

Sevyn

The Smoke & Fire Series

Adult Paranormal Romance

Book #4

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Warning: This book depicts scenes of violence and strong sexual content that is intended for Adults 18+

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Chapter 1

Sevyn

The yelling would not cease. One moment it grew intense and the next it faded into the background. Sevyn was lured from the grips of sleep by someone's aggressive shouting. She shook her head a few times to ward off the lingering effects of drowsiness and jumped when an urgent call struck her eardrum once more.

"Throw down your fucking weapon and exit the vehicle!" repeated a forceful voice.

Disoriented, it took Sevyn a moment to realize she was the one being yelled at by a voice that was way too loud to come from a man. Her mind struggled to restore her body's functions. In spite of her difficulties, she began to comprehend the gravity of the words being yelled.

"Throw the weapon down, now. Roll down the window and let me see your hands."

The pieces started to build a horrific scene; and the worse part, she was at the epicenter.

Sevyn was afraid she had finally pushed her enemy too hard. Her need to avenge her mother's death had placed her right into the hands of the monsters she was hunting.

Since age fifteen, she'd been prodding and poking a hornet's nest, searching for the monsters that murdered her mother. No matter how dangerous the hunt, she refused stop. Hunting had become her obsession.

Now, she feared she was trapped in a hopeless situation. Odds were stacking and they weren't in her favor, as her chances for survival grew dimmer with every passing moment.

She sat in the cab of a musty pickup truck. The rearview mirror showed a shotgun hanging haphazardly behind her head against a cracked, tinted back window. She saw the barrel of a shiny weapon. Its constant motion was perplexing, until she realized it was in her shivering hand. Although there was a small crack in the window, it didn't prevent the cold reach of February from finding her.

A threadbare mechanics jumpsuit discolored by splatters of paint, dirt and grim clung loosely to her body. Gas seeped from the jumpsuit. The intense stench of fumes watered her eyes and labored her breathing.

The 9 millimeter in her hand was aimed at nervous cops as they yelled angrily for her to drop the weapon. Along with their shouts, one of the cops used a voice amplifier. Her view through the windshield showed at least eight cops. Twitchy trigger fingers caressed the levers of service pistols as Glocks and 9 millimeters were aimed at her from every vantage point. The cops located to the east and west of her aimed pump-action shotguns.

Tape and rope kept her immobile. It held her in place along with the weapon she desperately wanted to, but couldn't drop. The cracked window and mildew-tasting rag in her mouth muffled her screams, preventing her from vocalizing her distress to the cops outside. It had taken her a while to discern that she was being address as *Darrell Wilkins*.

As a government agent, it was Sevyn's job to know the ins and outs of the criminal world. Darrel Wilkins had recently taken credit for killing three cops.

Why in the hell do they think I'm Darrel Wilkins?

The clues sprouted from her brain as her situation continued to fully reveal answers. Her posed position and the gun taped to her hand was a death sentence. The gag in her mouth stopped her

from identifying herself. Her left arm was cuffed to the driver's side door and even her legs were bound. Head and shoulder movements were the only functions that remained.

The culprits who posed her purposely used the cop killer Wilkins' truck and identity as far as the angry cops were concerned. She was posed for execution, her true identity obscured by the conditions of her surroundings. The tint in the side windows, her dark clothes, and the overcast Seattle sky all kept her from being positively identified.

The setup was well-thought-out and executed. She was trapped in a cop killer's truck, pointing a gun she couldn't put down, at cops who likely wanted nothing more than revenge. If that wasn't bad enough, her gun hand had gone numb and her jumpsuit had been soaked in gas.

Her arm was suspended, held in place by rope. Thin rope attached to the ceiling pulled her arm up as opposing rope tied around the console pulled her arm down in the opposite direction. The incredible amount tape and rope used to secure her to the seat did its job as she sat unable to escape or break free.

