The one I threatened to kill.

I wanted to murder Martin. I wanted it so bad. And that's fucking me up too. I'm just fucked up.

I check the name on each room's door, getting closer to the nurses' station.

Voices slow me. I don't want them to see me.

A man says something and a woman laughs.

Pressing myself against the wall and out of view, I slide closer.

There are more rooms further down the hall, but I have to get past the desk first.

"No," the woman says. "Not now."

The man says something I can't understand. Clothing rustles. The woman giggles. "Just a minute then," she says.

They appear, holding hands, and she leads the way, hurrying down the hall. If they turned back, they'd see me pressed up against the wall in my gowns looking like a mental hospital escapee. But the two only have eyes for each other as she unlocks a door and they disappear inside.

I break into a jog to cross the space exposed to the desk and the elevators.

My peripheral vision snags on a tray of surgical instruments—each one sealed in its own sterile wrapping.

I slow, stop. Turn. There are scalpels sitting right there, the deadly weapons' shine dulled by the blue film of plastic over them.

I don't think, just scoop up two of the knives, and continue down the hall past the closet with its muted moans, checking the name on each door as I go.

Ash Fraser.

I press my face against the door's glass window like a child at the candy store. It is dark except where dawn blue inches across the floor from the exterior window. The bed is mostly out of view, hidden behind a privacy curtain, except for large, blanket-covered feet pressed against the footboard.

The feet don't stir as I ease the door open. Closing it behind me, I stand with my back

pressed to the cool surface. What am I doing here? Staring at Ash's feet. Holding two scalpels.

Even as I ask the question, I slowly pull their wrapping off, the sound loud in the quiet of the darkened room. But the feet don't twitch. Sunlight breaks across the sky, adding a hue of orange to the pale blue—warming the light of this sterile place.

I drop the discarded wrappers and close the space between us.

As I pass the curtain, Ash comes into view.

He dwarfs the bed, turning it into something delicate.

Something almost comic if it weren't for the machines over the headboard.

The buttons of light. The steady mountain range of his heartbeat.

I should just go. Why am I here?

Because I need to know.

What?

I can barely remember, my thoughts fuzzed by the sight of him. By the exhaustion. By the intensity and yet distance of the night's events. It's like I'm floating outside my body as it drifts up next to him.

Ash's head is shaved—pale in the faded light of dawn. Thick stubble darkens his jaw. A bruise blooms on Ash's left cheekbone. Black lashes fan over gray circles under his eyes. He looks beat up. Tired.

I watch myself lean close, gripping a deadly blade—so like the one I used on Martin. Like the one I wanted to draw across his throat with enough violence to make sure he stayed down. I craved to kill him. And that's the most frightening thing about all of this mess.

Ash's eyes open and lock on mine. He doesn't look dazed or groggy. He moves quicker than I can react, and suddenly I'm back in my body. It's slammed into the bed, his weight pressing down, my weapon above my head—wrist wrapped in the shackle of Ash's fist.

This is why I brought two.

My other hand still holds its blade, cold against my bared thigh and held in place by his muscled leg. But also positioned to wound. The thin fabric of Ash's gown is the only thing keeping my clenched fist from the warmth of him.

"What are you doing?" Anger roughens his voice. The sunlight touches his eyes, bringing the blue out of the black. The gown bunches around his shoulders, dropping down to caress my neck, exposing Ash's bare skin and the black tattoos twining over it.

"Did you know?" I ask, breathless under the crush of him. But it's not scary. Fuck. It's comforting. Tears blur my vision even as I inch my hand between us.

His eyes dart around my face, get stuck on my lips, make it back to my eyes. "Angela, if I'd known I wouldn't have allowed myself to be blown unconscious for you to save." His brow is furrowed, eyes tight. He doesn't understand why I'd ask such a stupid question.

"I meant about the ambulance."

His gaze turns molten, rage swirling in the oceanic depths. "No."

"And you're not just saying that because I have a blade at your balls?"

His eyes widen, realization dawning. Satisfaction thrums through me. I caught him off guard. Victory tastes sweet. I let the smile tugging at my lips have its way with my face.

Ash shakes his head, amusement lightening his gaze.

He licks his lips and the humor in his eyes dies, reborn as something else.

Something hot and forbidden. Something that lights up the electric grid between us.

Sparks skitter over my skin making it impossible to think of anything but the way they burn so good.

His eyes stray to my mouth. He leans closer, lids lowering, black lashes fanning. I take in an unsteady breath, pulling air over my lips. Pulling him into them. Ash stops. My exhale finds his inhale. Neither of us moves.

My heart pounds against my breast, crushed by his chest. I swallow, incapable of speech. Incapable of anything but breathing. And I can barely do that. The last however many hours are gone. The disassociation that pulled me away from myself is gone. I'm here, Ash's weight holding me in place.

His jaw clenches tight, the muscles bunching under his stubble. His eyes leave my mouth and meet my gaze. He tenses, muscles tightening to move away from me. "Don't." The word leaps out of me.

Ash pauses.

"Don't go," I get out. "Please."

He stares down at me. Electricity sizzles. Then his weight comes back. And I sigh from the pleasure of it. He releases my wrist, brings both hands to my cheeks, his weight on me and his elbows. The blade is still caught between us, flat against my bare thigh, the metal no longer cold.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:45 pm

He holds me gently, gentler than you'd think hands that big and scarred could be. Our breaths mingle, the heat between our lips a living thing.

Camera flashes explode, leaving halos in my vision even behind the dark lenses of my sunglasses. I drop my head, leaning into Ash's side, hiding under his right arm. My silk scarf flutters in the rain-spattered wind.

"Angela!"

"How are you feeling?"

"Are you dating the prince!"

"How serious is it?"

Alesana's broad back wrapped in a navy suit jacket leads the way. Ash's left arm extends forward, blocking photographers crowding way too close. My heart rate doesn't spike. Fear doesn't flood me. This is nothing. Nothing compared to what I've been through.

I watch my booted feet cross the pavement, wet from the ever-present rain in this country.

A country I'm set to leave today. The press tour continues on, and I'm not missing it.

The police questioned me this morning—a male and female detective who assumed my innocence and had their assumptions confirmed.

I can't wait to get the fuck out of here. The scent of the hospital clings to me even though I'm showered and in fresh clothing. The only thing stronger than that antiseptic stench is Ash's scent—safe, close, necessary.

Alesana shifts to the right, pushing photographers away with his back, creating a path for me to where Chris stands next to the open door of an SUV. He's frowning, all focus on the crowd. Ash's hand drops to my lower back, warm through the tweed jacket I'm wearing, as he guides me into the vehicle.

The door slams, and for a brief moment I'm alone in the dark interior. The tinted windows mute the flashes and yells. I stare straight ahead, no expression on my face. I'm not offering those vultures anything.

Not that I have cause to judge. We all do what we need to survive. But I'm not carrion. Not yet, anyway.

Alesana and Chris get into the front seats and Ash slides in next to me, the photographers following him around the car and flooding into the street. Chris leans on the horn, inching forward. Ash's expression is grim as he watches.

We make it through the throng, depart the hospital grounds, and merge into traffic. Motorcycles whiz alongside, darting between us and other cars. In my peripheral vision photographers hang off the back seats of bikes, legs locked around the driver while they desperately click.

Horns honk, voices yell. Paparazzi swarm like flies on a carcass. My left hand lies on the leather seat between Ash and me. His lands next to it. My entire awareness drops to the space between our pinky fingers. Everything disappears but those scant inches. Magnetic energy thrums.

We enter a tunnel, the world outside the SUV plunging into darkness interrupted by

yellow lights at set intervals, throwing stripes over us each time we pass one. The flies continue to buzz.

Ash's skin touches mine. The side of his fingers lightly pressing.

My eyes close behind the dark lenses. Heart hammering, stomach clenching. I'm frozen in this moment. Totally transfixed by the intensity of his touch. How can this be so strong? So fierce?

Because it's dangerous? Forbidden? Or is it because it's him and me? Because he shouldn't be loyal to me but I want him to be so damn badly? I want to believe that he will throw caution to the wind for me. The fantasy of the loyal knight devoted to one queen.

He didn't kiss me in his hospital room. Ash held me, rolling us so that I was on top of him, and then cradled me to his chest. I fell asleep in the cocoon of his arms, and I woke up back in my own room. In the cold, narrow bed with the sun flooding in.

Part of me wondered if it was a dream—a hallucination created by my exhausted, terrified mind.

Lloyd arrived with my clothing and the concern of a mother hen.

He brought Zade who covered my bruises and brightened my eyes, their expression grim.

“If I had known that royal motherfucker was going to get you blown up, I never would have suggested you go on another date with him.”

They left and Ash showed up, dressed in a gray suit with a crisp white shirt. The scruff decorating his jaw was gone, the circles under his eyes diminished. Stubble

darkened his scalp. The wound at the base of his skull was covered in a white bandage.

His eyes met mine and electricity leapt between us, as real as the bruises decorating my throat, the burn on my arm, and the beat of my heart. Ash swallowed, an expression of pain passing over his stalwart face. And I knew it was real. I knew that last night something changed.

And now here we are, the barest contact between our skin making me feel every inch of my body. Making me feel real in this very unreal situation.

Ash's phone rings. He pulls it from his jacket with his free hand, not breaking our contact. I swallow, keeping my gaze forward. "Fraser." Unintelligible squawking comes over the line. "Understood. I will forward the message." He hangs up. "That was Rashid Talib, the prince's equerry."

I turn to look at him as we come out of the tunnel. White light halos him. Ash moves his hand away, as if my focus on him broke the spell. That or the mention of Omar. "The prince wants to speak with you. He's tried your number repeatedly."

"Oh." I pull my hands into my lap, twinging my fingers—cold now. "I..."

"You don't have to speak with him," Ash says, his gaze on the paparazzi revving next to us.

"Yes, I know. Lloyd is getting me a new phone. I'll wait and check my messages."

"You can use my phone now if you prefer." He turns to look at me then, the first time he's met my gaze since we've been in the company of others. His eyes are locked down, cold ice.

I clear my throat, turn away, uncomfortable with how good he is at acting.

Chapter Nineteen

"No press is bad press," Mary assures me over the phone. "At least not the kind that doesn't scream scandal." I'm in Rome soaking in a lavender-scented bubble bath. Candlelight flickers off the white marble walls bringing out the thin veins of gold.

The hotel suite's bathroom is as large as my closet back home. Almost the size of my first apartment. So far beyond where I ever thought I could get and yet where I always planned to be.

"You looked fabulous coming out of the hospital. Very Grace Kelly meets Princess Diana. Who chose the outfit?"

The tweed Tom Ford pantsuit and Hermès scarf paired with giant sunglasses arrived with Lloyd and Zade. I have no idea where they came from—but they are draped over the couch in the bedroom now. I glance at my injured arm, propped on the edge of the tub, the bandage wrapped in plastic.

Mary continues, not waiting for a response. "I'll ask Lloyd. That man is a dream, don't you think? Especially with how...intense it's been. I'm very impressed with his performance."

Mary pauses long enough I know I'm supposed to answer her this time. "Yes," I agree. My voice sounds dead—a flat line. Like a woman who's lost touch with her emotions. Someone so traumatized she's cut it all off.

The part of my mind that never shuts down notes a weighted emptiness. If I ever need

this feeling for my work I can come back here—to this glittering, perfumed, warm moment that feels like gritty rain-soaked cement is pressing down on me. Holding down a torrent of emotion.

"When are you talking to Jeremy?" Mary asks.

"Plan on calling him next." I pick up the glass of rosé next to the tub and take a sip—it chills and bites my tongue.

I owe a lot of people phone calls. Synthia for sure.

Julian called and texted. Omar sent flowers and left messages.

My eyes slip closed and I slouch further into the tub, careful to keep my arm above the bubbles.

Trying to find comfort but finding only more cement.

"Good. Have you seen the statement Jeremy emailed?"

"Yes, I read it on the flight." The darkness behind my eyes brings no comfort.

"I think it's perfect. Concern for the other people who were injured, while making it clear you're not actually involved in any way. This wasn't about the film. It was about the prince. About conflicts in the Middle East—not contraceptives."

I open my eyes—my toes, the nails painted glossy red, peek out from the bubble-laced water.

Mary takes a breath. I take another sip of rosé.

“Have you looked at the news at all?” Mary asks.

I make a noise that means no.

“The verdict for Providence Trust Bank vs. Consumer Protection Bureau came out.”

My throat constricts. I’m being strangled. Which case is it? There are two major ones in front of the Supreme Court right now.

My brain scrambles to remember. The banking one...Consumer Protection Bureau is the enforcement agency responsible for overseeing compliance with fair banking practices. The other case, the one about property rights, is Summit Crest HOA vs. Equal Housing Opportunity Authority .

“It didn’t go our way.” Mary’s tone is stark, bald. Like this fact has bounced off her armor without leaving a dent. “You need to reach out to Lauren,” she says, referencing my financial advisor. “And Tamara.” My attorney. “I’ll tell you, I’m getting married.”

My heart is beating against the constriction in my throat.

“It’s a lavender marriage—we’ve been friends for decades. The contract will be ironclad, and I’ll keep all of my assets. So will he. His boyfriend is marrying someone else. It just makes sense right now. Better to be safe than sorry.”

A knock at the bathroom door draws my focus. I still can’t breathe. “I have to go,” I tell Mary. “Zade is here, I need to get ready.”

“All right, honey, you’ll be amazing tonight. You always are.” She sounds motherly now. “If you need anything at all you know you can call me. And let me know what Lauren and Tamara say.”

The door creaks open. It's not Zade. They have never entered a room so slowly—Zade blazes into spaces.

Adrenaline pumps into my system, cracking through the sense of heaviness and forcing me to move. I sit up, my breasts almost breaching the bubbles. Dropping the phone onto the bathmat, I sink my glass under the bubbles, hiding it from whoever is creeping in here. It's the only weapon at hand.

Ash's bulk appears, his head turned away.

"Fuck," I say. "You scared the shit out of me." I take a breath. A big one.

"Sorry." His voice is gruff. Ash keeps his back to me as he closes the door. "I need to tell you something." He keeps his hand on the knob—as if he plans to make a run for it any second now.

"Okay." I still grip the wine glass under the water.

Ash's broad shoulders rise on an inhale. He's removed his jacket and is just wearing the white button-down shirt. It's a few shades darker than the medical bandage at the back of his head—which looks stark even in the flickering candlelight. "Temperance is coming here."

My heart thunders. "When?"

"He will be in your room when you come home from the premiere tonight." Ash's voice remains even, like he's reporting on the weather but gives no fucks about the impending storm.

"Thank you for telling me." My voice doesn't waver. I sound fine. I'm fine. Everything is fine.

"Well," he says, a note of teasing coming into his voice. "I didn't want to die."

A huff of a laugh escapes. I'm safe. No one is actually strangling me right now. "I didn't want to kill you."

Silence falls, the subtle pop of bubbles the only sound in the echoing space. The tension in me torques. Ash nods, as if he's made some decision and then pulls on the doorknob.

"Wait," I say. He freezes, body stiffening.

God, I want to break him. Snap his control so badly. Gain some kind of power right now. "Can you pass me a towel?" I ask, the burning question of every ingenue.

Ash takes a breath before he answers. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why?"

His forehead rests against the door with a subtle thunk. "You know why." That pain I saw in his face this morning in the hospital—the one that convinced me something had changed—is in his voice now.

"Tell me."

"Angela." My name is a groan. And I fucking love it.

"I wanted to kill—" I don't realize I'm speaking, that I'm about to spill that terrifying truth until I'm halfway through the sentence. I clamp my jaw shut on the rest of it. I was about to tell him about Martin. About my sick fantasy. That I can't stop thinking about. That I can't stop wanting.

The muscles in Ash's back bunch as he turns so I can see his profile. But he's still not looking at me. "Who?" he asks, his tone pure menace. I will kill them for you.

Attraction wracks through me so rough it steals my ability to answer. Ash's jaw ticks with impatience. He swallows, breathes, visibly relaxes—gets himself back under control. Fuck.

My phone vibrates on the bathmat. I tear my gaze from Ash to check the screen. It's Synthia.

Ash opens the door and disappears through it. Not so fast that it's fleeing, but a hell of a lot quicker than he came in here. I pull the dripping wine glass from the bubbles, placing it back on the rim of the tub.

The phone quiets as I'm grabbing my own towel—which was in very easy grabbing distance if we're being totally honest. Wrapped in the thick terry cloth, my hair pinned up so that it didn't get wet, my skin dewy from the humid air in the room, I swipe my phone open and return Synthia's call.

"Angela," she answers on the first ring.

"Hey," I say, tears suddenly choking me. Fuck. The adrenaline broke through the numbness, and I don't have anything to stop this now. But I don't have time to lose it.

I have the Italian premiere, and I cannot put Zade in a position where they have to deal with puffy eyes and throat bruises. It's just not right.

"Oh sweetie." The tenderness in her voice undoes me.

I sniffle, trying to hold back, but there is no stemming this tide.

Tears well, blur my vision, and then release; heat tracks down my already hot cheeks.

"It's okay," Synthia says. "I'm right here, you go ahead and cry.

You deserve a good cry." Synthia's voice fuzzes, and her next words are lost. Then silence. The phone dropped the call.

I try to contain the sob welling in my chest but it breaks free, loud, ugly, honest. The part of my mind always focused on my craft takes note of how deep in my body the pain welled up from, how sore my chest is from the ache of holding it back, and how good it feels to let it out.

The sound echoes in the marble space, loud and undeniable. A bundle of tangled emotions exploding like a bomb.

The door flies open, hitting the stopper built into the marble floor hard enough that it bounces back and knocks Ash's forearm. He takes up the entire doorway, eyes etched with concern and fully focused on me. Candlelight plays across his features.

I'm startled into silence. Standing on the bathmat, one hand holding the phone, the other clutching my towel to my chest. We stare at each other. His eyes track the tears on my cheeks, find the pain in my gaze.

It only takes two long strides for him to be so close I have to tip my head to look up at him. Without my shoes, Ash towers over me. His eyes flick across my face, his expression looks at once fierce and lost.

The man wants to solve this problem and he isn't sure how. "I'm okay," I say. He shakes his head, refusing my lie.

My lip trembles, the emotions welling again. He startled them to a pause but they are

still there, and they want out. I want to scream, to tear at something. I want to feel blood pouring over my hand while I steal a man ' s life.

I blink and tears fall. Ash reaches up, swiping at them with his thumbs, cradling my face like he did last night.

His hands are so big, so gentle. I refuse to believe I'm not safe with him. Does he know that he is loyal to only me now? He nods as if answering my question.

I close my eyes, unleashing more tears. Giant arms come around me, sweep me up so that I'm cradled against Ash's chest. Held firmly yet my injured arm is free—the burn and its bandage are not pressed to anything, even as the rest of me is engulfed.

His lips brush my forehead and the tenderness is what gets me.

What lets the emotion break all the way free.

I grip his shirt and the storm hits. Sobs wrack me. Ash's hold is tight and tender. "I'm here," he promises me, his voice rumbling under my ear. "You're safe. I'm right here."

Chapter Twenty

Yellow light spills through the large windows in dull rectangles.

The rest of my bedroom is a dark sepia. Temperance's smile is a slash of white.

His long legs and broad shoulders are sharp lines in the murk.

I suck in a breath, clutch my hand to my chest. "Jesus," I say. "You trying to give me a heart attack?"

"Nothing so dramatic," he purrs.

I flick on the overhead light, illuminating the luxuriously appointed bedroom—the king bed with its earth-toned sheets and gilded headboard, the crystal sconces, the terracotta walls.

Italian elegance at its best. Temperance in his suit with its subtle pinstripe and modern lines looks so reasonable and powerful sitting there, as if this is his bedroom and I'm the interloper.

"Yeah," I say as I slip out of my heels. "You're not dramatic at all, hiding in my bedroom like a creeper." Turning to the dresser, I start to take off my jewelry—one diamond stud, then the other. Temperance moves behind me, his footfalls quiet on the thick carpeting.

"Help me with my necklace?" I say, sweeping my hair over my right shoulder so that

he can reach the clasp.

Breath caresses my bare neck, steady fingers grip the latch.

It gives easily and he parts the heavy choker—which combined with Zade's expertise kept the bruises around my throat hidden from the public.

Temperance brings it forward, his wrists bracketing my neck.

I take it, setting the heavy diamond-encrusted necklace in the velvet case along with the earrings.

Temperance drifts away. Staring at the sparkling collar, I'm reminded of my grandmother's story of arriving in America with just her own grandmother's gold necklace to pay her way.

It was a chain that reached to the center of her chest when she arrived at Ellis Island.