The lighter tint of the windshield allowed her an unobstructed view of the cops. She didn't have to be outside the truck to know the cops saw only a suspect pointing a gun at them.

She desperately wanted to speak, but the rag soaked every drop of moisture in her mouth, and she couldn't spit it out. The dash's digital clock announced she had opened her eyes ten minutes ago. It was only a matter of time before the yelling became flying bullets.

"Hummm. Mmmm," she groaned uselessly into the unpleasant rag blocking her vocal exclaim for help.

The shouts outside intensified, silencing her moans. Even her shivering ceased. Due to loss of circulation, she feared any attempt to move her numb gun hand. Any sudden movement of the gun would give the twitchy-fingered cops the green light they needed to pull their triggers.

"Throw down your fucking weapon and exit the vehicle!"

She clung to life surrounded by gun-wielding vultures waiting to pounce on her with bullets.

There was no order to their yelling. Some barked, some screamed, and some were straight forward in telling her they were going to blow her brains out. All of them seemed to agree on one thing—she needed to drop the weapon.

Sevyn struggled. Hunting and underestimating her enemy had landed her in this deadly situation.

While hunting monsters, she had shot one of the inhuman bastards in the chest twice and he kept coming. Chest shots usually slowed them down, but not this particular one. He had actually smirked at her before she was struck over the head from behind. The powerful blow turned her light into darkness. She expected her enemy to kill her, but this was worse.

She was set to be unintentionally murdered by cops, who had no idea their world was a dark haven of terror they couldn't even imagine.

There wasn't a damn thing she could do about her pending execution but sit there and look like a dangerous gun-wielding suspect.

Her ability to move faster than the average human had always been her advantage. Being able to move faster meant she could anticipate faster; therefore, she wasn't looking forward to seeing her death coming before it got to her.

Sevyn had been recruited into a Top Secret government spy program—Top. The agency apparently had eyes on her for years. They actually had footage of her making her first kill. It had taken her three years to track one of her mother's killers; but at eighteen, she was an amateur and her sloppy execution had gotten her caught. Top was not like any agency she'd heard about or knew of. Instead of punishing her for killing a man in cold blood, they recruited her.

At the time, she had no way of knowing she hadn't actually killed a person; nevertheless, she didn't need much convincing to accept the Agency's proposal.

She was provided a few years of training and at twenty-one, Top activated her. With the training she received from Top, Sevyn's fighting, tracking, and killing skills improved tenfold. She used those skills to track her mother's murderers.

The flicker of some unknown object caught her attention and sent her eyes in the direction of one of two stands of trees. Sevyn studied the area with probing eyes until she made out the outline of a sniper, nearly camouflaged in the dying foliage left clinging to a far-off tree. His scope should allow him to see her ropes and tape; and he would, hopefully, tell the rest of the group she was being setup. At least, that's what she hoped would happen.

One of the officers advancing on her location shouted once again for her to put the gun down. His shouts grew into desperate pleas.

"Please, put the gun down. You don't have to die here today."

Sevyn prayed the sniper's scope would help him figure out her dilemma before his anxious friends started firing at her.

The advancing officer stopped directly in front of the truck. His voice rose octaves above the other cops who never stopped yelling for her to drop the gun.

The blast of a gun surprised her as much as it surprised the cops. The cop in front of the truck ducked for cover using the truck's front end to shield himself. She wondered who fired the shot because she definitely wasn't shooting.

Sevyn slouched as low as she could manage, preparing herself for the firestorm of bullets that were about to come her way. Her body shook with enough tension and fear, the cuffs on her left wrist clinked against the un-paneled door. If the bullets didn't kill her, any spark or hot piece of metal would ignite her gasoline soaked jumpsuit.

The anxious cops scrambled for cover but their eyes didn't stray away from Sevyn. Couldn't they tell she wasn't the one shooting?

There was no synchronized call to fire. The blast of guns was the cops' call to action. The first bullet, thankfully, missed its mark, penetrating the body of the truck and not hers. The second, however, flew through the front windshield and whizzed past her face, like a tiny fighter jet. Shards of glass flew into her face as she fought to protect herself. Shooting pain came alive on the exposed areas of her skin, making her cry out and struggle desperately against her restraints.

Like the projectile of death it was, another bullet headed straight for her head. She yanked her body, forcefully, pulling herself down enough that the bullet narrowly missed her forehead.

Having speed in her defensive arsenal had saved her many times, but how many bullets could she dodge before her luck ran out?

Her sharp jerk to avoid the next bullet snapped her gun hand; and she, inadvertently, shot at the cops. The bullet exited below the rearview mirror and flew through the windshield. The shot was aimed high enough that it would thankfully sail above the group of determined cops.

Shards of glass dug into Sevyn's face and neck so forcefully, she couldn't do anything but duck and force her eyes to shuffle open and close. She needed to see which way to duck.

She cried out, but only muffled moans escaped her.

A bullet snuck past her view, ricocheted off the metal of the gun in her hand and shot into her forearm. The searing hot pain erupted through her arm and forced the numbness away. Tears seeped through Sevyn's tightly shut eyes. Her cries intensified as did her horror.

Pain was put on hold as she dodged another bullet in the nick of time. The loud *thump* of bullets pelting the body of the truck had her twitching and wiggling in the seat. Every shot could

have been death coming to meet her. In her attempt to get as low as she could, she stretched her suspended and now shot arm to its limit. As the rope dug into her flesh, the bullet in her arm burned, like acid eating her flesh from the inside out.

The driver's side window shattered, bathing her in glass as a bullet narrowly missing the top of her head. The bullet came so close to killing her, it knocked her wig lopsided. To preserve her identity, she usually wore wigs when she hunted or worked undercover. Closing her eyes, she prayed out loud and awaited the final shot that would take her life. She wasn't ready to die, but her immediate horror made her life literally flash before her eyes.

Her biggest regrets were not seeing her family one last time and not finding and killing the rest of the monsters that aided in her mother's death. Her need for revenge had finally consumed her.

As abruptly as the shooting started, it stopped. The dead silence was intimidating as she awaited the torturous sound of more gunfire. The eerie silence made the drip-drop of blood flowing from her injured arm sound like the last beats of a dying heart.

Had someone finally noticed she was tied to the truck and not an active shooter? Had they noticed that she wasn't Darrell Wilkins?

She did her best not to squirm or move. Pretending to be dead would help more than trying to explain her situation. She kept her head slumped forward and peeked from her tearstained eyes.

The tap of a hard-bottomed shoe scrapping against the pavement grew louder. One of the cops approached.

"Fuck," the cop grumbled.

Another cop in the background yelled, "Hold your fucking fire god-dammit!"

At her window now, the one that approached stood at an angle that Sevyn couldn't turn to see him.

He yelled, "Put the gun down. Let me see both your hands."

Sevyn couldn't follow the officer's commands. All she could do was remain immobile and pray the cop would step a little closer. The cloudy sky dimmed the daylight, so he needed to move closer to see the full extent of her situation.

The sound of the cop's nervous breaths rushed from his mouth. Advancing closer, he quietly assessed her. His voice boomed through the busted window.

"It's a female. Someone tied her to the truck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuuuuuuuck!" he shouted with a thunderous roar.

The head of the cop, the one that had taken refuge in front of the truck, appeared. Sevyn peeked through one squinted eye, not sure of how soon to reveal that she was alive.

The man in front of the truck stared, unmoving. Sevyn imagined she was a sight. Sitting there tethered to a truck that had been through its own little war.

Confident enough to raise her head, she glanced at the cop that stood at her window. He gasped and drew back a bit, astonished that she was still alive. She raised her head higher, so he would see the rag in her mouth.

A shaky hand reached out.

"Ma'am, I'm going to remove the rag."

Thank God, she thought.