Grandma had two links left when she showed them to me soon after my parents' funeral.

She'd never talked about fleeing her home, losing her family.

That rainy afternoon in her living room, Grandma told me the whole thing.

It feels burned into my brain, the sorrow of it twined with my own loss like DNA.

My grandmother was younger than me when she arrived in America alone, a refugee.

But she survived. And she promised me I would too.

I could take this necklace, this band of diamonds, and flee. Move to some fishing village, change my name, dye my hair. Disappear. But probably not...

"I'm going to change," I say, turning. Temperance stands next to one of the large windows with its view onto the gardens.

Located in the crowded heart of Rome, the Rocco Forte Hotel feels like a country villa with its extensive walled gardens and private terraces.

I stare at Temperance so long, he looks back at me.

I blink at him, tilt my head. Take the hint and leave so I can change.

"I'm escorting you to meet someone; wear something professional." His tone is conversational.

I blink at him. The gown I'm wearing suddenly weighs more. It's scarlet, one-shouldered and falls to the floor in elegant drapes—like a toga but modern. The yards of satin suddenly feel like chain mail.

I'm exhausted. At the premiere tonight I had to pretend I was the right amount of fine—shaken but okay. Hannah inspected my eyes and didn't believe me. Which is no shade on Zade's craftsmanship. She knows my tells.

But Hannah didn't confront me. Just brought me a glass of whiskey at the afterparty and sat next to me, playing interference.

She's a good friend, and the fact that I can't tell her the truth of my life is just one more sorrow to endure.

And endure I will. I straighten my spine and nod to Temperance.

He wants me to meet "someone" at this late hour. Fine. I can handle it. I can handle anything he throws at me.

When Temperance opens the bedroom door I see Ash standing on the far side of the sitting room, his expression blank, eyes cold. Our gazes meet over Temperance's shoulder. His does not change.

A flower bouquet overwhelms the coffee table—sent by Prince Omar with another note of apology.

"Ash," I say, stepping forward to hold the door open. "I need your help with my zipper."

He nods like it's normal for me to ask him for help undressing. Ash passes Temperance, who cocks his head slightly. I can't see his face, but I'm guessing it's asking Ash a question. Something along the lines of you're unzipping her gowns now?

I close the door, Ash on my side of it. Then I head to the bathroom. Ash follows. I face the mirror. He stands behind me, focus on my back, at the zipper that starts between my shoulder blades and ends at the base of my spine.

Ash's hair is longer every time I look at him. It's still stubble-rough but thick enough I can't see his scalp through it anymore. The feel of his hair against my fingers in that dark, smoke-choked hall crashes into me. So soft. So warm.

"Do you know who he's taking me to see?" I ask, yanking myself back into this moment.

"No." Ash's thumb brushes my skin as he grasps the tiny pull tab. An involuntary shiver raises goose bumps on my skin. The zipper comes down, Ash's eyes follow it.

"Are you coming with us?"

"No." His touch lingers a fraction longer than necessary at the end of the zipper. But then he steps back, eyes coming to meet mine in the mirror. Frigid cobalt.

The dress drapes open, my spine naked. I raise a hand to keep it in place. If I let the fabric slip off my body the way gravity wants it to, what would Ash do?

"Do you need anything else?" he asks like he didn't hold me while I sobbed hours ago. Like I didn't sleep on his chest in that hospital room. Like he didn't promise me I was safe with him.

I turn to Ash, facing the man instead of the reflection. He has fully transformed back into a statue, as cold as the marble busts in the garden. "Should I go with him?"

Ash blinks—he wasn't expecting the question.

Temperance, as far as I know, is not a US agent anymore.

He could be working for North Korea or another enemy.

I don't want to betray my country. But then again, if he was removed for being unreliable and replaced by someone more loyal to Grand, he could be on the right side.

There is an election next year, maybe Grand will lose and people like Temperance will be restored to power. My chest tightens with a mix of hope and dread.

"Do you think I can trust him?" I ask.

A frown forms between Ash's brows. "Trust no one."

"Not even you?"

My heartbeat flutters in my throat. And I let my dress slip.

Ash's nostrils flare even as his eyes stay trained on mine.

I take a step closer to him. My lace strapless bra brushes the lapels of his suit.

Ash's hands land on my hips, holding me still, stopping me from getting any closer. Branding my skin with their rough heat.

I lay my hands on his chest and cock my head, a smile tugging at my lips.

"You won't hurt me." My voice comes out a husky purr.

His eyes burn down at me—still totally focused on my face, refusing to drift lower.

"Look how noble you are—most men would have pushed me up against the sink.

" I lick my lips. "Lifted my legs around their hips, and.

.." I smile. "Well, I bet you can use your imagination about what would happen next."
"

Ash moves back, his hands still on my hips, holding me in place—making sure I can't get closer. "I know you want me," I say. He swallows and doesn't deny the truth. "But you won't take me because you are just that good of a man."

"I am not a good man." His voice has never been so deep. So gritty. But his eyes don't drop, his hands don't move.

I shrug. "Have it your way." I go to turn but he's holding me too tight—I can't move. I raise one brow at him. His fingers loosen, and I turn in them so that I'm facing the mirror again. Ash's eyes drop. Get caught on my ass and stay there.

The hunger in his gaze steals my breath. Fuck. I'm playing a very dangerous game. A thrill runs through me. I may have a thing for dangerous games.

It's still warm, the nights in Rome at this time of year cooler than the scorching days but pleasant enough that the light jacket I'm wearing is plenty of coverage.

I choose chunky-heeled thigh-high boots and a pale yellow linen short suit—leather-covered legs served me well last time I almost died. I think they are going to be my uniform moving forward. Practical in a way I never expected.

The ones I have on now are buttery soft, a deep aubergine, and were a gift from the designer whose name I can't remember. But boy will they blow up if my body is found wearing them...assuming I'm not burned to a crisp or swimming with the fishes.

My purse is a cross-body bag—one that if I was blasted across a room would still stay on. Inside is my new phone and hotel key. No compass full of kompromat . Temperance still has that. No weapons. I should have kept one of those scalpels.

"I appreciate you taking the time," Temperance says as we walk through the hotel's garden, our footsteps crunching on the stone pathway. The lighting is subtle, illuminating the sand-colored pebbles but keeping the topiary's black green and the flower beds waving in shadows.

"I wasn't sure if I should trust you," I admit.

"You shouldn't." Temperance's voice edges on teasing but not enough for me to

believe he's joking.

"You sound like Ash."

Temperance glances over at me. "He told you not to trust me?"

"He gave me the age-old advice to trust no one." I wink.

Temperance huffs a laugh. We reach a gate hidden in one of the walls behind a drape of ivy, and he pulls out a key. I shake my head as he unlocks it. "You have all the toys, don't you?"

Temperance looks down at me as he holds the door open, allowing me to pass through first. "Keys are not toys, Angela, they are tools."

"Thanks for the clarification." Sarcasm drips off each word.

We exit onto a quiet street lined with parked cars and darkened residences. Temperance locks the door behind us and then leads me to a motorcycle. Not the same one he had in London, this one is all black, less speed demon and more cruising the Amalfi coast.

He hands me a helmet. Cocooned in its padded embrace, my body wrapped around Temperance's, we zip through the city, avoiding main roads, sticking to sleepy side streets, passing under shuttered windows.

Another ancient European capital he seems to know by heart.

My exhaustion has turned into a nervous energy.

The air chills as we get further from the center of the city. Soon we are in a quiet

residential neighborhood, the road bracketed by thick walls topped with broken glass.

We slow, turning up a stone drive to a large black gate that slides aside as we rumble in front of it. The long drive leads to a modern villa, all stark white and harsh lines.

Temperance parks in front of the large front doors. He helps me off the bike as one of the massive doors eases open. A woman wearing dark slacks and a silk blouse in blood red smiles at me, her eyes friendly.

"Good evening," she says, her accent slight, just the right inflections of Italian gracing the words. She's probably in her fifties with streaks of silver running through her night-black hair. "Please, come in."

I glance around but don't see any obvious security. Which means they are really good because there is no way this place isn't secured with more than broken glass and an elegant hostess.

"Thank you," Temperance says, leading the way into the house. The entryway is large and echoey—marble floors and high ceilings extend into a sitting room with clusters of modern furniture that looks radically uncomfortable. Designed to perch on during a cocktail party.

A wall of glass reflects the room back at us.

My hair is in a slicked-back ponytail that the helmet turned into something much less slick.

I run my hands over it, trying to settle the fly-aways.

Temperance slides back one of the doors, exposing a terrace and darkened swimming pool overlooking a garden smudged in charcoal.

Clusters of furniture dot the deck, more inviting than the sleek pieces inside but still stiff looking. A woman stands from one of the high-backed chairs.

She's hard to see in the low light but vaguely familiar. Her smile broadens the closer we get. "Angela, I'd like to introduce you to Rebecca Levi, the next President of the United States," Temperance says.

Chapter Twenty-One

Rebecca Levi is in her early sixties with curly hair floating just above her shoulders. Her brown eyes sparkle with intelligence warmed by kindness.

I recognize her robin's egg blue pantsuit as Carolina Herrera. A gold watch sparkles on her wrist. A string of pearls circles her neck.

She's smiling at me like we were introduced by a mutual girlfriend rather than Temperance Johnson—whose occupation at this point is unknown. Though I suspect once a spy, always a spy.

We are both seated in high-backed chairs, Temperance the tip of our triangle on a padded bench.

"I appreciate you taking the time to come and meet me," Ms. Levi says.

"To be fair, I didn't know I was meeting you." I give her a smile—sorry, but I'm not going to kiss your ass.

Ms. Levi's own smile widens as if she appreciates the honesty. I had a feeling that's what she would want. She may enjoy men groveling but not women. Especially not women she is going to ask for help.

Whatever she wants from me is dangerous and illegal and we both know it.

The woman who greeted us reappears. "Can I offer you something to drink?"

"I'll have a caffè, Martina," Ms. Levi says. She looks to me.

"The same, thank you."

Temperance stands. "Let me help you," he offers. Martina nods her agreement. They leave us.

Rebecca Levi's full focus falls on me. "I appreciate your trusting Temperance enough to come tonight."

"He seems to have a lot of faith in you," I say, ignoring the implication that I have faith in him.

"Yes, well." She cocks her head to the side, humor lighting her gaze. "He's a smart man." She winks and I can't help but let out a short laugh.

"Ms. Levi?—"

"Call me Rebecca."

"Rebecca, why am I here?" More not beating around the bush. More not bullshitting. There are no men here we need to make sure don't feel threatened by our directness.

"From what I understand, you and President Grand have a tense relationship."

"Tense." I huff a laugh. "We have a mutual destruction pact." Though, at this point, I doubt I could hurt him. My story would be just another scream in the cacophony.

"So you're hoping for a change in the administration?"

"I'd pray for it if I believed in a God who answered such requests."

"I'd like you to help me win." It feels like I just stepped on a landmine and moving could get me blown up. So I don't. "Grand has allies working on his behalf—disinformation is a powerful thing."

"Yes," I agree. "But I'm not sure how I can help with that."

"Truth is—" She opens her hands, gesturing to the sides. Truth is something we can't define.

My smile is brittle. I know she's right and I hate it. Truth is supposed to be ultimate. But reality refuses to play by the rules of evidence.

"Perception has more power." I shrug as if that's a truth I don't mind. It's certainly one I've managed to use to my advantage.

"Grand is in trouble—if he doesn't win, he faces indictments on several fronts, including the emoluments clause and treason.

"I stay very still on my unexploded landmine.

She smiles, soft and kind, like she can see it.

Like she wants to help me off without either of us losing a limb. "You don't look surprised by that."

"I follow the news. The accusations of election interference from Russia have been widely reported." I blink away the images that try to spring forward—the blood and brains of Vladimir Petrov spattered all over my bedroom.

"And I understand there are accusations that Grand is profiting from his position through his businesses." Temperance returns with three little cups brimming with

crème-topped espressos on a tray.

“As you said, facts are not the problem. Belief is.”

Rebecca takes one of the drinks and offers it to me.

“Facts matter in a court of law—a place Grand can end up if he loses the election, one he will surely avoid if he wins.” She sips her espresso before continuing.

The crèma lines her lips for a brief moment before she licks it off.

“He and his allies are working hard to insure that Grand wins this election. And that he won't have to surrender power when his next term expires. If we don't stop him now, we may not get another chance.”

A pit opens in my stomach. I know the man has ambitions of dictatorship—no one working so closely with the Kremlin is going to feel constrained by democratic rules.

People who believe in a government of, by, and for the people don't claim it can't survive without a strongman.

But hearing it said out loud always makes me feel sick.

"Do you honestly think that's possible?" I ask.

"Nothing is impossible." Rebecca smiles at me like that's a good thing. Temperance puts the tray aside and settles back onto his bench. He watches us over the rim of his cup, his silent observation making my skin itch.

I meet his gaze. "What do you think?" I ask.

"I agree with Rebecca. As you know, Grand has been systematically replacing civil servants with loyalists. Many states are changing their election rules at his request. He's a threat to our democracy. And always has been."

Another silence stretches. Wind whispers through the trees and brings the scents of rosemary, lavender, and sun-baked earth up to the veranda.

"Let me ask you a question," I say. They both nod.

"Are either of you officially involved with the US government at this time?" I turn to Rebecca.

"From what I know of you, you're a private citizen—a very wealthy and influential woman with political ambitions, but you currently hold no political office.

Right?" She nods, a subtle smile slipping across her lips as if I'm a student who's proving to be brighter than she'd originally hoped.

"And Temperance, you were recently relieved, shall we say, of your position. "

"That's right," he agrees, one leg casually crossed over the other as if this isn't a conversation about treason.

"So...seems like you don't have any official roles here."

"We need your help." Rebecca skips over my point.

"I'm not going to be able to influence anyone you need influenced.

I'm a woman—so you know his side isn't going to respect anything I say. Grand would gladly see me dead. My power over elections is nonexistent. I'm not even

secure in my role as a government agent. My current handler tried to kill me?—”

Temperance interrupts. “She just wanted to scare you.”

Rage ignites, flourishes, flushes my skin. I glare at Temperance. He appears totally unfazed by my wrath.

"You underestimate yourself, Angela," Rebecca says, her voice calm. "You have ties with English and Jordanian royalty."

I let out a surprised laugh. "Even if I do, which I'm not saying I do. But even if I did, what good would that do?"

They both stare at me. Waiting for their pupil to pick up on whatever it is they are laying down. "What?" I ask, fear starting to tickle up my spine. They wait. "I'm not going to guess." I put my espresso cup down on a side table next to my chair. "You're going to have to spell it out."

“How much do you know about Omar bin Rami’s family?” Temperance asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing. I mean, I know he’s from the royal family of Jordan but not much else. I try not to Google people I...” My voice trails off because my no-Google rule seems suddenly stupid. Painfully stupid and naive.

“Omar’s father is the king,” Temperance says, his voice dropping into a tone I recognize.

Professor Temperance has entered the group chat.

“His mother is American. A former fashion model who has become a powerful advocate for human rights. They are very progressive for the region. The king and

queen of Jordan are powerful allies whose values align with ours. Enough.”

Enough.

“His brother,” Temperance continues, “Crown Prince Elias bin Rami, is the next in line to the throne. And does not share the rest of his family’s values. A devout Muslim, he is a true believer--”

Rebecca interrupts him. “He’s a zealot.”

Temperance tips his head to the side. She’s not wrong, but he wouldn’t use that word. Even here, in this intimate conversation. Always so careful...

“The king of Jordan is sick,” Temperance continues. “Terminal cancer. They are keeping it quiet, but we are sure of our sources.”

“And the queen of England won’t live much longer either,” Rebecca says. “She is in her late eighties—and in poor health. She hasn’t been seen in public since the episode you witnessed. Her son, Prince Edmund, is morally bankrupt. He admires dictators and hates women.”

The media coverage of his divorce swirl through my mind. I was a kid when it happened but remember the scandal. It was a huge story—dominating the magazines in the checkout line for more than a year.

Divorce in the royal family would have been bad enough, but accusations of abuse leveled against the prince brought the media frenzy to a fever pitch. Then the tragic boating accident...that some said wasn’t an accident at all, but rather a way to silence Helena.

Victoria lost her mother and had to grieve with the eyes of the world on her.

Sympathy wells in my chest, the heartache of my own loss echoing behind my breast bone.

“I see,” I say. “Two of the United States’s closest allies are about to experience leadership changes.

Positions now held by monarchs aligned with your.

..vision...” I make eye contact with Rebecca.

She nods, encouraging me to go on. “ ...will be replaced by two men who would support Grand’s aspirations of authoritarianism. ”

“Exactly.” Rebecca’s smile is sad. She’s proud her student grasped the concept but regrets the lesson learned.

“I still don’t understand how I can help,” I say.

“You have connections with the two people who would take those roles if something happened to the next in line,” Temperance explains.

“Excuse me?” I raise my brows at him. Are you suggesting those two men are not going to survive long enough to wear the crown?

"You're going to receive an invitation," Temperance says. I take in a slow steady breath. "From Princess Victoria. To join her at Balmoral Castle in Scotland for a hunt. Omar will be there. A larger party will join you, but you'll have two nights alone with them." I clench my jaw to keep the scream inside me from slipping out. "We'd very much like you to attend."

I wait a beat, turning around his words inside my head, trying to build them into a

message I can understand. "So you want me to go to a party at a castle."

Temperance nods. Rebecca watches me.

"And what do you want me to do there?"

Temperance leans forward, and I get the sense that he's about to push me off the landmine, forcing its explosion. "Listen, learn. And, if the opportunity presents itself, give this to the princess." He reaches inside his suit jacket and pulls out the compass, its bronze cover catching the low light.

"She'll know what to do with it." Temperance doesn't offer me the compass, he just lets it sit in his palm, a silent screaming participant in our conversation.

"Are they even that powerful?" I ask. "I mean, the royal family of England. Aren't they just figureheads? How involved are they in..."

"The royal family," Temperance says, "are briefed on intelligence matters and are very attached to the stability of their nation and its allies."

"Grand is erratic and easy to manipulate," Rebecca says. "He wants to be a dictator. Democracy around the globe would be threatened if the United States fell to authoritarianism. The princess is particularly concerned about the impact of such a regime on women's rights."

"Reginald Grand is a very real threat to the security of the United States and the world at large," Temperance says, his voice a low rasp. He believes what he's saying. Or he's doing one hell of a job acting.

"I don't know that I can help," I say, trying to wriggle out of the request.

"We just want you to speak with the princess, give her the compass," Rebecca says. There is a wrinkle of concern between her brows, and etched around her eyes. "You're already in danger. If Grand dismantles our democracy, you're likely to end up on the list of people he won't let survive."

"Think about that ambulance ride the other night," Temperance says.

"You said they were not trying to kill me, just scare me."

"This time," Temperance says.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The sheets are soft and the room dark, but I can't sleep.

My brain is spinning, pulling up images from the past and throwing them at the walls—my grandmother's voice snarls at me.

Jack Axelrod's hands roam. Vladimir's brain splatters.

The urge I felt to murder Martin wells up, aching and dark.

The word yet bangs a steady beat underneath everything.

Dawn presses against the closed curtains. Temperance brought me back and let me in the garden gate but didn't walk me to my room. I navigated through the dark gardens alone, the marble busts looming at me. The compass a heavy weight in my purse.

Fear and numbness warred inside me. Chris was at my door and didn't ask any questions, I offered no answers. Exhaustion dragged me to bed.

I put the compass in the hotel safe, washed my face, brushed my teeth, changed into my pajamas and climbed into the elegant bed where Temperance greeted me hours ago.

Once my head hit the pillow, thoughts and images exploded, filling my body with the frenetic energy that is the love child of anxiety and a bone-deep need for sleep.

After an indeterminate amount of time, I push off the blankets. Slipping on a light cotton robe with the hotel's logo on the breast, I pad barefoot out of the bedroom into the sitting room, headed for the kitchen.

The giant flower bouquet Omar sent blocks most of the couch but a dark figure behind the blooms catches in my peripheral vision. I let out a choked scream, leaping away from it, and smashing into the wall, knocking a gilded frame painting hard with my shoulder.

"It's me." Ash's voice is muted by the whooshing in my ears. "Sorry."

"Sorry?" I rub at my shoulder. "Why are you sitting in the dark?"

"Didn't want to disturb you."

"Mission not accomplished." I push off the wall, resettling my robe and pushing my hair behind my ears. Adrenaline churns my stomach.

Earlier when I found Temperance in my bedroom, I expected him. Thanks to Ash. But who will warn me about this man's agenda?

Ash stands. The pale beginnings of dawn creeping through the window cast a dull glow over his face—making it paler, grayer than normal. He's wearing all black, the better to hide in the dark like a nightmare.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"I couldn't sleep." I wrap my arms around myself, the adrenaline fading and leaving me chilled and shaky. "I was going to make myself a cup of tea..." I shrug. "Or something. I don't know. I just couldn't stay in bed anymore."

He holds up an arm, gesturing toward the kitchen. Go ahead, I will follow . I turn and continue through the sitting room and into the narrow kitchen, flicking on the light as I enter the space.

It's a galley space behind the living room, designed for staff to fill drink orders for guests.

The cabinets are dark wood, the counters smooth stone the color of the beach in Malibu.

Homesickness hits me like a wave, crashing over me and sucking my mind away for a dragging moment.

I miss Archie so much it feels like a part of my heart is literally missing.

I pull open cabinets, looking for tea—every size glass and mug greet me. Ash finds a kettle and fills it from the filtered water in the fridge. He puts it on one of the electric burners and then opens the cabinet above the stove, pulling out a tea box.

"You want some?" I ask, holding up a mug. He nods his agreement. I place two mugs on the counter and then lean my hip against it. Ash stands in front of the stove, staring down at the kettle.

"Temperance took you to meet Rebecca Levi," Ash says.

"He told you?"

"I followed you," he tells the kettle.

"Always on duty." My tone is teasing, but there is no humor in Ash's gaze when he meets mine.

"What did she want?"

I chew on my lip. His eyes drop to it and then bounce away, finding something fascinating over my left shoulder to examine. "I want to ask if I can trust you, but the question seems so dumb."

"Because you know you can." His eyes come back to mine—the cobalt heated, almost angry. Daring me to deny it. "You saved my life, Angela. That's not the kind of thing I'd ever forget."

I can't look at him anymore. Not when he's staring at me like I'm some kind of hero. Like I could have left him to burn to death and didn't. The truth is I never could have left him. But a different part of me wanted to murder Martin.

Ash steps closer—the distance between us shrinking to an arm's length. He could grab me if he wanted. I could fall into him if I needed. "Angela." That pain is back in his voice.

I look up at him. He's staring down at me. Earnest. A man this big, this dangerous...earnest. It's hard not to believe him. Impossible not to want him.

"Levi thinks she can beat Grand." I pause, lick my lips, trying to find the words that will explain it. "Wants me to..." I take a breath. Ash waits in the silence of my exhale. I shrug. "I don't even know. Talk with the princess. See Omar again."

Ash nods, takes a step back, turns to look at the kettle again. "They will ask for more."

I let out a laugh—jaded and harsh. "Obviously."

He looks over at me and there is a storm brewing behind his eyes. "They will want

you to build a relationship with Omar. To gain his trust. To manipulate him in ways that benefit Levi and hurt Grand." His tone is dull and even, as though he's telling me something of little consequence.

Ash's black sweater is made of something soft—a baby alpaca maybe. Something cuddly. Something very unlike the iceberg standing in front of me. "Don't do this," I say.

He blinks but doesn't respond.

"Don't go robotic on me again," I continue. "Don't tell me they want me to fuck information out of someone without any emotion. It's...bullshit."

His brows raise, surprise touching his gaze. "Do you want to help them?" he asks, his voice more normal, face less masked.

"I think she's better than Grand." Obviously. "But I'm not going to be romantically involved with someone to...spy on him." I shake my head, the idea making my skin crawl. "They didn't ask for that, anyway."

"They won't, not yet. Not until you're more likely to say yes."

I huff a laugh. "Never going to happen."

The kettle whistles and Ash turns to it. He finds a hot mitt and pours the steaming water into our mugs.

"You don't believe me?" I ask.

"I believe you," he says, but there is something hidden behind the words. I believe you believe that, but I also believe you can be manipulated.

"Ash, I'm not some naive girl." His gaze flicks to me and then away. "Excuse me." I stand straighter. "What was that look?" He has the decency to grimace slightly. "Seriously? You think I'm someone who can be manipulated into sleeping with someone to advance someone else's political agenda?"

"No." He shakes his head. "But..."

"But what?" My spine is a straight rod, my arms by my sides, hands fisted.

"Once you are involved, it wouldn't be so bad to share information, would it?"

"Ash Fraser." My voice drops an octave. My nails dig into my palm, anger making me shaky. "You don't know me at all." I turn on my bare heel, pissed and on my way back to bed.

He grabs my elbow. "I'm sorry, that's not what I—" His eyes catch on mine. Ash looks...sad. Like the world is a sick and horrible place and that truth makes him...sad.

I wait, not helping him explain away the implications he made. Ash sighs, his shoulders rounding, head dropping. He's staring at where his hand holds my arm. His fingers relax, fall away. "I'm sorry," he says again.

I want to push him, knock him back, fight him. Make him react. Force him to respond. Instead, I continue back to bed without my tea.

Sleep doesn't come until we are driving to the airport after another day of press. One where Zade was straight up horrified by my face. "You will be the death of me," they promised several times throughout the day as they touched up my makeup.

Nausea had gripped me from when I dressed until I slid into sleep hours later. It was

the kind of tired so deep it no longer felt like exhaustion—it became something new, something sickening.

"We're here." Ash's murmur of a voice is close. Prying open my eyes, I realize my head is on his solid thigh, his suit jacket over me like a blanket. Pushing up to sit, I look around, disoriented.

Outside the tinted windows is tarmac. Another car follows us. It's carrying Zade and Lloyd. My gaze falls on Ash. He watches me like a scientist examining an experiment. What's his hypothesis? Does he think I will break under the strain?

Unfurling my legs, I put my feet on the floor and move back into my seat, crushing Ash's jacket. "Oh, sorry." I pull it out and pass it over to him.

The car rolls to a stop. A private jet looms outside Ash's window. Alesana opens my door and offers me his hand. I take it, needing it. He steadies me as I climb out of the Mercedes. Ash is speaking with Chris, directing him. Alesana escorts me to the aircraft steps.

He follows me up the metal stairs. A woman wearing a pencil skirt, white blouse, and silk scarf tied at her neck gives me a wide smile. "Welcome," she says. "My name is Claire, and I'll be your attendant for the flight to Berlin."

"Hi." I clear my throat. "I'm Angela, nice to meet you."

Her smile widens. "Please, follow me." She leads me into the aircraft. Claire shows me the seats, telling me about the amenities. I'm only half listening when she says: "There is a bedroom in the back."

"I'll take it," I say.

"Of course." She opens a door at the rear of the cabin and steps into the small space.

The bed looks like it's a double with white sheets and several pillows.

It takes up most of the room except for two chairs by one of the windows—pale leather with seatbelts neatly crossed on the seats.

"The bathroom is here, if you'd like a shower once we are underway.

The captain asks that you be seated and belted for take-off and landing. "

"Of course. I'll just." I gesture toward the bathroom. She nods and backs out of the room, closing the door behind her.

The bathroom is small but well-appointed with a shower stall and a well-lit mirror. Which is how I find out that I am a wreck. My hair, which was up in a chignon when I got into that Mercedes, is sticking out on one side—the side that was on Ash's lap. The man could have said something. Or Alesana.

I clean up and then head back to the main cabin. "Alesana," I say. He's sitting with Chris in facing chairs. He looks up and smiles. "Next time I look like a hot mess you need to say something."

He grins. "You've never looked anything but perfect."

I shake my head. "I'm not kidding, Alesana." But I am smiling. "If I was photographed like that..."

"You'd end up on their 'just like us'," Zade says from the next seating area over where they and Lloyd share a section.

"Yeah," I drawl. "It's very everyman to look a wreck while boarding your private jet."

"Well, it's not yours," Zade points out with a wink. It's paid for by the studio—Mary negotiated private transportation for my safety. The studio couldn't refuse.

My phone rings before I can respond. I pull it out of my purse and check the caller ID. Omar. My heart takes flight, skittering for a short moment then pounding. Turning back to the bedroom, I answer. "Hi, Omar," I say, putting warmth into my voice.

I don't look back at Zade but can feel judgment hot on my back as I retreat. "How are you?" Omar asks in that voice of his—the one that almost got me blown up.

"I'm okay," I say. "Thank you for the flowers, they were beautiful." I walk back toward the bedroom, ignoring Zade's dramatic throat clearing.

We do not date men who get us blown up. Or that presidential candidates want us to manipulate for reasons to be determined.

"How are you?" I ask as I close the door behind me.

"Fine, mild concussion but nothing serious."

"Good," I say. "I'm glad."

"I am so sorry this happened. I was having a lovely time."

A laugh escapes me as I sit in one of the chairs next to the window. "Explosions will really put a damper on a first date."

Omar's laugh is rich and somewhat irresistible. He's not an iceberg. "I've been trying

to reach you for days. I'd really like to see you again, Angela."

My throat tightens. I've had plenty of time to prepare for this question and yet I have no answer. "That's hard, Omar. I mean, I'm traveling for another week and then I have other projects lined up. I'm not...easy."

"I'm not interested in easy. I'm interested in you." Well, when you put it like that... "It's my understanding you have another week of the European tour and then a break before the Pacific leg begins."

"Have you been reading US Weekly ?"

Omar laughs. "I don't know where Rashid gets his information but I trust him implicitly."

"I see." The engines start up, vibrating the room.

"Meet me in Scotland—join me at Balmoral Castle at the invitation of the the Duke and Duchess of Balmoral." There is a smile in his voice. "Benjamin and Victoria would love to see you again."

Temperance and Rebecca said this invite would come from the princess. Omar did something they apparently didn't expect. "I don't know," I say.

"The security is very tight," Omar promises. "And, of course, you'd be welcome to bring your own team."

A tinny voice comes through unseen speakers. "This is your captain..."

"I have to go," I say. "My flight is about to take off."

"Just think about it, please."

"You sound good when you beg," I admit.

Omar laughs again, and it sends tingles over my skin. I do like him. Would it be so bad to share information ... Ash's question floats through my mind.

Ash, who never laughs. Ash, who looks at me with pain in his eyes. Ash, who I want to shove as much as kiss. Ash, infuriating and yet somehow safe. Ash, who I need to get out of my head.

"I will think about it," I promise.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I do think about Omar's offer. I think about it at the premiere in Berlin, through the days of press. Every time another bouquet of flowers arrives from him. When Ash's hand brushes my hip in a crowded elevator to move me behind him.

I think about it when I'm on the phone with my attorney and my financial advisor. Most of my assets are owned by corporations that I, in turn, own. Even my houses in Malibu and LA are owned by my LLC. "That doesn't mean they are safe," Tamara Delgado, my lawyer, says.

"Right now is the time to secure your situation."

"What do you recommend?" I ask, keeping my voice neutral.

I'm pretending we are not talking about something unthinkable and yet historically so much more likely than the freedoms I've known my whole life.

But my rights are relatively new—women didn't have access to credit in the United States until the seventies.

That's only fifty years. Less than a lifetime.

It took a century of fighting to get to where we are, and the Grand administration is rolling it back in a matter of years.

"We can place your stocks, bonds, and a big chunk of cash in a trust that we establish

offshore,” Tamara says. “The Cayman Islands and Switzerland are both good options.”

“Okay.” My lips are numb. I stare out the window of my hotel room.

It’s early here, the day gray and gloomy.

Raindrops patter against the glass. I focus on them, watching the individual path each one chooses after slapping the glass, the way each zig-zags down the smooth surface, following gravity’s pull in its own unique way.

“We can also set up foreign entities to own the property. Really, moving as much offshore as possible is vital.”

“What about Violet Glamour?” I ask.

Tamara clears her throat. “If we establish residency for you abroad...”

Tamara keeps talking but the words stop making sense. It’s like I’m underwater. I can hear the sounds she’s making but they are distorted. Inside my head Ash’s voice reminds me that it’s easier to kill you outside of the United States.

“We can also consider relying on male family members or associates as nominal account holders or property owners, ensuring you have control through enforceable private contracts.”

I take a breath, let it out. “That’s kind of what Mary’s doing,” I say. “But she’s going a step further and getting married.”

“It’s a strategy that does provide a lot of protection and allows you to continue living in the United States. Do you have someone in mind?”

“I hate the idea of it,” I say. “Depending on someone like that.” I’m not one of those girls who grew up dreaming of a white wedding—I longed for Oscar’s accolades, not a husband. I wanted freedom. Still do...

Tamara sighs. It’s the first time I’ve heard any emotion from her on this topic.

She’s in her fifties, black, and at the top of her field.

This is a woman who busts balls for a living.

Like Mary, she sounds like this is all business—and that bitching and moaning about it to her clients isn’t going to change a single fucking thing.

But that sigh. Fuck. I felt it in my bones.

“I understand,” she says, her voice softer.

Gentler. “You don’t have to decide right now, but I think it’s important for you to start to think about this—while it’s possible nothing will happen at the federal level, and you’ll be fine with your California residency, I’d hate to bet your fortune on that outcome. ”

“Of course,” I say. “I understand.”

“Just think about it.”

“I will,” I promise.

I do think about it. I think about Omar’s invitation to Scotland, Rebecca Levi’s intelligent eyes, and if I need to find a safe man to marry while going over my next projects with Mary—I have one lined up but scripts are pouring in.

"There is a lot of awards talk around The Benefactor ," Mary says with glee in her voice. "Everyone wants to work with you."

I'm thinking about it all when Synthia and I finally reach each other after a dozen missed connections. Ash and I are driving back to my hotel after a long second day of press. One during which Alesana mentioned a hair was out of place and then winked at me.

Zade slapped his brawny shoulder and then pretended their hand had been gravely injured. It made me laugh. The whole thing reminded me I'm not drowned yet.

Ash is sitting next to me now. Our pinkies are nowhere near each other. "You seem better," Synthia says, the connection distant—like she's in a cave talking to me through a tin can.

"You mean I didn't burst into tears at the sound of your voice."

She laughs. "We like improvement. Have you been working out?"

"Yes, Mom. Every morning." As long as I didn't spend the night in clandestine meetings or fighting for my life. "But I'm looking forward to being back in regular training with you."

"Mary tells me you're going to need swordplay training. And horseback riding lessons."

"Yes, should be fun. I rode when I was a kid." Before my parents died...my mind tries to drag me back to those sun-soaked memories, but I block them. The joy hidden there is drenched in sorrow I can't face right now.

"Totally, I've got some good people to introduce you to. You're back next week,

right?"

"I'm not sure, I was invited to Scotland after this leg is over—so I may be a few days delayed returning to LA."

"Scotland? Who invited you there?"

I shift in my seat, turning to look out the window, blocking Ash from my vision.
"Omar."

"The prince who nearly got you killed?"

"When you put it like that..."

"How would you put it?" Synthia's tone isn't playful. She's pissed. Pissed I'm considering becoming more involved with a man who has proven to be dangerous.

"He didn't do anything."

"Except abandon you in a burning building."

"He was unconscious. His...assistant, estuary, whatever that word is that means assistant but is all royal. But Rashid pulled him out. Nothing personal. Ash wouldn't have gone back for Omar after saving me."

Synthia lets out a frustrated sigh. "Angela, there are lots of men in the world. Why put yourself in danger for this one?"

"He is a prince," I joke. Every little girl's dream...one my grandmother would have refused to let me participate in even if my heart had led me that direction. No one will save you. Always be ready to run.

"Who lives on the other side of the world. You broke up with Julian because of these same issues; you think a prince has more flexibility in his schedule?" Synthia asks, always ready with the logic. "You barely know him. Don't do it." Synthia's advice never comes sugar-coated.

I chew on my lower lip. She's right. Of course. But she doesn't have all the information. And I can't give it to her.

"How is Archie?" I ask, changing the subject.

"Speaking of princes," Synthia says. "You spoil that dog."

"Oh, really? You're the one who got him hooked on Wagyu."

Synthia gasps. "It's the healthiest meat for him."

"I'm not even allowed red meat," I point out.

"You, my dear, are not a dog."

The hotel comes into view, a scrum of photographers surrounding the entrance. "I have to go, it was great to hear your voice."

"Same. I'm glad you're feeling better. Come home. Skip the prince."

"I'll think about it," I promise again.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Hannah sits on the couch in my suite wearing a black sweatsuit, a bowl of popcorn in her lap. She's flicking through the movie options. I settle next to her, an open bottle of wine in one hand and two glasses in the other. "What are you in the mood for?" she asks.

"Comedy," I say. "Nothing to do with contraception or women's rights."

Hannah huffs a laugh. "Exhausted with the topic."

"Yes."

"Have you talked to Lauren yet?" she asks, referencing my financial advisor.

"No, but I spoke with Tamara. And she spoke with Lauren. I'll meet with her when I'm home." I place the wine bottle and glasses on the coffee table. "What are you going to do?" I ask, looking over at Hannah.

She's not wearing any makeup tonight, and the shadows under her eyes suggest she's sleeping about as well as I am—which is to say terribly. "I'm not sure. Mary is getting married."

I nod. "I know."

I start to pour the wine. A knock at the door interrupts as I finish.

Glancing at my phone, I see a missed text from Ash asking if he can speak to me for a minute. "Come in," I yell. Hannah holds up the bowl of popcorn, offering Ash some as he enters.

"No, thanks," he says. "I just wanted to confirm tomorrow's schedule."

"You should probably be talking to Lloyd then, you know I'm just the puppet and that man pulls my strings." Ash does not smile at my joke. His sense of humor is hard to find. Apparently, he's only into homicide jokes.

"Do you want to go for a run in the morning?" Ash asks.

"Have you been talking with Synthia?" I sit back into the couch, taking my wine glass with me.

Ash's eyes drop to it briefly; no obvious judgment crosses his expression, but I manage to feel it nonetheless. I can have a glass of wine or two with a friend while watching a movie. There isn't a stick up my ass, unlike some giants I know.

"Your normal training schedule would have you running tomorrow morning, but Lloyd has you at the gym. I thought you might like to go outside."

My gaze flicks to the window—dark now. I've never been to Berlin before and have had no chance to explore.

I could be out there right now, dining with Zade, Lloyd, and other members of the cast, but my skin feels raw, my battery for dealing with people low.

Running through the city in the early morning before it's fully awake would be really nice, though.

"Yeah," I say, turning back to Ash. "That actually sounds great. Thanks."

"Of course. I'll meet you at six?" His eyes flick to my wine again.

I cock my head at him. I know you're judging me.

I'm just standing here waiting for a reply.

"Let's make it six thirty," I say. "Want to join us?" I turn to ask Hannah.

"I only run when being chased, but thanks." She smiles at me.

"Okay, I'll be off for the rest of the evening. Alesana will be at the door. You can always reach me on my cell."

"Hopefully there won't be any security issues as we watch..." I turn to the screen where Hannah has cued up Elf . I laugh.

"Christmas is only a hundred and three days away," Hannah says, raising her chin in faux defensiveness.

I laugh. "That's specific. Is it true?"

"I have no idea," Hannah admits, reaching for her wine glass. I laugh again.

"It's ninety-three days away," Ash says. We both turn to him. He nods. "Good evening, ladies." Then he leaves.

"He's something, huh?" Hannah says.

"Because he knows how many days until Christmas? For all we know he made that

up."

"We could do that math," Hannah points out.

"I'd rather just watch the movie."

We skip the research and stick with the comedy, laughing so hard that tears well in our eyes.

And I drink more wine than I should. So when my alarm goes off at 5:45 a.m. I'm in no mood for its beeping bullshit.

But I get up. Because I didn't reach this place—living this life—by ignoring the promises I made myself.

When Ash knocks on my door at 6:29 a.m. I am dressed in my running shorts and T-shirt, hat brim pulled low. Sneakers laced. Ear buds in. Phone strapped to my low back. Water bottle in hand. A cup of coffee and a banana in my gut.

Ash is wearing the same black sleeveless top and shorts he did when I threatened to kill him. His tattoos draw my eye, and we stand there in silence for a moment longer than is polite. Or normal. Ash just lets me look. Not talking. Any judgment silent.

The tattoos look like snakes or vines. I take a step closer, reaching out to his bare bicep, as if the feel of the inked designs against my fingertip will tell me what they are, why they are there. What they mean to him.

Goose bumps break across his skin at my touch and electricity surges through my veins. The place where our skin meets is a live wire in the grid between us.

The brim of my hat narrows my view of the world—cutting Ash off at his throat.

I resist the urge to crouch down and look closer at the tattoos on his thighs.

A twin urge wants to pull up his shirt and see if the same design curls around his chest and licks down his abs. Is it all one image? One pattern?

I do let my fingers trace one of the designs up to his shoulder, my face tipping to follow their course. The inked skin feels the same as the bare. Ash clears his throat and I pull my hand back, suddenly hotly aware of how fucking crazy that was.