As soon as the rag was removed from her mouth, she started coughing. Her dry and scratchy throat became ignited by the fire she must have unknowingly swallowed.

The cop reached further into the truck.

"Whoever did this, they did a number on you, lady. Damn." He talked low, more to himself than her. "Who'd you piss off?"

Sevyn struggled to speak, but sound avoided her raw throat. Her ragged voice squeaked, unable to form words, as she fought to tell the cop who she was. Her attention was diverted, however. Her quick eye caught something much worse than gun-wielding cops lurking.

The bastard, or one of the sons of bitches who had arranged this entire setup, was stooping in a stand of bushes that fought the cold to stay alive. He was far enough away that the cops hadn't noticed him. He had likely been there the entire time, waiting to bear witness to her death and was likely the asshole that fired the first shot. The cops had been too busy ogling her to even notice him. An evil smile creased his pale face.

"Next time," his lips conveyed to her.

The bastard's eyes were as sharp and as quick as hers. He knew she saw him.

"Ma'am," the cop at her window called, but her eyes remained on the devil in the bushes.

He knew she wasn't going to alert the cop to his location because she lived for the hunt. His nonverbal words were a promise that he was going to kill her the next time they encountered each other.

Knowing the cops weren't aiming to kill her anymore, Sevyn's body sparked with an untapped fury that heightened her need to kill the demon posing as a man.

He was bold enough to stand; and as the pale creature started to turn away, Sevyn mouthed silently, "You're dead."

His smirk confirmed that he'd gotten her message.

The cop's commanding voice drew her from her silent promise as he snapped his fingers in front of her face.

"Ma'am, are you okay? Can you speak? What's your name?"

Her voice found its way through the rough patches of her throat.

"My name is Dana Diallo. My father is William Diallo."

She knew that by giving her father's name, she would be treated with more respect.

The cop's mouth flew wide open.

"William Diallo, the self-made millionaire, entrepreneur, and diplomat? Get outta here."

I wish I could.

Her father was somewhat of a celebrity for his business wealth. He'd made it into countless money magazines and had been interviewed by some of the most popular talk show hosts. His diplomatic status increased his celebrity status, making it spill into her and her brother's lives.

Somewhere in the distance, a cop yelled a late announcement.

"Lower your weapons. Lower your weapons. She's been setup. It's not Wilkins."

The truck door squeaked open as the cop announced that he would cut her loose. Finally, Sevyn released the pressure she had on her injured arm. She relished the fact that she wasn't going to die today. This meant she would have another chance to catch her mother's killers.

The biggest question on her mind: was she going to get them before they got her?

Chapter 2

Dana

The rain poured in sheets, washing the world of its evil. At least that's what Danalyn Diallo believed. The sound of it relaxed her, the sight of it hypnotized her, and the beauty of it eased her mind. Rain was her therapy, a form of meditation that kept her sane in a world filled with chaos.

From her side of the window, her fingers traced the beautiful droplets as they drizzled down the outside of her windowpane. She hated to turn away from the glorious view, but she needed to dress and prepare for another day.

Beautiful, classy, and smart were words she heard people use to describe her. The words were descriptors Dana aimed to make true when presenting herself to her family and friends.

No one in her family knew her as Sevyn, nor would she ever tell them. As a Top asset, her agency had a hand in helping her downplay the truck scene that had gotten her shot a few months ago. A mugging gone wrong was what was released to the public. All of the cops involved that day had written their reports to match the far-fetched mugging story. Dana didn't know the details of how Top had convinced all of those cops to lie, but she was grateful.

Top had a number of different cleanup crews. Apparently, crime scenes were not the only kinds of scenes they were equipped to clean.

Reminding herself she was the dutiful daughter now and not the spy, she thought of her family. Her brothers, Daniel and David, co-ran the family business, Diallo Investments. Although her father was CEO of the investment firm, William chose to embrace his job as a diplomat. He specialized in foreign relations between the US and a number of participating nations.

Dana had no clear idea of what her father's specialty entailed because he never spilled any of his job secrets. She assumed she had an idea of what diplomats do, until she found out she didn't. Job secrets and secret jobs was an interesting paradox that she shared with her father. Although they harbored deep concerns for one another, they held an unspoken respect for each other's secrets.

Dana defied many of the requests and demands of the Diallo men. She would never be content with being a stay-at-home prize to some man that likely didn't deserve her. She played by her own rules when it came to men, and it drove her father and brothers crazy.

They claimed she gave them fits. All she ever heard was how hardheaded she was and that she was too tough and too hard on men. They teased that the docile gene skipped her. To appease them, she acted her part, to a certain point.

To appease her, her father made her a portfolio manager in the family's investment firm. Her passion was never to work for her father, but the job proved to be a valuable cover. She was certain her brothers never expected that she would be good at the job, let alone great at it.

The only real time Dana spent away from her family was when her father allowed her to attend college across the country in New York. She had begged and pleaded to go to New York because that was where her secret hunt for her mother's killers had led. There was only one reason her father allowed her to go. His best friend lived in New York and had agreed to keep eyes on Dana.

Although she'd earned a business degree, Dana was certain her family never intended for her to use it. They simply wanted her groomed and educated enough to marry one of the millionaire suitors they had handpicked for her. When she earned her series 7, 63, 31, and 24 investment licenses, as well as life, health and long-term care insurance licenses—all in record time—her father and brothers started taking her seriously in the business world.

Now four years into building one of the firm's most lucrative client lists, and despite her brothers leaning on her for advice and investment ideas, the men in her family continued to treat her like the black sheep.

Dana didn't mind being their little sheep as long as they relaxed some of the formal, prim and prudish standards they expected her to maintain. Although labeled the troublemaker because of

her combative—and against the grain—nature, she had her father wrapped around her finger and usually got away with murder.

She enjoyed the financial security her family provided, but Dana refused to bask solely in the good life while the real world went to hell. She knew from her experiences as an agent that the real world operated under veils of evil so insidious, it would make heads spin. She didn't want to be soft and unaware, so she refused to keep herself sheltered from reality.

Dana loved her family, but she was more inclined to find ways to make the world safer verses picking out china, or choosing flowers, or attending teas and balls.

Dana's mother, Natalya Pajari Diallo, had been the consummate mother and socialite. When Dana was younger, she was being groomed to follow in her mother's footsteps. She had never set foot in a public school, had never been without a maid or butler, and had never shopped at Wal-Mart. She didn't know what it was like to be on a budget or go without any luxury in life due to finances. She'd never washed her own clothes or dishes and never cooked.

Despite all of the comforts and security in Dana's life, her mother had died during a horrific home invasion. Dana had not only witnessed her mother's death, she'd been in the room when it happened.

The crime had done irreparable damage to her young psyche. Her ranting of monsters eating her mother's flesh had landed her in the offices of countless shrinks. The fact that no wounds had been found on her mother's body led her family to believe she had truly suffered a psychotic break after seeing her mother's death.

Her father, as much as he fought to hide it, had never gotten over his wife's death either. He blamed himself, saying he hadn't done enough to keep her protected.

The horrific events of the home invasion had changed Dana's focus, drastically. She stepped away from following in her mother's footsteps and no longer shied away from the harsh realities in life that most wealthy people ignored.

Dana perfected the art of looking the part. She strived to maintain a stylish, classy and sometimes even elegant persona. One would think her a princess instead of the daughter of a wealthy diplomat. She enjoyed the spoils of the life her father provided her; it was also the perfect cover to hide her more dangerous activities. Her hunger to seek out and kill the men that had killed her mother was, at times, overwhelming.

At only twenty-four, her father harped on her constantly about getting married and bearing him grandchildren. Her brothers wanted to become uncles. She was the only woman in a family of men and not having children was a step from being a crime in her family.