"Sorry," I say, stepping away. The brim of my hat still blocks his face. A blush I don't even try to control heats my cheeks.

"Thank you," Ash says, surprising me. I raise my gaze to his. He's looking down at me, his eyes soft. Vulnerable. "Thank you for saving my life."

I blink at him. It seems so out of context. One second I'm molesting the man's tattoos and the next he's...oh. He's taking a step toward me. His hands find my hips. It's not the professional touch he usually uses. This isn't the flat-handed pressure of a security agent moving his charge.

Ash's fingers grip, grasp. My shirt scrunches, the edge of his hand coming into contact with naked flesh. Electric shocks rock from the contact. He's holding the same place he did in the bathroom when I teased him. But this isn't the same.

Ash stares down at me, his eyes bright under the brim of his black cap. I take in a stuttering, surprised breath. He looks left then right, checking the hallway. I can't break my gaze from his throat. Can barely resist the urge to lick from his tatted collar bone right up to his?—

"Linda Whitmore is in a car waiting for you outside," Ash says as his focus comes back to me. "She wants to talk." My brain stutters to catch up. His fingers tighten,

bringing all my awareness to the places where his skin touches mine, making it almost impossible to think.

Ash is staring down at me, and I'm not sure if I'm supposed to speak or grab the back of his neck and climb the man like a tree to bite his lip. He closes his eyes, and his fingers relax. He steps back, taking all his electric warmth with him.

I get a breath in and his words sink through the haze hovering over my brain. "What does she want?" I ask. "And why did you grab me like that to say it?"

His eyes come back to mine, and they are so sharp I'm almost surprised I don't start to bleed. "She wants something from you. I've never worked with someone so unprofessional. That woman is dangerous. And I shouldn't have." He swallows. "Grabbed you. I just—" He swallows. "I'm sorry."

"Just what?" It comes out a whisper, like if I say it too loud I'll scare away the answer.

"You." If he clenches his jaw any harder he'll crack teeth. His eyes flick to his arm where I caressed his skin like a freak.

"Oh. God, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..." What was I thinking? My voice sounds small. Pathetic. Like I'm some embarrassed, rejected teen.

"No." He closes his eyes for a long moment. Ash's chest rises as he pulls in a deep breath. "I'm sorry. That was unprofessional."

"Well," I say, trying to inject some lightness into my tone. "I did touch your tattoo first."

He flinches like my words hurt. "That's no excuse. I am sorry."

"You're having trouble resisting me." I say it teasingly, so that he can scoff at my words and we can get back to our regularly scheduled program of silent judgment and annoying client.

But he doesn't scoff. His eyes land on me so hard that I almost fall. The want in his gaze tears at my chest. My heart pounds, the sound of it filling my senses.

Ash steps back and turns his body toward the elevators. I'm supposed to move out now and lead the way. So I do, my movements wooden. We walk to the elevator in silence, our footfalls quiet on the carpeted floor, Ash following me like the good security agent he is...

Inside the elevator we stand like we always do—Ash in front of me, blocking the doors. The small space seems to shrink with each passing floor. The air between us sparks so hard it almost hurts. Hurts so good.

"I wasn't supposed to tell you," Ash says.

For a brief, wild moment I think he means he wasn't supposed to tell me how much he wants me with those looks, and that grasping touch. But of course, he means about Linda. "I appreciate it."

"You saved my life. I owe you."

"Good." I didn't mean to say it out loud, but Ash seems to do something to my inhibitions.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rain mists the car window as Linda Whitmore drives.

Her helmet of hair is under one of those plastic hoods—the kind of thing women wore to church when I was teenager to protect their curls.

They'd come into the diner where I worked, scented of floral perfume and summer rain, the plastic hoods shedding droplets onto the entry rug and dripping a trail to their table.

The busboy, Fernando, would have to mop them up so other people didn't slip.

Linda's is dotted with rain, as is her trench coat. No American flag pin on its lapel. So more subtle than when we met before, but she was parked right in front of the hotel, leaning against her black car for all the world to see when Ash and I came out the front door.

"Fucking idiot," Ash muttered under his breath. We ignored her and broke into a slow jog, the rain pitter-pattering on us, as we left the protection of the hotel's awning.

Linda was smart enough not to say anything. But I felt her stare on my back. And I heard her car start. Ash and I ducked down the first side street we came to and waited for her to join us in the cobblestoned alley.

She stopped next to us and rolled down the window. "Get in," she commanded. As if we were not waiting for her. It's like she graduated spy school from Cliché

University. I climbed into the passenger seat while Ash got in the back.

Her wipers swipe slowly, brushing away the misty rain. I wait for her to speak because I have nothing nice to say. "Do you have the compass?" Linda asks as she pulls back onto a main boulevard, lined with shuttered cafes and large leafy trees.

"No," I lie. "It was lost in the explosion."

Her head whips toward me, a flash of fear in her eyes. God, she's bad at this. She turns forward again and clears her throat. "How could you be so careless?" she asks.

My breath comes out a short, amused huff. "When was the last time you were knocked unconscious and forced to flee a burning skyscraper? Trust me, all you're worried about is survival."

"I'm always thinking about my country," she says, her tone haughty. Ignorant.

"I was attacked afterwards, you know? In the ambulance."

"Yes, I'm aware."

"Do you know what happened there? Who is after me?"

"I don't know." She shrugs. "Your film has angered a lot of people." Linda sneers the word film like it's a porno. "Your premiere in LA was also attacked. When you go against God, he stops looking out for you."

I turn to stare at her profile. Her nose is too perfect, something she might have picked out at a surgeon's office.

And her forehead doesn't move enough—botox.

God's plan for her doesn't seem to be the one she wants to stick to; not sure why she'd have a problem with people choosing not to become impregnated every time they get laid.

The small pill I popped this morning comes into my mind's eye as it has so many times since I first read the script for *The Benefactor*. What would my life be like without it? How many lives have been saved, how many lives made so much fuller, because of the choice it gave women?

I'm trapped in a car with a woman who couldn't hold the position she does if it wasn't for the war waged by women like Katherine McCormick.

If it weren't for the sacrifices of the Puerto Rican women who risked their health in the trials to bring the pill to market.

Women who were lied to by the scientists funded by McCormick.

Fuck, the world is a twisted, messed-up place.

"Aren't you supposed to be looking out for me?" I ask. "Or is God my handler now?"

Her eyes narrow, the skin around them not wrinkling like it should.

I need a run, not this utter and complete bullshit. My nails dig into my palms.

"You better get with the program," Linda says like some twisted after-school special. "You're playing a dangerous game?—"

"It's not a game, you stupid cunt." The words pop out, and I can't quite believe it. Linda's face flushes and her lips part from a surprised breath. Ash makes a choking sound from the back seat. "This is my life." I'm seething, rage bubbling out of every

pore.

"You want to kill me? Then fucking do it.

But just know that if you pull that shit again, I'll be the one in your bedroom in the dark.

You won't see me coming. You'll be fucking dead before your eyes even flutter open.

And are you so sure which gates you'll end up at—God's or his fallen angel's dominion? "

I just threatened the life of a US intelligence agent and suggested she might be going to Hell. That might have been a bad idea. Shit. But I'm too far gone now.

"Did you just threaten me?" Linda asks, her voice filled with righteous outrage.

"All I did was level with you. Next time you want a meeting with me, don't be parked in front of my hotel, advertising our connection.

Unless you are actually trying to expose me.

But don't forget." I pause for dramatic effect.

It works; she takes her eyes off the road to watch me.

"I have enough shit on your man to ruin him.

It will ruin me too, but I'm getting really close to giving no fucks.

" I also seriously doubt anything I say could diminish his power.

"Did you just threaten the President of the United States?" she asks.

"Watch out!" Ash yells. Linda and I both face forward where a truck's brake lights are blaring.

Linda slams the brakes, but we ram the delivery truck hard enough to explode the air bags.

My face hits it hard, blood exploding from my nose and stars dancing across my vision as white powder thickens the air. Fuck!

My door is ripped open and Ash is there. He punches the air bag away and leans over me, his chest pressed to mine as he unclips my seatbelt. Then he's yanking me out of the car. Blood wets my lips and when I suck in a breath, it coats my tongue.

I cough as Ash drags me to the sidewalk. Then we're in a narrow alleyway between two cafes. The rain mist is cold on my heated skin. I stumble next to Ash, his firm grip on my bicep doing a lot to hold me up. "We couldn't risk being seen," he says.

"Or me answering her question about threatening the President. That's illegal, right?"

Ash pulls us into a recessed doorway, pressing me against it, his big body blocking the street behind him.

He stares down at me, his brow furrowed the way brows are supposed to be when you're thinking, or feeling. Not that I have a problem with botox. I'm just upset. Tears are suddenly stinging my eyes and I sniffle blood. Fuck.

He whips off his shirt. The tattoos are all one image.

He holds the shirt to my nose, staunching the blood.

Between his pecs is a black rose; thorny vines twist away from it.

More blossoms bloom along their treacherous lengths.

The vines soften the farther they get from his heart, turning into the textured, abstract lines that I've seen before.

I follow one tentacle down to the line of his shorts. Fuucckk.

"Angela." Ash's voice pulls my eyes back to his face. I blink up at him. "You okay?" he asks. Big hands cup my face, that gentle touch he uses with me sometimes. The one that makes every inch of me ache for him to be rough.

"Yeah," I say.

"Do you think your nose is broken?"

I prod at it gently through his T-shirt. It hurts, but is not excruciating. "I don't think so."

His hands drop away and he leans back to look toward the main street. "I don't think anyone saw us, or at least they won't be able to recognize us. But we need to do something about the CCTV footage."

He pulls his phone out and swipes it open, pressing a name to make a call. I watch him, watch the vines ripple with each movement. They don't reach up his neck or down onto his wrists—so they are all hidden under professional clothing.

When the person on the other line picks up, Ash starts speaking in German—it's a guttural, hard language with a lot of action in the front of the mouth. I've never played a character with a German accent, but I auditioned for one years ago and spent

hours practicing the r's, similar to French...

Memories flash of repeating "zis area is very close to my vork" in my car stuck in LA traffic, watching my mouth in the rearview mirror to make sure my corner action was small enough.

That Angela...Stacy...would kill to be where I am now. On a world tour for her critically acclaimed film with offers lined up. She never could have guessed the cost. But she would have been willing to pay just about anything.

I've spent so much time fighting this situation, resenting it. Feeling helpless. Maybe I need to recognize I'm getting what I want. And be willing to take it.

Chapter Twenty-Six

A very similar misty rain thickens the air in Scotland as we drive on a windy road. Alesana is at the wheel of the SUV, which seems too large for the narrow roads, with Ash and me in the back.

Chris has returned to LA since he was supposed to have the next two weeks off. His replacement—a woman named Sheila—didn't join us since security was being provided by the Crown. The Crown . What a crazy way to put it.

My nose wasn't broken, and the swelling only lasted a day.

The bruising is mild and Zade covered it easily.

Well, they weren't easy about it. Zade was merciless about what the fuck happened.

They didn't believe me at first, but Ash backing up my story about slipping in the bathroom and smashing into the door convinced them. Ash's word is gold for Zade, I guess.

Ash being more believable than me dings my ego. I'm the professional here. Though, as I glance over at him, the gold-green Scottish hills undulating beyond his stoic profile, I remember that the man is a professional too. But it doesn't feel like there are many lies left between us.

Stone walls etch gray lines in the green landscape—as if the cloud-rich sky dragged a finger across the hillsides. It's gorgeous, otherworldly.

We enter a village, the buildings stone and medieval looking. If it weren't for the people walking around in modern clothing, I could imagine I'd been transported back in time.

My hand drops to the space between Ash and me, hoping he will put his there too. So that I can feel that sparking connection. This whole trip has me unmoored.

I made the decision so quickly. Called Omar and told him I'd come. Rashid, Ash, and Lloyd arranged the rest. And now here I am. Lloyd and Zade went home with Chris. I'm only here for three days. I can do my own makeup. Decide on my own outfits.

Zade and Lloyd did help me pack, though. By which I mean, they packed for me while I sat on my bed smiling, pretending I wasn't freaking out about the decision I'd made to throw myself into this mess. To choose the game rather than be a pawn in it.

I'm not here just for Omar—to embed myself with him to help Rebecca Levi. I need to talk to Victoria. She's the intended recipient of the kompromat on Grand. What do they even hope to do with it? His supporters can't be swayed by proof of corruption. They only believe what he tells them.

My threats to Linda echo through my mind. Doubts that I could actually do anything swamp me. The hopelessness that's haunted me for the past few years seizes my chest.

What could possibly take him down? And what is Victoria supposed to do with the compass? She didn't try to create a moment to take it off me at the Globe Theatre. But she's obviously okay with my invite here, which seems sure to provide greater opportunity for a hand-off.

Victoria's grandmother is out of the hospital. Dehydration is not to be fucked with, but the queen was apparently fully recovered. Or at least as recovered as a woman of

her “advanced years” can be.

Elliot Kendricks’s appearance at my hotel in London made me suspicious of the dehydration story.

But he could have just been using it as a way to speak with me.

Could have even been sent by Temperance to not so subtly let me know he was no longer my handler...

he could have done that through Ash, though.

We leave the village. Trees grow taller, crowding the road. Signs for the castle appear on the roadside—directing tourists to the attraction. Parking lots crowd the side of the road, empty now, since the royal family is in residence.

A single lane bridge with green wrought iron railings spans a river running fast and hard, brown and frothing. On the other side the gatehouse of Balmoral Castle greets us. It looks like a lovely English country home in its own right.

A guard speaks with Alesana and then we’re through the gate. Our wheels crunch on the long drive as it serpentine through manicured woods. It looks like someone has gone through the trees and cleared out the underbrush, gentling the forest floor.

Balmoral Castle appears. Silver-gray turrets, ivy-flocked walls, golf-course-green lawn. Pewter clouds roil behind it. A man in a tuxedo waits with his hands behind his back next to the imposing wooden doors. A butler out of a film.

I take in a deep, fortifying breath as we roll to a stop.

The man comes down the few steps to open my door. His face is long and wizened.

His hair is black and streaked through with silver—the same color as the castle’s stone walls.

“Welcome to Balmoral Castle, my name is Hamish Cunningham,” he says in a rich Scottish brogue while offering a white-gloved hand.

I accept it, a warm smile taking over my face. "Thank you."

"I will be at your disposal for the length of your stay."

Alesana and Ash confer on the other side of the car as Hamish escorts me to the steps. A young man passes us, dressed in a navy suit with a tartan tie. I glance back to see him in front of Alesana, offering to take a black duffel bag. Alesana smiles down at him, shaking his head.

My eyes flick to Ash and snare on his, waiting there for me. The connection jolts my head forward.

Hamish leads me over the threshold into an echoing room. It's like something out of a museum...or castle. The floors are an intricate parquet. A grand staircase wider than Ash is tall winds away to a second story.

Stag heads line the walls, and light falls from tall windows halfway up the staircase.

There are three life-sized marble statues.

Two are shrouded women set into nooks built for them.

And at the center of the room, with the staircase curving around him, there’s a man with a walking stick, his hand resting on the head of a hunting dog.

I follow Hamish up the steps to the second floor. The walls are sage green, the carpeting more of the tartan the young man wore—a gray base with overchecks of black and red. More stag heads and oil paintings of disapproving royals line the walls.

Homey.

A door opens in front of us and Omar steps out. Seeing me, his face lights up. I mirror his expression by instinct but am surprised to find I genuinely am thrilled to see him. Warmth blooms in my chest, excitement dances over my skin.

"Angela." Omar's voice is smooth and deep. He doesn't hesitate, comes right at me, opening his arms, inviting me into his space.

I step into them and his lips brush the top of my head as my cheek rests against his chest. Omar's sweater is deliciously soft, the muscle underneath wonderfully solid. "It's so good to see you."

"You too," I say, easing back. He moves away, but drops his gaze to mine. "I'm so glad you decided to join us."

Omar is dressed casually in brown slacks and a sweater in greens and blues.

His black hair is pushed back, dark eyes shining at me.

He looks so handsome, so royal, even in his casual clothing.

And the way he's looking at me...like I'm the center of the world right now, the only thing he wants to look at even in this incredible place.

My heart flutters at the attention, at the focus, at the bald want. He's pursuing me and not even a little afraid to show it. "Thank you," I say. "It's hard to turn down an

invitation to a royal castle."

"So my evil plan is working." He winks.

I grin at him. "Something like that."

We're standing close, the space between us subtly intimate. My eyes roam over his face; there is no sign that only two weeks ago he was the victim of an explosion. That he was knocked unconscious and carried out by his equerry.

The bruises on my throat have faded to nothing. My burn is still healing, though, the bandage wrapped tight.

Footsteps behind me draw Omar's gaze over my shoulder. I turn to follow his attention. Alesana is standing there—looking normal-sized in this giant hallway.

Ash appears at the top of the stairs. His eyes slide over me and roam to Omar. Ash's expression remains unchanged, as if we mean the same to him. Two figures on a chessboard, neither evoking emotion.

"This is Alesana," I say, introducing him to Omar, turning slightly so the two men can meet. "And you remember Ash?" I ask as he reaches us.

Omar smiles, steps forward to shake hands with Alesana, who offers a polite, professional smile. "Hopefully we won't need you," Omar says. "But I'm glad you're here."

"Nice to meet you," Alesana says with none of his usual warmth. I get the sense he doesn't like Omar. But then again, no one who cares about me seems to want me around him.

Ash takes Omar's offered hand. "Your Highness."

Hamish has basically melted into the wall at this point. It takes me a second to place him next to a random chair—dark wood with an intricately carved straight back. Clearly a decoration not meant to be actually sat in. Though with this long of a hallway, it's possible people might need a respite.

"I'm sure you want a moment to freshen up," Omar says. "Will you meet us in the drawing room for tea? Hamish can show you where it is when you're ready."

"Yes, thank you."

Omar joins us the rest of the way to my room and then leaves me with a chaste kiss on the cheek. Hamish comes in to show me around.

A canopy bed that looks like something out of a period drama rests against one wall. Made of dark wood with thick curtains and decorative fringe, it's imposing. A fire crackles in the hearth across from it, two armchairs facing the flames. Space yawns between the sitting area and bed.

Hamish takes Alesana and Ash with him when he leaves to show them their rooms next door.

The warmth of the fire does not reach the bathroom. I take a few minutes to touch up my makeup and breathe. When I come back out, Ash is standing by one of the large windows looking out onto the gardens beyond. He turns to look at me. "Ready?"

I nod. He starts toward the door, the air between us even colder than the bathroom's chilled tiles. "Ash," I say, not following.

He turns, the fire at his back, flickering light outlining him. "Yes?"

"You think this is a terrible idea?"

"I'm not sure what the idea is," he answers, his tone implying that's fine by him. He's just the muscle. Why would I share my plans with him?

"I just...need to..." I can't find the words. Ash doesn't help, refuses to fill in the blanks for me. His expression remains unchanged, the fire behind him a stark contrast to his cold gaze. "Don't look at me like that," I say, my tone turning frustrated. Annoyed.

His head cocks slightly, as if he's trying to find a new angle to see me from, one that he can understand.

"Ash!" I hiss-whisper at him, rushing to close the space between us, stopping short a foot shy of touching him. "Come on."

He's looking down at me, blank. Empty. Cold. "I'm here to protect you, Angela. What else can I do for you?"

Tears clog my throat and burn behind my eyes. I need to pull it together. "That's how you want to play this?" I ask, keeping all the emotion trying to spill down my cheeks out of my voice. "Fine." I wrap myself in the cold mist of indifference and lift my chin. "Fine."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I let out a big laugh—only half fake. His Royal Highness, Benjamin Arthur—who insists I call him Ben—is charming and, after adding whiskey to my tea “for the chill”, has been telling a story about the time when he and Omar first went riding together.

It ended with both of them in the mud and their horses returning to the stables unmounted.

"The queen was not amused," Omar says, playing the straight man to Ben's boisterous orator.

Victoria and I laugh into our spiked tea.

These three are clearly good friends. And the fact that I'm the only other guest is wild.

This is an intimate evening before the rest of the hunting party is set to join us tomorrow afternoon.

I'm basically on a sleepover double date. The only non-royal here.

Though it's always been said that celebrities are America's royalty.

The sitting room is huge with several seating areas—the carpet is tartan, the walls dark green.

A fire rages in the ornate fireplace. It gives off an intense heat.

I've stripped off my wool sweater and am down to a button-up shirt and jeans, my shoes kicked off, legs tucked up onto the couch—mimicking Victoria's pose.