She deflected some of her responsibilities as the dutiful daughter and sister, but the men had no intention of giving up easily. They often invited the wealthiest and most eligible men to events, in an effort to spark her interest; but Dana was on to their tactics. Helping with the family business was her way of keeping them off her case and proved, just a little, to them that women could be more than just...kept.

Her daily routine—go into her office, make people money, solve financial problems, and attend meetings—was boring.

Currently, she was in the midst of ditching the latest security officer her father insisted she have with her at all times. The guard awaited her reappearance from the lady's room of the restaurant she requested to eat at. She sneaked past the guard and walked towards her car.

Hopping into her Mercedes, she drove away, glad for the few hours of freedom she would enjoy before heading home. After her mother's death, her father sheltered her and kept her under protective eyes, so ditching a protective detail became a sport.

Their family's home was protected like a fortress. Her brothers, although they would never admit it, had literally run from their home when they turned eighteen. Dana remained at the insistence of her father. She considered running away and becoming a career spy, but love for her family, however crazy they all were, kept her from leaving.

Her father was convinced that hired protection was the key to keeping them safe. As a result, he had one rule; Dana could do as she pleased as long as she allowed him to protect her. He had relaxed the protection rule drastically, until her latest incident ended with her being shot in the arm.

The last few guards her father hired had been of a much higher caliber than usual. They weren't so easy to lose. The guard she'd left guarding the empty restroom called her father and quit after the incident. She had executed one too many disappearing acts on the man. It took her father less than a week to announce he'd found her a promising replacement. All of the bodyguards he hired were promising until she found a way to make them quit.

One of the maids peeked into her room.

"Ms. Diallo, your father would like to see you in the study."

"Okay, I'll be down. Thanks."

It was time to meet the newest *victim*—guard—her father hired to babysit her. Without even giving the poor man a chance, Dana started to formulate a way to get rid of him. She didn't need protection, nor did she want any. Protection only got in her way when it was time for her to hunt.

Chapter 3

Neal

Neal Erickson had been a government agent for five years. He didn't understand why he was assigned a job babysitting the daughter of a wealthy diplomat. He was never one to boast about his abilities; but he usually received more serious jobs, like tracking murderers or taking down rogue combatants. He didn't know whether he should be upset about the downgrade, or happy as it could serve as a reprieve from his otherwise hard work.

Trained for combat, the last thing he wanted was to babysit some spoiled, rich woman. But, he was never one to complain, so he accepted the assignment and kept his comments and opinions to himself.

If there was one thing he'd learned in his line of work, nothing was ever as it seemed. The file he received from Top communicated an unbelievable story about his new assignment, Dana Diallo. The information had him questioning how she'd ended up in a situation that ended with her being fired upon and shot by cops. Neal approached his new assignment determined to keep an open mind.

He'd been in Seattle three days, and the rain never stopped. Seattle must be the city that coined the saying, "April showers bring May flowers" because the April showers were in full bloom. He noticed that most of the people didn't mind the rain, but it was something he would have to get used to.

He was greeted at the front gate of the secluded estate by an armed guard that conducted himself with military exactness. Checking his paperwork and ID, the guard also examined his rental car with some type of sophisticated scanner that belonged at the entrance to the White House instead of the entrance to a private residence.

The guard opened large outer gates and pointed Neal to a secondary entrance that led to a massively guarded mansion. Neal was greeted by another armed guard, waiting in the driveway with an umbrella.

"Hello, sir. My name's Howard."

He reached out a hand. "Nice to meet you. I'm Neal."

Turning down the offered umbrella, Neal shook water from his collar and followed the man. The entranceway opened to a barred walkway that led to the actual entrance—two large metal doors. Neal observed. The man used a key card as well as punched in a combination of numbers to gain access into the house.

Surprised, Neal noticed more guards posted at discreet locations within the house. Apparently, the diplomat was serious about protecting his family. This place was fortified and guarded like a prison.