She's wearing black slacks and a thin cashmere sweater that brings out the blue in her eyes. Blonde hair up in an elegant chignon, pearls circling her willowy neck, the princess is effortlessly graceful. "Do you ride?" she asks as our laughter fades.

"Not in a long time." I sip my tea. "But I'll be getting training for my next role."

"Oh, what is it?" she asks, tone eager.

"Promise not to tell anyone," I tease. She grins, her smile whiskey wide.

"Of course."

"We can be trusted with state secrets," Ben says, in a faux serious tone. He's wearing pleated evergreen khakis and a camel hair sweater vest—somehow he makes it work.

"The Last Guardian . It's a sci-fi thriller with lots of sword fights and horseback riding."

"Sounds fun!" Victoria says.

"I'm looking forward to it."

"You should have Omar help you with the sword fighting," Victoria says. "He's a fencing champion."

"Is he?" I say, turning my attention to him.

His dark eyes twinkle at me. "Victoria overestimates my skill."

"Nonsense," Ben says. "He was a champion at Oxford."

"You went to Oxford together?" I ask.

"Yes," Victoria answers. "Omar introduced me to Ben."

"But she refused to date me," Ben adds. "Rejected me outright." Victoria laughs. "It wasn't until she saw me shirtless in Dark Symphony that she deigned to accept my advances."

Ben refers to his breakout role—a coming-of-age film about college-age kids in London that was critically acclaimed. And had a ton of sex in it. My memories of the film are hazy, but I do remember Ben's sculpted body slick with sweat in a dance scene.

Victoria shakes her head. "Absolutely untrue. We were friends. And I'd seen you without a shirt on plenty of times before I agreed to go on a date with you." She turns to me. "He was too much of a player for me."

Ben shifts from where he's standing by the fire to sit next to his wife, putting an arm around her. "I've aged like fine whiskey, wouldn't you say, lass?" He uses an excellent Scottish brogue. Victoria laughs again, leaning into him.

They seem so normal. Cute. When I glance over at Omar, he's smiling at me as if to say: We could be like that. You and me. Happy, normal royals.

Hamish materializes behind the couch. "Your highness." He bows to Victoria. "The queen is on the phone."

Surprise flits across Victoria's face. It doesn't look like she was expecting a call from her grandmother. "Okay." She sits up, Ben's arm falling to her waist. "I'll take it in my office."

Hamish bows and moves away. "Excuse me," Victoria says, the skin around her eyes tight with worry as she slips her loafers back on.

"Of course, I hope everything is okay," I say, my own feet coming to the rug.

She gives me a nervous smile. "I'm sure it is, thank you." Victoria hurries out of the room. Ben watches her go.

"How is the queen?" I ask. The scent of the powdered electrolytes my grandmother's doctor recommended for her dehydration drifts across my consciousness.

Sharp lemon and herbal stevia. The spoon clinking against the glass as I stirred it in.

The way it would sit next to her bed untouched until she said it was too warm and I had to make another.

Another she'd barely sip. Every time I visited her, I made her dozens of glasses of pale yellow electrolytes she barely touched.

"She's doing well," Ben says, leaning forward to grab one of the crustless sandwiches on the coffee table. "I'm sure everything is fine."

"Good." I nod, smiling.

"We should go for a ride tomorrow morning," Omar suggests. "The park is best seen from the back of a horse."

"I'm not sure I've got the skills," I say. "Or the clothing."

"I'm sure we can rustle up a kit for you," Ben says. "It will be fun. There are several horses who will take good care of you."

"You just told me a story about how your horses were spooked by a stag and dumped you into a mud pit."

"I will remind you," Ben says, "that we were quite drunk."

I laugh. "Well, if you keep giving me cups of tea this strong, I'll hardly be sober."

"Don't worry," Omar says. "They don't spike the morning coffee."

"Of course not," Ben says, feigning insult. "We wait until noon to start drinking like all civilized people."

"Unless it's Bloody Marys," Omar points out, his tone serious. Grave almost.

"That goes without saying." Ben waves the comment aside. "Bloody Marys are not considered alcoholic. Too many vegetables."

"I didn't realize the vegetable count of a beverage had anything to do with its intoxication effects," I say.

"Happy to enlighten you." Ben grins at me.

I laugh.

"Do come riding with me tomorrow," Omar says. "We will find you clothing. Do you have everything you need for the hunt?" he asks.

“I think so; Rashid and Lloyd conferred, I believe.” I knew for a fact they had talked in great detail about the necessary boots, tweed suit, and walking stick I’d need for tromping around the Scottish countryside.

“Excellent,” Ben says, nodding with approval.

"How did you like Rome?" Omar asks me, changing the subject.

"I didn't get to spend any time outside of work, unfortunately. Besides a few dinners that were lovely. Though I'm back on a strict diet as I prepare for training. So I mostly lusted after my friend's pasta."

Both men laugh. "It must be hard for you to go out in public, sightseeing," Omar says.

I shrug. "Yes and no. I've been known to don a pair of sunglasses and a hat to enjoy some time in public.

" Omar's eyes wander down my body. How do you cover that up?

And he's not wrong. Even with a hat and sunglasses people stare.

Men stare. "In LA mostly people leave you alone even if they recognize you, unless they're a tourist."

"Your security seems to be quite good," Ben notes.

"Yes, I have a great team. But they can also draw attention. And I do miss going out alone."

"A joy that Victoria has never known," Ben says, his tone still jovial, but the words

are cruel somehow. She's spent her entire life in castles like this one. In large rooms hung with oil paintings of her ancestors scowling or hunting. I have yet to see a painting with a smiling subject.

"Don't feel too bad for me," Victoria says from the doorway.

"I do have a fifty thousand-acre estate in Scotland.

" She smiles broadly as she comes back to the couch, settling in with Ben, leaning into his side.

He kisses the top of her head. "Not to mention a really fabulous place in central London. "

"Everything okay, darling?" Ben asks.

"Yes." She tilts her head to look up at him. "Though it's probably time to go dress for dinner."

"Yes, I think you're right," Ben agrees. Omar glances at his watch and a subtle smile steals over his features.

Ben stands, holding out his hand to pull his wife up next to him. "We will see you both at seven-thirty for cocktails." I glance down at my tea, realizing it is not considered a cocktail. All sorts of interesting nuances here.

Victoria and Ben leave, their pace quick, his hand on her lower back, their heads bent together.

Omar looks over at me, his eyes twinkling in the firelight.

"What?" I ask.

"We have two hours before dinner."

It dawns on me. "Oh." I let my cheeks heat and cast my eyes to the rug—tartan again.

"They are very much in love," Omar says, leaning back into the big armchair.

"They do seem happy."

"As happy as royals can be, I think."

"It's hard to be happy as a royal?" I inject a note of teasing into my tone, but also curiosity. Tell me a joke, or a truth about yourself.

"Royalty is not a choice. And if you don't have choices in life, you're less likely to be happy, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes." My stomach knots and I swallow the anxiety that tries to close my throat. All the choices Grand has stripped from people, and the ones he craves to steal, turn my tea to acid in my gut. I sit forward to place the half-empty cup on the table next to the platter of crustless sandwiches.

"Victoria was lucky she fell in love with a man who was acceptable and prepared for the lifestyle."

"Right," I say, sitting back, tucking my feet again. "Though how many opportunities did she have to meet men who weren't?"

"She could have fallen in love with the chauffeur." His tone is light, but his point is clear.

"Of course." I laugh at myself. "I was thinking of some tattooed biker, forgetting an honest working man would not do."

"It would be a good story though," Omar says, sipping his tea. "If she'd fallen for a member of the staff. Insisted on marrying him."

"Would her family have disowned her?" I ask, my tone still humorous—as if love being conditional is a laughing matter.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:46 pm

"Possibly. Hard to say in this modern age." Omar shrugs, casual. We are just bantering here. Nothing serious. "It used to be there was nothing more unacceptable than the wrong marriage." He smiles.

"I'll admit, my knowledge of the royal family is limited."

"You don't follow the scandal rags?" he asks, smiling.

"Only the ones I'm featured in."

He laughs. "King Edward the VIII had to abdicate his throne to marry the woman he loved."

"How romantic," I say. "And sad."

"Turned out he was a bit of a Nazi, so the old rules on royal marriages did the country a favor."

"A bit of a Nazi?" I say, trying to keep my voice light. Trying not to think of how the Nazis murdered my grandmother's entire family and left her broken, bitter, and incapable of love. But I can't keep the faded numbers tattooed onto her arm from flashing across my mind's eye.

"A sympathizer for certain," Omar says. "I think Hitler hoped to install him as a puppet king. Historically, nothing was as unacceptable to the British royal family as the wrong marriage partner. Next worse thing would be cozying up to a dictator. I suppose they felt that a supreme leader should be installed by lineage, not violence."

I don't let my respiratory rate increase. I smile like we are still flirting. As if we have not strayed into the exact conversation I was sent here to have. "You said historically; is that no longer true?"

"The queen is a traditionalist."

I can't ask about the future king. It's too obvious. Too blatant. "What about Jordanian royalty?" I ask.

Omar drops his gaze to his now-empty teacup.

"The difference between a traditional monarch and a dictator is somewhat opaque.

" His gaze rises to mine again, his smile almost sad.

"One inherits their power, the other takes it through force—or lies.

Usually a combination of both. But in either case you end up with a leader who has absolute power. "

The fire is suddenly less cozy, more suffocating.

The heat coming off of it is scorching. The tea and whiskey in my stomach war with the light lunch I ate on the flight.

"That was a nifty way to avoid the question," I say with a smile as if I don't care about his answer.

As if this entire conversation is just foreplay.

He grins, his expression wicked. "I'm sure my father would not stand for any member

of his family creating close ties with our enemies. As the Nazis were to Britain."

"But what if King Edward the VIII had been installed as a puppet for Hitler by force or lies, or a potent mix of both? Would your father accept such an ally?" I'm probably treading too close here.

"Angela," Omar's voice drops. The way he says my name sends a shiver up my spine and I'm not sure if it's fear, lust, or both. "The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan will work with whoever we need to in order to maintain peace and safety for our people."

Well, when he puts it like that...

"What about marriage?" I ask, eager to change the subject. I'm not here to weasel information out of him. I'm here to talk to Victoria. I'm here for my own purposes, not anyone else's.

Omar shrugs, leans back, steeple his fingers.

"My father would be very disappointed if I fell for the chauffeur.

" I laugh. Omar grins. "There are rules, of course—expectations.

My wife must be a Muslim. She must be capable of handling the public attention.

" His lips curl into a smile, but it's edged with sorrow.

Almost like he feels bad for his future bride.

"My mother converted to Islam to marry my father. She was a well-known fashion model, British."

“Are they happy?”

Omar nods. “Yes, I think so.” The fire crackles, and I lean forward to pick up my tea again. Sipping the spiked, sweet warmth.

A comfortable silence falls. Omar is the one to break it.

“So much of politics, of power, is artifice. Being able to control the narrative.” I look over at him.

He’s still leaning back in the chair, long legs parted, hands gently curling over the ends of the armrest, looking for all the world like a man with immense power.

Like a king in his throne. “That’s part of why royals so often marry actors.

They need partners who can help tell the story they want told. ”

“Is that why?” I ask, teasing, trying to steer this conversation back to flirting and away from power and artifice. “I thought it was all about our hotness.”

Omar laughs, the sound warm and easy. He shifts forward, hands coming to clasp in front of him, the fire dancing over his face.

“It doesn’t hurt.” His eyes track over me appreciatively, coming back to my face.

“But beauty is not enough on its own to make a marriage work.” He holds my gaze.

“Someone who can present a story with their body, their face, someone who can create a truth, is very powerful.”

I make sure to keep the chill sneaking up my spine off my face. Does he know about

me?

Omar shrugs, sitting back again. "That is one of the reasons Benjamin is such a good partner for Victoria—he can help her tell any story she wants told."

"The love between them seems genuine."

"I believe it is." He smiles, eyes twinkling again. "I'm afraid that love would not make my father's list of reasons for marriage."

I laugh. "Does it make yours?"

"I want her to be a woman I can respect above all else."

"Respect is more important than love to you?"

"Love has been known to fade." His eyes drift to the fire.

"A relationship built on respect and mutual interest can last longer."

"Omar's attention comes back to mine. "Falling in love is dangerous—there is falling involved, after all."

"Humor glints in his gaze but fades. "When it comes to a life partner I'd rather be on solid ground."

"My marriage is not only mine. It's a nation's."

"I must pick a wife who will help Jordan thrive."

Silence falls between us, the fire sputtering to fill the void. "I get that," I admit.

"You do?" His smile is pleased.

"Falling is dangerous." I smile. "Especially for a woman. It's easy to become trapped. To be disappeared by devotion. I've worked too hard to get where I am to risk that."

"We are similar creatures then. Pragmatic in our ways."

"Yes," I agree. "In some ways." I don't mention that I may also need to marry for reasons that have nothing to do with love...

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Omar walks me back to my room after dinner, Alesana a large shadow stalking behind us. He's keeping enough distance so we can pretend he's not there but close enough that if I needed him he could save me from...a menacing sculpture or judgmental painting.

I stop in front of my door and turn to Omar.

"I'm glad I was able to walk you home this time," he says, a smile teasing the edge of his mouth. The light is low, sconces flickering as if they are candles. Omar's skin glows golden. His lips are a dark rose color—full and very kissable. Especially after the wine and fun I had at dinner.

One of the craziest parts about this experience is how well I fit in here. I wasn't raised to lead a nation, but I have the same sense of humor as these royals. Turns out having power with limited agency is a rare unifier. "Thank you for coming," Omar says. "I appreciate your faith in me."

"Well, this date has been much less explosive." I smile at him, ready to turn our nightmare into a shared joke.

His expression darkens, clearly not ready to slap a band-aid of dark humor over our past. "You don't know how that haunts me. How sorry I am."

"The dozens of flowers you sent with notes of apology gave me a clue."

He reaches down for my hand, twining our fingers. His skin is warm and touch assertive. "The men responsible have been dealt with."

"How menacing," I say, trying again to tease, but it comes out a little breathless. Like I find it hot that he has dealt with whoever tried to hurt us. Hurt me.

His eyes hold mine, sparks tingle along my arm.

"Angela." He searches my face, then glances quickly to where Alesana is standing in the shadows at the top of the stairs with his back to us.

Omar leans in, his mouth close to my ear.

Warm breath glides down my neck. "I wasn't the only target that night. You are in grave danger."

My breath freezes, my whole body stiffening at his words. "What?" I exhale.

His lips brush the shell of my ear. "Invite me in, we need to talk." Omar leans away to meet my eyes again.

I choose to show him fear and confusion. "Please come in," I say for Alesana's sake, reaching behind me to twist the knob and open the door at my back.

"I'd love to." Omar smiles.

The fire in the hearth flickers light over the two armchairs in front of it, but the canopy bed and draped windows remain in shadow. Omar closes the door behind him, and I move further into the room, fidgeting, pretending to be nervous, to be confused. To be scared.

I'm not sure exactly what I actually feel. And it doesn't matter. What matters is convincing this man that I can't imagine why I'd be a target. "It's okay," Omar assures me. My savior.

He likes this role. And why wouldn't he? White knight is a great character. Damsel in distress less so. Both are cliches, though.

We are dressed for our parts. Omar wears a dark suit with pinstripes of gold and blue running through it. His tie is paisley, shirt a dove gray. He looks like a prince—one here to save me.

I'm wearing a dress Zade and Lloyd argued over. Zade thought it said fuck me . Lloyd thought it said: if you're lucky I'll let you fuck me .

It's a gold metallic A-line silhouette mini-dress with a deep V neckline and long bishop sleeves—that's where the begging comes in, according to Lloyd. "Sleeves that long and billowy make it clear she isn't easy."

"The red-bottomed shoes scream take me now ," Zade insisted as they placed Louboutin heels into my suitcase. They then leveled me with an intense stare. "So don't wear them unless you're sure you want him."

"Zade!" Lloyd yelled. "Shoes are not consent!"

Zade just looked at Lloyd like he didn't understand fashion. Or fucking.

Omar definitely noticed the shoes, the dress, my hair...he seemed to notice everything and liked it all. A lot. He also seems to have noticed that I'm a target. How much does he know?

His eyes are soft and caring as he closes the gap between us—we're in the space

between the sitting area and the bed—between the light and the dark. "I want to help you. But you'll have to trust me."

"I don't know what you mean." Which duplicity does he want me to drop?

Omar's hand rises slowly to my face, pushing a lock of hair behind my ear.

I shiver as the long strands tickle my shoulder blade.

"If I had known your country was trying to kill you, I would have checked your purse that evening.

" He smiles like that's an inside joke between us now.

Something we will tell our grandchildren.

"What?" My voice comes out choked, frightened. Fake.

Omar falls for it; his brow crinkles with concern, eyes dropping briefly to my parted lips and then coming back to meet my gaze. "You don't know?"

I shake my head, unsure of what he thinks I know.

Is he talking about the explosion that left us both unconscious?

Or the attack in the ambulance? Martin's billowing back fills my mind's eye—and the cold rage, the sick urge that soaked into my bones in that moment comes with it.

The same one that still animates my dreams and seems to leach into my skin whenever I let my guard down.

Fuck, I have to work on not wanting to kill people. I am going insane. But there is no way Omar knows that. No one knows that.

Omar takes in a deep breath, his thumb stroking my jaw, fingers hooked behind my ear. "The attack at the restaurant—someone on your security team leaked that we would be there."

"To who?" I shake my head. "I don't understand." I step back, needing some space. He lets me go, his hand falling away. No grasping or gripping...he thinks he's trapped me. That I need him. Omar is convinced he's my champion.

"I thought it was a terrorist group angry with your family's ties with the US.

" I try to remember what Ash told me. I just believed him when he assured me it didn't have anything to do with me.

I trusted Ash. Was too afraid of my own rage to look into the incident further.

I just wanted to bury the whole thing deep inside me.

Use it for a film? Sure. But investigate it? No.

"Yes," Omar says. "I was the intended target—but our location was leaked by a member of your security team."

I shake my head, still stepping away from him, from the fire. The air grows colder as I back into the shadows. "Who? That doesn't make sense. Why?"

Omar just stares at me—eyes dark pools I can't read—firelight shimmering behind him. My legs bump the bed and I stop.

"Because you're an asset for US intelligence," Omar says, his voice even and low. He says it like the words will frighten me and he doesn't want them to.

My heart rate spikes and my lips part for a sharp inhale. I shake my head, wanting to deny it while also recognizing it's pointless. He obviously has information.

Omar slips his hands into his pockets. Looks down at his loafers. They don't communicate anything about his willingness to fuck. When his gaze comes back to mine it's harder. "Angela." His accent does something to my name that makes my throat dry. "I can keep you safe, but you have to trust me."

I don't respond because I have nothing to say. Trust him? I don't know him. Why would I trust this man?

He takes a step toward me and I flinch. He stops, sighs. "I've frightened you."

"I don't want—" I pause so he thinks I'm torn. So he thinks I'm struggling with how to handle this...which I am, but not because I'm trying to decide if I should trust him. Because I need him to think I might. "Who was it in my security?" I ask.

"Ash Fraser." Omar says it like he regrets having to tell me this awful truth.

"But he was injured," I say. "He could have died."

"Your country isn't known for protecting people who show it loyalty." There is anger in his voice. My nation's history of betrayal is a worthy target of rage.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"Let me keep you safe."

I blink at him. "How?"

"First, I'd take care of Ash Fraser for you. It would be easy to create a hunting accident."

I shake my head. "They will just replace him," I say. "It's not like I can be free..."

Omar wets his lips. His full lips. They rise into a pleased smirk and when I return my gaze to his, it's obvious he likes that I was looking at his mouth.

He takes a step forward, hands still in his pockets. I don't flinch this time. He takes it as an invitation and joins me in the shadows. "Don't do anything," I say. "To Ash...yet," I add, bringing a hand up to Omar's chest—warm and solid.

"Of course." I feel the words through my palm. "I won't do anything you don't want me to." The fire crackles in the silence. "I won't force anything on you. Ever."

My heart flutters, its rhythm quick and flighty. A frightened bird's wings beating in my chest. But I'm not afraid of him. I'm afraid of me.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“No one can save you.”

I wake with a start, my heart pounding, adrenaline tightening my chest. My grandmother's voice echoes in the clamshell of my ear. As if she just whispered to me while I slept.

But, of course, I'm alone...in a canopy bed...in a castle...in Scotland. Pulling the covers off, the morning chill seeps through my thin sleep shirt, breaking goose bumps over my skin. I hurry across the cold rug to the closet and pull out a robe, then go over to the fireplace where coals still glow.

I throw on another log, sparks jumping from the ashes. The dry wood quickly catches and tiny flames lick up over the bark, feasting on it. The fire I was forced to escape when I last spent time with Omar burns its way past the haze of sleepiness hovering over me.

He thinks Ash sold us out, but I know it was Linda Whitmore. I didn't tell Omar that. He left without touching me after promising me he'd see me today. Only a man who wants more than sex does that—especially when he's already had the milk for free, as that repulsive saying goes.

Omar is playing a long game. He's not the first powerful man to become enamored with me. But this feels different somehow.

I think Omar wants to care for me—in part because he thinks I can't do it myself. But

also because he feels we have a unique understanding between us. I comprehend the double-edged nature of his glamorous life.

It's very possible Omar thinks I would make a useful, pleasant royal consort—perhaps even a queen one day—capable of what the role requires. A consort who needs him to stay alive...

My phone pings on my bedside table, and I have to leave the warmth of the fire to go to it.

"Are you up?" Ash asks.

I don't bother texting back, just cross to the door and open it.

Ash stands there, taking up so much space it's almost a joke. What does his mother think of him? Is she amazed by his size every time she sees him? Does she still think of him as a boy? There was a time when this man didn't reach his mother's knee.

"What are you smiling at?" Ash asks, his brow furrowing.

I shake my head, stepping back so he can enter. "I was thinking there was a time when you were tiny. A baby." He turns to me, head cocked. What? A baby? I close the door. Leaning against it. "You're just so big. It's funny to think you were little once. Do you have siblings?"

"Yes," he answers slowly, unsure how I will use this information. "An older sister."

"She was once taller than you." I'm grinning now.

"That's not a fact I'm willing to confirm at this time." His expression is blank but there is a hint, some distant twinkle of humor, behind his eyes.

I laugh. The memory of when Ash grinned at me comes back in full technicolor and heats my cheeks.

His head tips to the side. What now?

I take in a breath and move past him back toward the fire. "What can I do for you at this ungodly hour?" I ask, taking one of the seats by the fire, pulling my legs up onto it and tucking them under me.

"I wanted to talk about security on the hunt. Assuming you're going."

I bite my lip. The hunt. There are ten more guests arriving today. And they are going out after a stag tomorrow. Tromping through the Scottish moors in tweed with rifles and good old-fashioned grit.

Ash takes the other seat, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees. His gaze rakes over me. "You okay? Something seems off."

I sigh and lean back into the chair, letting my gaze wander to the molding at the junction of the wall and ceiling—it's ornate like everything else around here. A tribe of cherubs blow horns and shoot arrows around the edge of the ceiling.

"Omar knows..." My words drift off, unsure how to finish the sentence.

I bring my gaze back to Ash. His eyes have sharpened.

His entire face transformed—it suddenly has more angles.

There is not a hint of softness left. Nothing of that boy his mother must have adored.

The one his sister could pick up. I sigh.

"He knows I'm an asset. And that I'm now a target of my own nation. He offered to help me."

Ash's frown deepens.

"By killing you," I finish.

Ash's top lip twitches—almost a snarl.

"Don't be like that," I say, sighing again. "He thinks you're the one who leaked our location in London, information that was shared with the bombers. And in a way you did, I guess. Because you told Linda." Ash's jaw tightens, eyes chilling, iceberg mode activated.

"Ash, I know you were as betrayed as me." I lean forward, my feet touching the warm rug. "I haven't had any coffee, you know?" It comes out a whine. And a defense. I would have figured out how to say that in a way that didn't make you so emotional if you'd brought me coffee.

A knock at the door sounds before Ash can respond. He stands to answer it. Alesana hands him two mugs of coffee, giving me a nod good morning. I nod back, kind of chastised but, in my defense, I hadn't had any coffee.

Ash returns and passes me my mug before taking his seat again, leaning back into the generous chair, and crossing his legs. "What did you say to him?" he asks, voice even, not iceberg, but no fucks are being given out for free this morning.

"I told him not to hurt you."

Ash huffs a laugh—as if Omar could.

I roll my eyes, sip the coffee. It's good, creamy and rich with a touch of sweetness. I close my eyes and rest my head on one of the chair's wings.

I open my eyes to find Ash watching the fire, jaw tight...it would probably be a more fun game to note when it's not bunched with tension. Those moments where he's not holding back.

I've never seen him in a fight, but I'd guess it's loose then—I bet he's relaxed when he's in combat. When he's unconsciousness, whether natural sleep or concussion-based.

I take another sip of coffee. When he's on the verge of a smile, that little bunch of muscles relaxes. Maybe that's how Zade figured out Ash's funny bone—watching the line of his jaw. I could see that.

A log cracks loudly, making me jump. It splits, half falling into the coals, shooting up sparks. My heart rate settles, I pull my legs up again. Sip my coffee and shift my focus to the fire. Ignoring Ash.

His attention falls on me; I can feel his inspection as hot as the flames in front of me. "What?" I finally say.

"Nothing."

I turn to him because the lie is so scalding. "Seriously, you're staring at me."

"I'm sorry." Ash drops his gaze to the carpet between us.

"You're mad that Omar thinks you betrayed me?"

"No."

"You think I'm playing with fire and are concerned for my safety?" His jaw relaxes and his lips twitch. I grin, pleased with myself.

"Don't look so pleased with yourself," Ash says, keeping his focus on the intricately patterned rug.

"Don't ruin my fun."

His eyes come back to me, and concern tightens the skin around them. "Angela." Fuck, when he says my name like that, the whole grid lights up, sparks skittering between us. Does he feel that too? He must. This kind of thing can't be one-sided. Can it?

No. He wants me—Ash has made that clear.

That he wants me but isn't going to do a damn thing about it because of his nobility and professionalism.

Traits I admire. Sort of. I swallow and his eyes drop to my throat as if he can tell I'm trying to push down the lust that his voice saying my name just ignited in my sleep-addled body.

Does he know the way it fuzzed my not nearly caffeinated enough brain?

"This hunt is a bad idea," Ash continues.

"I'm not going hunting," I say, shaking my head and dropping my gaze to my coffee cup. "I might go horseback riding with Omar. But I'm not joining the hunt."

"Okay."

"Why?" I look up. "Do you think I'd be hurt? Or are you worried about how you and Alesana can provide security?"

"I'm worried about you." His eyes hold mine and there is an always at the end of that sentence he's not saying out loud. The fealty I wanted is right there. I got it. But it doesn't feel like enough...

"I'll be fine," I say.

"I know."

My smile trembles. "Because you'll take care of me?"

"You can take care of yourself. I'm just here to watch your back." I laugh because it's so ridiculous. His head tips, examining me from that other angle he seems to need when I'm not making sense. "Angela."

"Don't." I shake my head.

His head tips further—my words just getting more confusing.

"You are very capable. You saved my life.

" Fuck, he's doing that earnest thing again and I cannot.

I just cannot contend with earnest Ash. Iceberg Ash is better than this vulnerable man leaning forward, his eyes intense—practically begging me to see what he sees.

"You've saved mine a few times." I wave a hand at him. The memory of his big body blocking me every time I've needed a body to block mine in the last two years except for that blast. That ambulance. The sickening need to kill I've been fighting grips me

by the throat.

"What?" Ash asks, noticing the shift in me.

I meet his gaze, suddenly desperate to tell him.

The words are sitting there. I wanted to kill him, Ash.

I wanted to slide my blade across his throat and feel the warmth of his life pour over my skin.

I wanted to end him so he would never hurt anyone again.

"Nothing," I say, shrugging one shoulder, and turning my focus to the fire.

"You can tell me," Ash says, his voice quiet, almost a whisper. "If there is ever anything...you should tell me. It makes it harder to have your back when you don't share."

The laugh that comes out is bitter. It belongs to a woman who has realized all her efforts have gotten her nowhere but to the edge of an abyss. That she made all the wrong moves for the wrong reasons. I note the swirl of emotions that elicit it. The thoughts running through my mind when it escaped.

He would never understand.

Don't risk telling a man what you really think.

Sharing your darkest thoughts will only hurt.

Life will kick you in the teeth the moment you think it won't.

Faith is the most dangerous drug.

"Angela," Ash uses that tone again and this time it makes me want to cry. "You can trust me."

I nod, forcing the burning behind my eyes to subside. Puppies playing with a roll of toilet paper. A panda bear doing somersaults. "I know I can trust you." I reach out to touch Ash, trying to soothe him, to make him forget he's sure I'm hiding something.

When my fingers connect with his wrist a spark sizzles between us. "I know," I say again, my voice quieter. The tone you'd use in church to confess your sins. But I won't admit my blood lust to Ash.

Ash turns his hand and twines his fingers with mine, surprising me. I had to move to the edge of my seat to reach out to him. My feet on the fire-warmed rug, arm extended, fingers now trapped...held by his.

He's staring down at our joined hands. I follow his focus. My nails are painted a pretty pink—they're long enough to bead blood but short enough they don't get in my way every time I pick up a fork. Ash's fingers end in blunt, naked nails, his fingers thick and rough. Mine slender, soft.

"You're stronger than you think you are," Ash says without breaking his gaze from our fingers. "I'm sorry you have to use so much of your strength to hide from everyone."

He looks up at me then, and I'm not ready for Ash's gaze. I'm staring at him, my masks all forgotten. He held me while I sobbed and never said a word about it. He carried me. Followed me. "I'm sorry you have to hide too," I say.

Ash blinks, surprised by my response. We stare at each other, our fingers interlaced,

the electricity between us crackling louder than the fire in the hearth.

Chapter Thirty

I lean forward, my body in sync with the galloping mare under me. Each hoof fall is a beat in the rhythm of our dance. My gloved fingers are wrapped in her mane, the wind whipping it against the bared skin at my wrists. My cheeks ache from how hard I'm smiling.

The mare slows to a trot as we reach the top of the hillside.

She snorts, slowing to a walk, stretching her neck down.

I reach forward to pat her—strong muscle under soft fur.

"Good girl," I huff, my breath catching up with us still.

"That was amazing." An urge to wrap my arms around her almost unbalances me.

The mare's name is Dream, which is so fitting. She is gray with a black and white mane, gentle brown eyes, and a powerful body. "Dream's a sweetheart," the groom, a deep-voiced, big-bellied man with auburn hair had assured me. "She will take good care of yen."

And she had. We'd been exploring the grounds of the castle for the last hour, Omar on a black Friesian named Falcon and me on Dream. We'd mostly walked until this hill, where Omar told me they usually canter to the top.

Dream had begun to prance, excited for the fun. Omar held back his mount, waiting

for my agreement, and when I grinned at him and leaned forward, Dream took off like a shot. I grabbed her mane, and she carried me to the top of this hill—it felt like flying.

Omar's horse slows to a walk next to us. He's grinning as big as me. "You seem to be remembering how to ride," he says.

I laugh, leaning forward to pat Dream's neck again. "She's taking very good care of me."

Omar nods. He looks so handsome on his dark steed, the Scottish countryside rolling behind him. We are on a well-groomed trail. "I'm happy to see you enjoying yourself so fully," Omar says, his dark eyes roaming over my face, his own smile broad.

"Thank you," I say, "for inviting me. This is amazing.

" The trail dips down and into a wooded area, the tall evergreens casting chilling shadows.

I'm glad for the thick tweed riding outfit that was found for me.

It fits very well—they must keep one in every size for guests.

Which is wild. Unlike the landscape here, which is as tamed as Dream.

The path through the forest is just wide enough for us to ride side by side. "Have you thought about what we discussed last night?" Omar asks, his tone even, as if we didn't discuss my lead protector betraying me last night.

"Yes," I say. "Of course I've thought about it.

" I worry my lower lip. His focus falls to it just the way I planned.

We come out of the woods and back out under the cloud-thickened sky.

A wind whips over the grassy hill, ruffling the short green blades, and tugging at my braid.

"I appreciate your offer to help. I do."

"But..."

I look over at him, letting a sad smile tug at my lips. "I don't think you can help me. No one can."

"You're in grave danger. I can provide protection."

"How?" I ask, meeting his gaze.

"Be with me."

"Be with you?"

"I could keep you safe."

"Omar, I have a life. I'm going back to LA tomorrow. I have more promotion to do for my current film and am committed to my next project."

"I would never ask you to give up your work.

" He sounds almost insulted, but there is something else in his tone.

He'd never ask me to give it up. But if I wanted to give it up...

if I wanted to let him take care of me, he would.

"But I would gladly provide security for you. If you were under my protection, there would be serious consequences if you were hurt."

"Omar, that's..." I'm not sure what it is. Sweet? Crazy? Confusing? "I don't know what to say."

"You can trust me, Angela."

"But can you trust me?" I ask. "When I have so much to gain from a connection with you?"

Omar's smile broadens. I'm once again the student who exceeded my teacher's expectations. "I don't think you're the type of woman who would betray a man she's romantically involved with."

I blink, surprised. He...I... Clearing my throat, I turn my tone flirty. "Are we romantically involved?" I tease.

"I hope so." His smile turns wolfish. Hot. No iceberg here. The prince knows what he wants.

I, on the other hand, have lost the thread of why I'm here. My impulse was to take action—do something. Talk to Victoria, give her the compass, and then figure out my next move. But Omar's revelations and subsequent offer have thrown me off kilter.

American politics feel far away from this manicured environment. Could a connection with Omar save me? Or would I be trading one devil for another?

"I appreciate your offer," I say, because I do. "But I'm satisfied with my security."

"Ash Fraser is dangerous." Omar's voice is suddenly stern, serious.

"I know." But not to me. I don't say that part out loud. "He's the devil I know." I look over at Omar again. He's watching me, frowning. A spear of sunlight breaks through the low clouds and lights up the hill behind him for a brief moment before shadowing again.

"I'm the devil you don't know?"

"Yes." It's a challenge—and I get the sense His Royal Highness, Prince of Jordan, Omar bin Rami, enjoys a challenge.

Princess Victoria is chatting with Gordon, the groom, when we return.

She waves to us, a broad smile on her pretty face.

"Angela," she says, head tilted up, eyes shielded by large tortoiseshell sunglasses.

"I'd like to show you my garden if you have a half-hour to spare.

"The breeze toys with Victoria's ash-blond hair, brushing the tips against her tweed jacket.

"Of course." I smile back, relieved to finally get some alone time with her.

Victoria and I chat about my ride, Dream is a dream! , the beauty of the region, so gorgeous! and other innocuous things, dinner last night was delicious! as we walk.

When we reach the stone-walled garden scented of rosemary, we fall silent. The

crunch of small stones under our boots and the quiet symphony of nature are the only sounds as we navigate the paths between the herb beds.

"It's beautiful," I say, breaking the silence.

"Yes." There is a smile in Victoria's voice. "They are all medicinal plants. It's been here for generations. Even before my family bought the property."

She stops, stooping down next to a bed of knee-height flowers with strong, slender stems and feathery fern-like leaves.

The white blossoms are small and clustered close together.

"This is yarrow, *achillea millefolium* ." The Latin name rolls off her tongue like she was born speaking that dead language.

"It grows wild in fields and can be used to stop bleeding.

" Victoria looks up at me. "It can also help with fevers. And infections."

"You eat it?" I ask. "How does that stop bleeding?"

She smiles, her gaze falling to the flat-topped flowers. "You make it into a poultice or powder. You can even chew it and apply it to the wound. It contains chemicals that speed blood clotting. Achilles, who the plant is named after, used it on his soldiers' wounds."

"That's amazing." The scent of the yarrow wafts to me—herbaceous and sweet, like oregano and honey.

Victoria stands and points down the row to another bunch of flowers. They are

rangier, their yellow flowers faded and not as tightly knit as the yarrow. The leaves are longer, and faded in the early fall. "Chamomile," Victoria says.

"I've had the tea," I say with a smile.

A crow caws, drawing my attention to the far side of the garden, about fifty yards away. The black bird perches on a low stone wall. It ruffles its feathers. Another lands next to it. They both dive behind the wall, disappearing.

"They are eating the wild carrot seeds. *Daucus carota* ." Victoria starts to walk toward the birds. "It's commonly called Queen Anne's lace."

It occurs to me that Queen Anne might be an ancestor of Victoria's. "Why is the flower named after her?" I ask.

"She was a wonderful lace maker, known for her incredible craftsmanship.

The flowers are usually white or purple, and at the center of each one is a tiny cluster of red flowers.

As if a drop of blood spilled on the lace.

Queen Anne lost seventeen children—so they say the spilled blood is her sorrow at the center of the flower. "

"Oh, that's so sad." I'll never look at the pretty white cluster the same again.

Victoria nods her agreement.

A crow hops back up on the wall, its obsidian eye watching our approach. "Hello." A woman's voice comes out of the bird's beak, stunning me into stopping.

Victoria stills as well. "Amazing, isn't it? They mimic perfectly. Better than parrots."

"Victoria," the bird says, bobbing its head and taking a few side steps.

"It knows your name."

"And speaks in my grandmother's voice." Victoria starts walking again and I trail after her. The crow speaks in the queen's voice? "It's almost enough to make you believe in magic—in ancestors watching over us."

"Almost," I agree, though I don't know that I really do. Victoria is a princess; it makes sense the world is magical to her. But then again, she's as trapped as me. Caught in a spider's tacky web.

Two more birds join the first on the low wall as we reach it. Running parallel with the outer wall for about ten feet, it creates a partition for the plants growing on the other side.

Victoria pulls a plastic bag out of her pocket. "Nut, please, Victoria," the first crow says.

"Please, Victoria," another one says in the same voice—a queen's posh British accent.

The princess holds out a shelled peanut to the first, who takes it gently with its sharp beak. Then it shuffles away and the second comes for its prize.

A breeze swoops through the garden, fluttering the plants on the far side of the wall. The Queen Anne's lace has started to go to seed—the flowers gone, the thin stems that held them closing in on themselves. Like a goblet. Or an aging hand.

My grandmother's claw-like fingers flutter through my mind, there and then gone.

And I'm back in the garden, enshrined in the scent of this place.

More crows drop into the garden, landing on the wall, each lining up for a peanut.

"Queen Anne's lace is an abortifacient." Victoria doesn't look at me when she says it.

My chest tightens, that word spiking fear in my gut.

"All the plants in this area of the garden are." Victoria says it quietly.

Calmly. As if she isn't casually feeding a murder of crows and talking about abortion.

"I didn't know that."

Victoria glances over to me, her eyes still obscured by her sunglasses. She looks so pretty. So strange. With the black birds lined up elegantly in front of her.

"The queen cannot show emotion." She changes the subject as her attention returns to the birds. "She must be stalwart. The ideal of masculine power. Neither peaceable nor bloodthirsty. Unaffected."

"That makes sense, I guess."

"Another, please," a crow says.

"You already had yours, Felix."

"Another." The bird bobs his glistening head. "I dance." Victoria laughs but shakes her head. "I'm almost out and Winston still hasn't had his."

The bird sighs, sounding so human it's truly bizarre. And also super fucking cool.

We are alone except the birds. I reach into the inside pocket of my borrowed tweed riding jacket and wrap my hand around the compass. Inhaling I pull it free, keeping it mostly hidden in my gloved hand.

Victoria glances over at my movement. She straightens, and I open my palm. The bronze cover glows dully in the cloud darkened afternoon light. Victoria's smile is subtle, almost sad, as she takes it from me, disappearing it into her pocket.

"You know what this is?" I ask.

She nods, turning back to the waiting birds.

"What are you going to do with it?" I go on, emboldened by the intimacy of this moment.

"Use it to convince my grandmother we need to do something."

"Do you think she'll take action?"

"Honestly, I don't know." Winston, I'm assuming, arrives, landing next to Felix and pushing him slightly away.

Victoria offers him the last peanut. "My grandmother does not think we should interfere in other countries' elections.

" Her tone is even but there is something underneath it.

Her grandmother won't always be in power.

She's in failing health. Soon Victoria's father will be king... unless something happens to him.

"You think interference is warranted?"

"We have done such things in the past—not that our past is something to emulate.

But Russia is hard at work destroying American democracy.

They've come after ours as well. I don't think we can sit on our throne and wait for it all to sort itself out.

Mis and disinformation—lies are easy to spread.

Easy to believe." She pauses. "They always have been. "

"What can we do about that?"

Victoria folds the plastic baggie and slips it back into her pocket.

She slides off her sunglasses and meets my gaze.

There are fine lines radiating from her eyes and a furrow in her brow.

No botox here—no hiding age. But she is hiding power.

I thought she was meek, a tool for the Crown. I was wrong.

"I want a new world order. And so does Rebecca Levi."

My heart crawls into my throat. "What does that mean?"

" And should we be talking about this in front of the crows?"

Wow, that's not a thought I ever imagined would cross my mind.

Then again, I never knew I'd want to murder a man—that I'd crave it.

Yet, here I am. In a walled garden at a royal castle, surrounded by a queen's herb garden, lusting for an unattainable freedom and a man's blood on my hands, worried that crows will spill my secrets.

She smiles. "It means we stop anyone who is in our way. No matter the cost."

Oh fuck. The princess might be as bloodthirsty as me.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ash stands on the far side of my bed, the gold dress I wore last night in his hands, my suitcase open in front of him. "We need to go. Now."

Weak late afternoon sun pours in the large windows, casting the space in light gray. A fire crackles in the hearth. He pushes the dress into the bag roughly.

"Alesana is getting the car." His eyes look past me. "Close the door."

"What's going on?" I ask, glancing into the hall as paranoia crawls up my spine. There is no one there—Hamish intercepted Victoria and me as we came in and she went to take a call.

"I will explain everything once we are on the way. Get your toiletries." I don't move. His jaw tightens. This poor man's teeth. "Now." It's not a bark but it's not not a bark.

"Ash—"

He cuts me off. "Angela. Please. Just listen."

Fine. I start for the bathroom. Less than ten minutes later we are walking down the wide stairs. "I can't just leave without saying goodbye," I argue.

"They will understand."

Hamish appears at the bottom of the steps like an apparition. I stop short and let out a

yelp of surprise that echoes in the large space. "Ms. Daniels, are you leaving us so soon?"

"We have an emergency situation," Ash says. He's on the step behind me, looming. He shifts, pressuring me to continue down. I do.

"Please tell Victo—her royal highness. All the royal highnesses." Wow, this is coming out super chill and awesome. "That I had to go. I will call them..."

Hamish's expression does not change. It's as set as the statues behind him. "Allow me to escort you to your vehicle."

"Oh, sure." I smile. It feels wooden. Get it together. Pick a part and play it. Pulling in a breath, I search for who I want to be in this moment. This moment of fleeing.

Martin's prone form and the blood lust I felt in that ambulance rises up, banishing the fear, and wrapping me in a cloak of craving. My steps become surer as I reach the bottom of the stairs. Hamish turns toward the exit, his hard-soled shoes echoing in the large foyer.

I follow him, the veiled female figures in their alcoves seeming to watch me go—watch me stalk. If I wanted to, I could kill Hamish. Wrap my forearm across his neck and grip my opposite arm, I could make him sleep. Then keep holding until his brain died and heart stopped beating. If I wanted to...

Alesana drives. Ash sits in the back with me. "What's going on?" I ask as we pull down the drive in the SUV we arrived in.

"The queen is dead," Ash answers.

I suck in a sharp breath. "Ben said she was doing..." Well, of course he did. Why

would he tell me, a practical stranger, that Victoria's grandmother was on death's door?

Ash's body is angled toward me, his focus on my face, gaze tracing from my eyes to my parted lips. "I don't have many details, just that she passed."

"That must be the call Victoria received when we came back." I lean back into the leather seat. Poor Victoria.

"Probably."

"But wait," I look back at Ash. "Why do we have to leave?" I shake my head. "Why does the queen's death mean we need to run?"

Ash holds my gaze. The large gates part for us and we pass through, but don't turn to cross the bridge we came in on, instead continuing straight, following the river.

"I no longer have faith in the Crown's ability to keep you safe."

"Do you mean they don't want to keep me safe?" I ask, Temperance's warnings about Linda and her lieutenants echoing in my mind. Yet.

Ash's eyes widen. I turn to look behind me, but before I can see anything the entire world becomes shattered glass and crunching metal as another vehicle smashes into our front end.

My body tries to bend with the forces, but I can't keep up.

The seatbelt burns across my body as we tumble down the river bank.

Up is down, down is up, and then we hit the water.

The river surges through broken windows, ice cold and chaotic. I'm upside down, held in place by the seatbelt. Until I'm not. It releases and I fall, body crumpling into the water pooling in the roof's interior, arms up just in time to protect my head.

I'm moving, twisting, reorienting to this upside-down world. Mouth above the roiling river. Instincts drive me, sensations dulled. An arm around my waist. Ash's voice hot on my ear. "The water isn't deep." It's climbing up my body. Waist, breast line. "They will be waiting to shoot us."

My teeth are chattering but I don't feel the cold.

"Swim out, but stay close to the side of the vehicle. Grab for the wheel well. The current is strong. Don't let it take you. I'll be right behind you."

His arm stays around me as Ash kicks at the broken window, making the opening wider. Then he's pushing me toward it. Hands on my back, helping my momentum.

I suck in a deep breath then dive, hands grabbing at the frame. Passing through the window, I twist to keep hold of the vehicle as I pull my legs into the current. Ash won't fit through that space. How will he get out?

My lungs burn. Kicking, my booted feet heavy, I curl my fingers into the back wheel well and my head breaches the water.

The SUV is nose down, the back end sticking out. I'm on the far side, the road we were pushed off obscured by our vehicle. It seems to be stabilized. My feet kick against a hard surface but when I seek purchase it's a slippery boulder, not the flat bottom of the river.

Behind the tinted windows I can make out movement inside. Ash must be looking for another way out. Is Alesana okay? A strong kick at the back windshield shatters it,

cubes of glass tinkling into the water.

The SUV shakes with impact as bullets smash into it. The assault pauses. Ash pops up, firing at the shore I can't see, then ducks back into the SUV's rear storage area as bullets rain again.

My jeans, sweater, jacket and boots drag at me as I pull myself with quickly numbing fingers toward the side of the vehicle to try to see what the fuck is going on.

Peeking around the edge, I see there is an SUV eerily similar to ours, the front smashed from when it hit us, driver and passenger doors open, two men crouched behind them.

A man pops up and fires at us again. I recognize him with a jolt.

Martin.

My heart thunders in my ears, almost as loud as the rushing water. He's not wearing his glasses, but the dull light is glinting off his auburn hair.

Ash fires again and the men duck behind their open doors.

Ash hauls himself through the back window and drops into the water with a splash.

He disappears under the rushing, brown water for a brief moment before breaking the surface, water streaming off his shorn head.

With one strong stroke he grabs onto the SUV.

Seeing me, he frowns. Reaching out a long arm, Ash grabs my sleeve and drags me back to the wheel well. "Stay here," he orders, gripping the SUV with one hand, the

other holding his gun above the water.

A black backpack lands in the water—it must have been thrown out by Alesana—thank god he’s okay! Ash lets go of the SUV to grab one of the handles, slipping it down his arm so he can hold on again. His body brushes mine as he maneuvers past me, heading to the vantage point I was using.

He fires off several shots and Alesana splashes into the river. His eyes meet mine and he grins at me, a dimple popping, as he joins me at the wheel well. “Your hair is messed up.”

I choke on a laugh. Alesana slips past me and takes the bag from Ash, settling it onto his back while a fresh wave of bullets shakes the half-submerged vehicle.

Ash moves back to me, his body pressing against mine—a wall of warmth in a world of cold.

“We have movement,” Alesana says. “Red is moving.”

“He’s from the ambulance,” I say, meeting Ash’s gaze. He ’ s the one I wanted to kill.

Bullets explode into the water. Alesana fires back.

Martin has moved up the shore to gain a better vantage point.

A suspension footbridge is another thirty yards away—once he crosses it we won’t have any cover.

Ash’s gaze travels to the forested shore opposite our attackers. “Can you make it?” he asks me.

“Yes.” The word comes out garbled, my body already struggling to function in the cold water. My boots are laced and will have to stay on but I wriggle free of my jacket. The oilskin coat sinks as I release it.

“On three,” Ash says, his eyes holding mine. I nod.

“One, two, three.” Alesana starts to shoot as we kick off the SUV, moving toward the shore opposite the road. The current carries us downstream, away from the bridge and our would-be assassins. My legs feel leaden, the cold water numbing them and my wet jeans dragging.

I slip under for a brief moment but surge back to the surface, fear and desperation renewing my strength. I’m not going to drown in a fucking shallow river!

Ash’s arm comes around my waist and he pulls me close. He can stand now. Maneuvering me in front of him, he pushes me toward the shore. Bullets strike the water around us, and Ash makes a sharp sound as my feet find purchase on the river bottom.

I turn back to look, but Ash pushes me forward, forcing me to watch where I’m going. “Get to the tree line.” His voice is tight with pain. Was he shot?

We splash up the bank and digging my hands into the cold, damp soil, I start to climb up to where the trees grow thick and solid. One of Ash’s hands lands on my ass, helping me up the steep incline.

The firing stops as we reach the cover of the trees. I lean against a thick trunk, panting. Ash joins me, his chest also heaving from the exertion. My teeth chatter and the wind brushing against my wet clothing leeches more warmth from my body.

“Take off your clothes,” Ash says. “They will pull heat. Better to have less on.”

“I will if you give me a gun.”

Ash nods. “On my left hip.” He pushes off the tree and stands in front of me, close enough that we are both still protected by the tree. Blood soaks the left sleeve of his coat, mixing with the water so that his entire arm is dripping in a pink cast.

“You’re shot.”

“Take the gun.”

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:46 pm

My hands shaking, I push back his coat and pull the pistol from his holster. The solid weight of it calms me. “Stay under cover,” he says. I look up to find his eyes shining down at me. His gaze drops to my lips. “I need to hear you say it.”

“I’ll be safe,” I say.

A muscle jumps in Ash’s cheek. He doesn’t like that answer. Wants me to say the words he said. But I can’t. Because I won’t stay under cover. There is something I need to do.

Ash doesn’t press me. There isn’t time. He moves to another tree and, extending his uninjured right arm, lays down fire, giving Alesana cover as he swims to us.

I pull off my sweater and let it fall, limp and heavy to the mossy ground. My fingers fumbling, I struggle with the buttons of my flannel shirt.

Peering around the tree trunk reveals Alesana almost to the shore. Beyond him, Martin is crossing the suspension bridge while Ash fires at him, his bullets pinging off the metal with tiny sparks of light.

I peel off my shirt and am down to just a sopping wet T-shirt, my jeans and boots. I start to run. My legs eat up the ground. “Angela!” Ash’s voice calls out behind me. But I’m flying, darting between the trees, my limbs coming back to life.

Ash’s footsteps pound behind me, but he won’t catch me—not with his injury. Not in this thick forest. My legs extend, arms pump, my focus lasered. I’m not letting this opportunity slip past. No fucking way.

Martin's hair flashes in the trees ahead of me, and I dip behind a trunk. Quieting my breathing, I listen. He's not trying to be quiet. Doesn't expect me to stalk him. Martin expects me to flee.

I check my position. My right wrist is in line with the rear of the pistol. My pinkie, ring, and middle fingers are curled around the grip. My trigger finger lies flat against the barrel...for now.

The thumb of my support hand presses against the side of the pistol, and the fingers curl to clutch the pistol with both hands, a hair's breadth less than as hard as I can.

A twig snaps near me and my finger finds the trigger. Martin appears between the trees, running at an angle toward where he imagines me to be. He's looking straight ahead, moving fast, his own gun just as ready as mine.

I wait for him to get a little past me—so that he won't see me emerge from the trees.

Keeping my head erect, my neck and shoulders neutral, I push out with my support thumb as my trigger finger eases back.

Looking through the sight, not at it, with my dominant eye, I find the back of Martin's head. And I fire.

The sound roars in my ears in the same moment that Martin falls. Bending my elbows again, I move toward him, picking my way across the forest floor. Martin's gun lies next to his hand and I kick it away, then prod him with my boot.

His body is still. No billowing breaths. A calmness settles over me as his blood soaks into the earth. The chattering cold from earlier is gone, replaced by a powerful heat.

The sound of an engine breaks the spell. About fifty yards to my right an SUV flashes

through the trees. There is a road there. We are still on the Crown's land. The vehicle comes to a stop and men start to pile out.

I need to find Ash.

I try to be quiet as I run back the way I came, but leaves crunch and sticks crack. The cold starts to seep in again. I see Ash in my peripheral vision at the same moment his hand wraps around my bicep and tugs me against his body.

Ash turns, forcing my front against the tree he was hiding behind, his warmth pressing against my back. My arms are pinned between me and the trunk, my gun still gripped in both hands. "Stay." His whisper is so low it seems to come from his chest as much as the lips at my ear. "Please."

I nod, my cheek scratching against bark. Ash levers his weight off me and puts his back against the thick trunk next to me. His injured arm is curled up, left hand resting against his chest. Ash's right hand is empty. Where is his gun?

He lifts his chin and Alesana's bulk emerges from a nearby tree and then disappears again—elegant, deadly, and somehow almost invisible.

A twig cracks. Someone is coming. Ash raises his right hand, fingers loose, his jaw totally relaxed. I'm staring at him, fascinated because I've never seen him like this—then he moves.

Ash's hand shoots out, ripping a gun from the hand of the man holding it.

I take in a startled breath as he steps sideways and uses that same hand, now holding a pistol, to backhand our attacker.

The man slams into the trunk of the tree, his shoulder taking the brunt of the impact.

He bounces off it, and goes back at Ash who strikes him in the throat with a savage blow.

The man's back hits the tree this time. His body slides down it while he makes horrific choking gasping sounds.

Ash isn't looking at him, though. He flips the gun around like a fucking gunslinger and with blood dripping off his left elbow fires once in the direction of our attackers, shifts his aim and fires again.

Shots echo around us—the forest filled with the blasts of bullets.

Then silence falls. Except for the desperate attempts at breath coming from the man slouched at the base of the tree I'm still leaning into. Staying just like Ash asked me to.

Ash turns his body fully to face the fallen man. He aims the black pistol at him. Then his cobalt gaze finds mine. Ash raises a brow. Do you want to end him?

I take in a stuttering breath and shake my head. No, thanks.

Ash fires. The man slumps, silent.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Ash leans back into the worn leather couch with his eyes closed and body tense as I bend over him. The bullet took out a chunk of his shoulder, leaving a pulpy path behind. Cutting right through one of his tattooed vines. It is still gently weeping blood.

Alesana left me with Ash and a first-aid kit in a cabin the two of them knew about—they didn't say how, but they also never looked lost as we navigated through the forest to it.

Ash didn't even check the GPS on the phone Alesana passed him as he stood over the dead man leaning against the tree.

He just used it to photograph our victims and text their images to Elliot Kendricks.

"He's the one who told me the queen died," Ash said as if in explanation.

Ash is shirtless now, but has dry pants on—black, made of some modern material that is probably waterproof, wicks sweat, and can do your taxes if you ask nicely enough.

My outfit is just as high tech. The black leggings and zip-up jumper are soft against my skin and helping to bring warmth back into my body.

It was all in the backpack Alesana dropped out of our SUV. Dry bags with clothing for each of us, and more weapons. Lots of weapons. We changed in the forest, Alesana and Ash turning their backs to offer privacy. I peeled off my clothing with

numb hands.

Ash couldn't take off his shirt and jacket because of the bullet wound; that had to wait until we reached the cabin. He sat on the couch and I cut them off with scissors, slicing through the sodden material and exposing Ash's skin—cold and clammy.

I laid a dry shirt over him, trying to keep him warm, but it slipped off as I worked, the tension in his body from the pain making it slide away. I'm leaning over him now, my knees on the couch, our bodies close, the warmth between us helping.

I tweeze another piece of fabric from the mess on Ash's shoulder. He's an excellent patient, staying still even as I prod around in his broken flesh. "Almost done," I reassure him.

Once I've cleaned away any obvious debris, I open a saline solution and pour it over the wound, using a clean towel to catch the mix of water and blood seeping out. Ash's fist tightens in his lap. "I'm sorry," I say.

"Don't apologize. You're doing what needs to be done."

I start to bandage the injury, laying clean gauze over the lurid red. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Okay."

"You were really prepared. The backpack with the weapons and dry bags. I mean, do you always have that?"

"We prepped it to take it on the hunt if you decided to go."

"So you knew something like this was possible?"

“Only if the queen died. They couldn’t try this while she was alive. But a tragic hunting accident is an excellent cover. And the new king would be more than happy to ingratiate himself with the Grand administration.”

Omar said he could kill Ash the same way—a hunting accident. Fuck.

“Why did Temperance send me here?” I ask as I tape over the gauze to keep it in place. “Was it just about handing off that damn compass, or did he want me to understand how much danger I’m in?”

“He wants to embed you with Omar. You’d be safe and influential.”

“Embed me.” I shake my head. “Bed being the operative word there,” I mutter.

Ash doesn’t respond. “Temperance expected me to continue to help him—to be Omar’s piece of ass and to listen and report.

” I repeat the words Temperance used whenever he told me to attend a party or sit next to a specific guest at dinner events.

“Yes,” Ash says, and he turns to watch me.

It’s the first time since I started working on his shoulder that he has faced me.

I keep my focus on my work, his gaze on my profile setting off sparks.

“Omar’s influence would keep you safe—killing you would be much more difficult with his protection.

Jordan is a vital ally. Pissing off the royal family would not help Grand’s cause.

You're not worth that to him." His head shifts back again, Ash's focus returning to the window in front of him.

Alesana is out there, making sure our location is secure and scouting possible escape routes. We're still on the Crown's land. Ash has a helicopter pickup location nearby, but the airspace over the grounds is a no-fly zone. We need to get off this estate to escape.

I lay the last piece of tape on Ash's bandage but don't pull back. Instead, I look over at him. His jaw is hard and close. If he turned again our lips would be a breath apart. I don't need to be this close anymore, but I can't seem to move away. "Ash." He swallows. "Look at me."

His eyes shift, but he doesn't face me. So I lean in, my eyes closing. And I press my lips to his cheek—rough stubble over hard heat. The electric grid between us shudders.

The muscles of Ash's shoulder tremble under my fingers. I retreat, opening my eyes. His are closed, squeezed shut. "Ash." It's a whispered plea. Don't pretend this isn't real. I'm not crazy. Tell me I'm not crazy.

My heart beats in my throat. Ga gung, ga gung, ga gung. I take in a fortifying breath and tense to move away. That's when he turns to look at me. His cobalt eyes are on fire. His left hand comes up and dives into my hair, pulling me into a searing kiss.

The simmering field between us ignites. My skin flames.

His kiss burns. I bite his bottom lip and Ash makes this rough, almost angry sound.

As if I'm going to pay for making him so desperate for me.

But I'm just as crazed for him. I shift, moving to straddle his lap.

His right hand grips my ass, possessive and starving.

Using the hand tangled in my hair he holds me back, meets my eyes. "Angela." My name is a prayer and plea. I'm panting, my hands on his chest, on those marvelous tattoos.

"Shut up." I capture his lips again. He groans and meets my passion, sitting up, pressing our chests together, holding me so tight. So perfectly hard.

Ash twists away and I let out a frustrated sound. He's staring at the door. The cabin is small. We're in a sitting room with a stone fireplace—that we couldn't light because of the smoke—bracketed by two windows. The front door is to our left and to our right is a bedroom and a bathroom.

Ash lifts his gun with the hand that moments ago was so twisted in my hair I would have thought he'd never let go. I slide off him as the quick triple knock lets us know it's Alesana.

I shuffle away, touching my swollen lips, feeling like a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar. When Alesana enters, I'm cleaning up the first aid kit. I glance up at him but can't maintain eye contact.

Ash grabs the shirt I laid on him earlier and pulls it over his head. I don't offer to help. If I touch him again, I might actually combust.

Alesana doesn't offer to help either. "It's as we suspected, their perimeter is secure. They don't have the manpower to come looking for us and keep it that way, but it's going to be a bitch to get out of here," he says.

Ash nods and stands, pacing to look out the window. “They will wait until nightfall at least. We need to get out of here before then.”

The first aid kit organized and closed, I turn to the two men. “I’ll call Victoria, she can help.”

Ash scowls. “You trust her?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“We want the same thing...we want...she will help us.”

Omar and Victoria arrive on horseback. They bring the scent of rain, hay, and earth into the cabin with them. Omar crosses to where I stand, eating up the space between us so fast that I see Ash’s hand come to rest on the butt of his gun, though he doesn’t draw it.

Ash is fully dressed, including laced-up black boots, a gun holster criss-crossing his back, and a utility belt with another holster. Omar ignores him, coming into my space and cupping my face, staring down into my eyes. My hands come to his wrists, warm and solid.

“Are you hurt?” he asks, his accent playing with the words, the deep timbre of his voice dropping to a dangerous rumble. If anyone has hurt you, they will pay.

“I’m okay,” I say, my throat tight, heart thundering. “Really. I’m fine.”

His eyes roam my face then down my body, looking for injury. There are some scratches on my arms, but they’re covered by my clothing. Omar sighs and takes a

step back. “Alhamdulillah,” he says in a low voice.

“You rode?” Ash says, addressing Victoria.

“Yes,” she answers. “I thought it best.”

“Does that mean you can’t escort us off the property?” There is no condemnation in his voice, no emotion at all. Iceberg Ash is back.

“I can.” She straightens her shoulders. “But it’s not that simple.”

“We have a helicopter arriving nearby. You just need to get us past the perimeter.”

“No.” Ash raises a brow. Victoria shakes her head. “It’s not that simple. This won’t stop when you’re not on the property. And we can’t. I can’t. I’m not in a position to help.”

“If you can escort us off the estate that will be a great help.” Ash’s voice is even—reasonable. Not even a hint of fear. Meanwhile my heart has moved into my throat and set up a drum circle at the base of my tongue.

Victoria takes a step forward, frowning. “You know they won’t stop.”

“I do,” Ash says.

I feel like the child in the room with her parents arguing over her but not truly understanding what the fight is about.

Victoria turns her focus to me. “Angela. I can help you off this land, but you’re in serious danger. They are...it’s not...things are in motion.”

Omar interrupts. “Angela, may I speak to you privately for a moment?” I glance at the closed bedroom door. “I understand time is of the essence, but I believe I can help. If you’ll just spare me a few minutes.”

Victoria nods at me. She thinks I should hear him out. Ash doesn’t give off even a hint of what he’s thinking. I might as well be looking at a statue trying to figure out what it thinks I should do. “Okay.” I nod.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:46 pm

The bedroom is musty and shadowed with just one curtained window providing weak gray light. Omar walks over and clicks on the bedside lamp, illuminating a brass-framed bed covered in a blue quilt.

He returns to where I stand next to the closed door. Omar takes my hands and then frowns. “Your hands are so cold.” He looks honestly concerned—brow drawn down, eyes tight.

He lifts my hands to his mouth and kisses my knuckles, his lashes fanning. Tingles of awareness travel down my arms. He is gorgeous if nothing else.

“Angela, this isn’t how I wanted to do this,” he says, lowering our joined hands. “But you need security. And I can provide it. No one can protect you the way I can.”

I’m not sure what he’s saying, offering, asking for, so I stay quiet, keeping my eyes wide and expression innocent.

“The moment I saw you, I knew I’d ask you this question.

” He smiles, self-deprecating and almost shy—but not quite.

“But I’d hoped to have more time to win you over, to help you see what I knew the first time my eyes landed on you.

” His gaze is intense, beautiful. “Angela, please marry me. If you agree, I can keep you safe. Forever.”

“Marry you?” I ask, my voice pitched higher than normal.

He smiles, eyes sparkling. “Yes.”

“We hardly know each other. This is...” I pull my hands free and he lets me. “I mean, I see what’s in it for me. Literal survival. But what do you get out of it?” I’m trying to buy time, trying to sort out what is happening.

“You.” His eyes are wide with wonder that it isn’t obvious. “A stunning wife. A brave and powerful partner who understands our world. Who can help me create the story we want to tell.”

No mention of love—but that’s good. He couldn’t love me. Omar wanting to use me for what I am is better than him being deluded into thinking he wants a love marriage after so few hours spent together.

“I don’t know your world,” I protest. Because it’s true. “I’ve never been to the Middle East. I’m not Muslim.”

“You can convert. My mother did.” I shake my head. Take another step back. “They won’t stop coming for you.”

Omar reaches for me, but I scoot away from him, knocking into the bedside table and unsettling the lamp. It crashes to the ground, the bulb popping, dropping the room into deeper shadows.

“Angela.” His voice is gentle. Like I’m a frightened horse and he a steady trainer. But I am not livestock. “Think strategically,” Omar begs. “Please.”

“I’m not putting my head into a noose to avoid the guillotine.” It comes out a hissed whisper.

His frown deepens. “Do you think marriage to me would amount to strangulation?”

I shake my head. “I’m. No. But. I don’t want to stop working.” It sounds so stupid. So very stupid. I don’t want to give up on my dreams. That’s what I mean. I don’t want to be a princess. I never wanted that.

I want to make films. Make my own money.

Have my own power. It’s not that I crave normality—I don’t.

My whole life I’ve felt different, apart.

Separate from other people. Losing my parents young, growing up looking the way I look, with the family history I have.

My innate ability to take on characters as if they were my own. As if I was them.

I’ve always been an outsider and that won’t change no matter whose ring I wear on my finger. But I want the life I planned for, the one I pined for, not this...

Omar watches my face, intent on every micro expression. He thinks he wants to marry me. That he can have some kind of meaningful relationship with me.

“They will come for you again.” It sounds like a promise verging on a threat. “You can’t hide. You won’t be safe.”

The room is suddenly hotter, closer; fear claws at me. Omar steps into my space, his hands sliding into place at my waist. He moves closer, fingers tightening, pulling me into him.

It’s happening fast, I’m barely able to register the heat of his palms, the strength in

his grip before Omar slants his mouth over mine.

This is not the electric fire that sparked between Ash and me. But there is a flame here. Omar pulls back, holds my gaze. “Please marry me.”

A knock at the door saves me from answering. Omar creates some space between us but keeps a possessive hand on my waist. “Yes.”

Ash opens the door. “The helicopter has landed. If we are going to go, we need to move.”

“Omar,” I say. “Can I have a minute with Ash please?”

The prince turns fully to me, giving his back to Ash. “I would like to tell you to take all the time in the world, but we don't have it.” He kisses my forehead and then leaves, slipping past Ash without a glance.

“Close the door,” I say.

Ash does as I ask, his gaze staying on me. It drops to the broken lamp, then comes back to me. There is nothing in his eyes. Cobalt ice.

“Ash,” I whisper. It draws him closer. Just a few steps. Just close enough for the electric grid to light up. “You knew this was a possibility. That we’d be trapped here. That they’d try to kill me.”

“Yes. I knew it was a possibility. If the queen died.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” It’s my turn to take a step toward him.

“You didn’t ask.”

“I didn’t ask.” Is he fucking kidding?

“It’s not my job to advise you, Angela. I’m tasked with keeping you safe.”

“I think we are a little past that.” His jaw tics. Oh, are you getting a little angry, Ice Man? Welcome to the fucking club. I make a sound of annoyance mixed with disgust. “Well, I’m asking you now. What do I do? Omar asked me—” I stop talking because my throat tightens too much. I can’t say it.

“To marry him?” Ash asks. I nod. “I think you should.”

My jaw loosens and my eyes widen. “Even after.” I gesture to the other room, to the kiss. To the painful craving we share.

“Here are your options.” Ash comes closer, bending his neck to speak quietly. “I can take you out of here. Back to your house. We can beef up your security. Cancel nearly every public appearance. But if you try to resume even a semblance of your career, I think they will still manage to kill you.”

I shrink away from him. He closes his eyes, lets out a long breath.

“I can also make you disappear. Hide you. You give up your fame, your life, give up everything, give up any power you have to affect the world. But you’d be safe.

” He opens his eyes and they burn me with their heat.

“I know how to make it so they will never find us.”

I’ve stopped breathing.

“Or you can marry his royal highness. You will be safe.” He pauses, the rest of the

sentence, the real truth hanging in some liminal space for the long breath he takes before continuing.

“You will also be very well positioned to help Temperance and his allies. You can help mold the world you want.” He pauses, his expression softening.

“Those are your three options. Which one do you want?”

He’s holding my gaze. And it hits me: this is really happening.

This is my life.

I’m tangled in a web that has enveloped me since I traded my independence for my freedom the day Temperance walked into my life. Its filaments are hard to perceive, but strong as spun steel.

And now that I can see it, the choice becomes clear. I can carry on at my extreme peril. I can forgo all agency and try to disappear. Or I can take the one option that will allow me to manipulate the strings.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:46 pm

My dog once took a bullet that was intended for me. A bullet that ripped through his chest, narrowly missing his heart, and exited through his shoulder blade, effectively shattering it. This left him unconscious on the floor of my home. Amazingly, this bullet did not kill him.

Ten years ago I adopted Blue as a present to myself after I broke up with my boyfriend one hot, early summer night with the windows open and the neighborhood listening.

The next morning I went straight to the pound in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

Articles on buying your first dog tell you never to buy a dog on impulse.

They want you to be prepared for this new member of your family, to understand the responsibilities and challenges of owning a dog.

Going to the pound because you need something in your life that's worth holding onto is rarely, if ever, mentioned.

I asked the man at the pound to show me the biggest dogs they had.

He showed me some seven-week-old Rottweiler-German shepherd puppies that he said would grow to be quite large.

Then he showed me a six-month-old shepherd that would get pretty big.

Then he showed me Blue, the largest dog they had.

The man called him a Collie mix and he was stuffed into the biggest cage they had, but he didn't fit.

He was as tall as a Great Dane but much skinnier, with the snout of a collie, the markings of a Siberian husky, the ears and tail of a shepherd and the body of a wolf, with one blue eye and one brown.

Crouched in a sitting position, unable to lie down, unable to sit all the way up, he looked at me from between the bars, and I fell in love.

"He's still underweight," the man in the blue scrubs told me as we looked at Blue. "I'll tell you, lady, he's pretty but he's skittish. He sheds, and I mean sheds. I don't think you want this dog." But I knew I wanted him. I knew I had to have him. He was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

Blue cost me \$108. I brought him home, and we lived together for ten years.

He was, for most of our relationship, my only companion.

But when I first met Blue, a lifetime ago now, I had family and friends.

I worked at a shitty coffeehouse. I was young and lost; I was normal.

Back then, at the beginning of this story, before I'd ever seen a corpse, before Blue saved my life, before I felt what it was like to kill someone in cold blood, I was still Joy Humbolt.

I'd never even heard the name Sydney Rye.

Chapter Two

My foot tapped against the spotted linoleum as the subway squealed over the Manhattan Bridge, and clacked up the East Side. I scolded myself for my constant tardiness and vowed that from that day forth I would change my life. I would get organized. I would become better.

Three hours later, a pastel-clad woman with bad hair asked if she could have a macchiato, which didn't make any sense.

A woman wearing pastels, obviously from a place where they still wore scrunchies, asking for a shot of espresso with a touch of frothed milk on top.

She should have been asking for a Frappuccino just like all the others who walked into the shop assuming that it was a Starbucks, because who could possibly imagine that there was coffee that was not Starbucks?

"Do you know what a macchiato is?" I asked.

The woman smiled benignly. "Yes, I want a caramel one." She obviously had no idea what she was talking about. You don't put caramel in a macchiato.

"So what you're saying is that you would like a shot of caramel and a shot of espresso with a touch of frothed milk on top."

"Why not? Let's give it a go." She smiled at me and I thought, this is amazing.

She is willing to try a new drink—not only a new drink but a drink that she practically created for herself.

Had anyone else ever ordered this? I swear, in that moment, I was filled with a renewed sense of life.

I had been wrong—not all dowdy women dressed in pastels were unadventurous lemmings.

"Oh, this isn't what I ordered," she said, looking down at my small cup of perfect caramel macchiato from above her two chins.

"Yes it is. It is a shot of caramel and a shot of espresso with a touch of frothed milk on top." I had been wrong. She was like all the rest of them.

"No, I've ordered this before at Starbucks and it's iced and in a very large plastic cup with a straw. It's not at all like this," she said as she waved her pudgy hand at my creation.

"Actually, this," I pointed at the little cup, "is exactly what you ordered.

Exactly." I looked at the line of tourists that snaked out the door behind her onto 60th Street and continued, "I asked you if you wanted a shot of caramel and a shot of espresso with a touch of frothed milk.

You said, 'Sure, let's give it a go.' "I used a high-pitched nasal voice to imitate her.

"Now, I will make you a new drink," I said, "but it won't be any Starbucks knockoff and you won't get whatever it is you want unless you first admit that you are an idiot.

"The woman's face turned red and all her features made a mad dash to the center, leaving her with only cheek, forehead, and chin.

"That's right," I was really rolling now, "an idiot, a dumb-ass who has no idea what is in her coffee.

I bet you don't know that Frappuccino is a Starbucks name, not the name of a real

coffee drink.

Frappuccino is a trademark, not a beverage.

" I was still explaining the finer points of coffee in an outdoor voice to the tourist when my manager, a guy named Brad who always seemed to be staring at my tits, came out from the back and fired me.

Although the way I stormed out of there, you would think I had quit.

I threw my apron on the floor and told Brad to fuck himself and stop masturbating in the coffee grounds. Yeah, the customers liked that one.

By the time I got home, I was crying.

It is not often that the weight of daily existence catches me in public.

I usually have to be in bed, alone, in the dark.

But this time I was standing outside my apartment crying so hard I could barely get my key in the door.

The thing is, I wasn't crying because I got fired or because I'd broken up with my boyfriend, Marcus.

My job was stupid, and Marcus was an ass.

Breaking up with that dick-wad was something on the list of "shit I've done lately that I can be proud of," but it was pretty much the only thing.

I got the door open and Blue whined and circled me, desperately happy at my return.

I sat down, my back against the door, crying.

Blue nuzzled me and licked my face. I hugged him and he squirmed.

"You've only known me less than a day and already you like me this much, huh?

" I asked him, sniffing back my tears. He flopped onto his back, exposing his belly and warbled at me in answer.

Blue followed me down the hall and into the kitchen, where my answering machine sat blinking. "Five messages," I told Blue, wiping my face with the back of my hand. He leaned his weight against me and nuzzled my stomach.

I hit play and heard Marcus's voice. "Hey, listen.

" I heard Marcus's tongue slip out to wet his lips.

My chest tightened. "I was thinking I'd come over later and we could...

I don't know...talk or something. Call me back.

" Beep. "Hey, it's me again. Look, I'm in the neighborhood.

I guess you're not home yet. I think I'm just going to head over...

all right, um, bye." Beep. "What the fuck, Joy. I was just at your house and there was a huge fucking dog trying to kill me. I—" Beep.

"Your fuckin' machine sucks, and where the fuck did you get that vicious dog?

I mean, we just broke up last night and you already have a new dog.

I don't know what that means, but I just don't know about you anymore.

" Beep. "Listen, just call me, OK?" Beep.

I exhaled. "Did you really attack him?" Blue wagged his tail and sat.

"I suppose it would be your natural instinct," I hiccuped.

"He was invading your home, right?" Blue looked at me blankly.

"You don't look mean." He really didn't. He was tall and very skinny.

I could see his ribs under his thick fur coat.

With the snout of a collie, the markings of a Siberian husky, and the body of a wolf, with one blue eye and one brown, he was a very unique mutt.

It occurred to me that I knew nothing about this dog.

Our history was barely 12 hours long. I'd basically moved a large, hairy stranger into my house.

The phone rang as I stared at my new dog, a little confused.

"Hey." It was my brother, James. "You want to get some drinks tonight?"

"Yeah sure, I have a lot to tell you."

"Anything good?"

"Not really. Well, I guess one thing." Blue had curled himself into a ball at my feet.

"How about Nancy's at—" I looked at the clock. It was 6:30. "How about a half hour?" I asked, planning a quick walk around the block for Blue.

"Perfect," James said.

The sun was slipping behind the brownstones across the street and turning the sky pink when I left for Nancy's. "Hey," said the guy on the corner who always said hey. I ignored him. "Hey, pretty lady, you got a beautiful ass," he tried again. I watched the concrete and power-walked away.

Ten minutes later I was at Nancy's, a low-key lesbian bar with a nice backyard. If you wanted to talk to a stranger you could, but there was no pressure. If you wanted to take someone home you could, but again there was no pressure.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:46 pm

I ordered a 'Tequila Gimlet, straight up'.

The bartender, whose name I was pretty sure was Diane, nodded and moved off to make my drink.

My face, reflected in the mirror behind the bar, peered from between a bottle of Blue Curacao and Midori.

I needed a haircut. My fashionable bangs had grown out, and now I just pushed them behind my ears.

Last night's fight with Marcus and my early-morning journey to the pound had left puffy, blue-tinted circles under my eyes.

All those tears had left the white around my gray irises streaked with red and—I leaned forward a little to make sure—my upper eyelids a bizarre orange.

Diane placed a martini glass brimming with a sheer red liquid on the bar, and I handed her a ten. I moved toward the backyard, trying not to spill my drink all over my hand while spilling my drink all over my hand.

One overly cute couple sat in the soft candlelight cooing.

I took a table close to the door and artificial lighting.

As the tequila burned in my mouth, I wrangled with the memories of the past 24 hours.

I usually shoved thoughts I didn't like to the back of my mind.

But they never went away—they're always back there—lurking right on the other side of my self-control.

James appeared in the doorway, smiling, holding a Tequila Gimlet, splash of cran (but his was on the rocks).

He was a head taller than me at around six feet.

We shared the same gray eyes and blonde hair, though James's was short and styled while mine was reaching past my shoulder blades.

Edging towards 30, James liked to talk about how his green-bean physique was morphing into eggplant. But the guy was still a pole.

"You look like shit," James said as he sat down. I smiled weakly and slurped my tequila. "Seriously, what the fuck happened to you?"

"Well, I broke up with Marcus"—this elicited a gasp—"and bought a dog."—an even bigger gasp—"Oh, and I got fired." I raised my glass in a mock toast to myself and polished it off.

"I talked to you yesterday! All this happened in one day?" I nodded, tried to finish my drink, then realized I already had. I went and brought back another.

"It's not really surprising," I said as I sat down. "We all knew it was coming."

James nodded. "Are you OK?" he asked.

"Well, I did lose my job because I went kinda crazy at work."

"Crazy?"

I told him about the plump tourist, her disorder, my insane reaction, and Brad's management decision. Then I told him about the masturbation comment.

James laughed. "I love it," he said. "I'm proud of you, Joy. That job sucked. Marcus was a tool. You've got a whole new fresh start."

"Easy for you to say. How exactly am I supposed to pay my rent?"

"You'll figure it out. Now, tell me about this dog. I can't believe you're such an asshole that you went out and got a dog because you broke up with your boyfriend. It's so pathetic."

"You're a real sweetheart."

"Somebody has to tell you."

"Jesus, I wanted a dog, so I went and got a dog."

"Oh, this was something planned?" James leaned his elbows on the table with mischief dancing in his eyes. "It's just a coincidence that you happened to break up with your boyfriend the night before." He smiled at me.

"Oh, just shut up. So what if I bought a dog to console myself?" He was right, of course. I had gone and bought a dog because I broke up with my boyfriend. And, yes, that was pathetic.

"So, what kind of dog?"

"He's really beautiful. He has one blue eye and one brown. Oh, oh, the best part is he attacked Marcus when he tried to come over." James laughed. "I know. Can you

fucking believe it? He left me five messages today." I held up my hand with all five fingers extended.

"Your dog attacks people?"

"Not people, intruders," I said with more confidence than I felt. For all I knew Blue attacked all sorts of people. Maybe it wasn't that Marcus was breaking into the house. Maybe Blue would attack any douchebag we passed on the street. The thought made me laugh.

James smiled at me. "Not to talk badly about Marcus, Lord knows he was sexy as hell, but the guy is kind of an idiot. Not to mention that he tried to control you way too much. Low self-esteem fucks up a lot of men." James sat back, his hypothesis fully expressed.

I laughed. "I guess. Whatever, I'm over it." I sat up and scooped up my drink taking a long sip. "I'm so over it."

"Well, are you going to call him back? I don't think you should. Make a clean break."

I knew he was right, but I also knew that I had no control over myself whatsoever and would probably call him. "How's Hugh?" I asked, changing the subject. Hugh was James's boyfriend of four years.

"He's good," James smiled. "Actually, we're really good ..."

Our offer was accepted." Hugh and James had spent the last eight months trying to find an apartment.

Two months ago, they'd found it. A fifth-floor walk-up with a roof deck, two bedrooms (OK, a bedroom-and-a-half) and a kitchen that was recently renovated.

"Holy shit. That's awesome. How much?"

"It's a little out of our price range, but you always pay more than you want, right?"

Later, I stumbled into my building blind-drunk.

I climbed the steps humming to myself, swinging my keys.

I was feeling pretty good. Sure, I had no job, no boyfriend, and a weirdo of a dog, but life was not so bad, not so bad at all.

I would make it; I could fix it. Everything was going to be just fine.

Blue greeted me at the door. "Hi, boy." I crouched and rubbed his ears.

He nuzzled my chest, knocking me against the wall.

Blue wrapped himself in my arms. I breathed into his neck, smelling the pound.

"We're going to be OK," I said into his neck.

"I'm going to take care of us. Starting tomorrow, I'm going to fix this mess of a life of ours. " Then I passed out.