The house appeared larger on the inside than it appeared from the outside. It exuded a high level of sophistication and class. It showcased beautifully crafted French-style furnishings with modern allure. Areas on the walls where pictures normally hung had original handcrafted and carved art etched directly into the wall. There were life-size statues and vases that put museum showpieces to shame.

It was plain to see that the Diallos were wealthy. The diplomat's salary was probably pennies compared to what he actually made as a successful business owner. Being a diplomat, however, garnered a certain level of power that most successful people thrived on. Despite what the public thought they knew, diplomatic immunity had many definitions and was one of the best perks of the job.

Neal was escorted to a large study. The size and well-stocked bookshelves made the space resemble the lobby of an exclusive library.

Howard instructed Neal to take a seat. The man hung on to a curious smile. He seemed to be itching to leak information that Neal wasn't sure he wanted to hear. It was too soon to start hearing rumors.

When Neal didn't comment, the man started anyway.

"If you're here for the daughter, good luck, buddy." His words were slow and deliberate. "She. Is. A. Handful. When she's not charming her way into getting what she wants, she uses her cleverness to trick her way into getting what she wants.

"I must warn you, one of her most lethal weapons is her beauty. It should be against the law to be that damn beautiful. She doesn't flaunt her looks, but it's difficult not to notice. Let me warn you ahead of time, everyone her father has hired in the last few months has ended up quitting or requesting a transfer. They all claimed she was too much to handle."

Neal didn't comment.

Howard continued, "Mr. Diallo, however, thinks his daughter is an angel, and no one had better say otherwise." Howard started to leave but turned back. He'd forgotten something else. "Oh. I almost forgot. Although she'll disrupt your efforts to protect her, keep in mind that there is a threat lurking.

"She downplayed being shot, but there may be someone trying to kill her. From what I was told, she was an eyewitness to her mother's murder when she was a little girl, and the killers were never found. It's one of the reasons Mr. Diallo keeps so many guards in place."

Neal gave a nod. Although he already knew the information, he took heed of Howard's warnings. He studied the diplomat, his three children, and the latest incident that had gotten the daughter shot. Although he didn't know why, he was intrigued.

Neal jumped to his feet when William Diallo entered the room. Gripping his hand, the older man held firm.

"Son, I already like you. You know how to show a man respect."

Neal inclined his head, "Thank you, sir." He noticed the man was fidgety, like he'd had too much coffee.

Letting his hand go, William gestured for Neal to take a seat as he proceeded to talk.

"Is it okay if I call you Neal? Calling you Mr. Erickson is too formal. My daughter is always getting on me about being too formal."

"Yes, sir. Neal is fine."

Neal noticed the man's accent was distinct and remembered reading that he was originally from Nigeria.

William approached the tray of refreshments one of the maids set in place and poured himself a drink.

He glanced at Neal over his glass. "I hope you don't drink much Neal. I need you with a clear head if you're to keep my daughter safe."

"I never drink on the job sir."

The statement drew a smile from William.

"I will explain a few things to you about my daughter." William took a deep breath before he took a long sip of his drink. "Son, I'm not a fool when it comes to my daughter. She's polite and proper in front of me and guests, but I know better. She has a mind of her own, and she knows how to use it well.

"She's a strong-willed and determined woman; and although she never tells me, I know she's usually up to something she doesn't want me or her brothers knowing about. I have never snooped into her private business, but that doesn't mean I won't do everything in my power to ensure her safety." Another sip emptied his glass. "She's a complex one. Hardheaded and, at the same time, sweeter than sugar cubes.

"She doesn't listen or take orders well. She's used to getting her way or finding a way to get her way. I can't say she's spoiled, but she does like to live well. And she's smart. The girl knows exactly how to downplay her smarts. She'll have you thinking she's clueless when she knows the endgame all along.

"She gives me ulcers, but I love her to death. She's my only baby girl, and I will do anything to protect her. But, I'd be damned if trying to protect her isn't one of the most difficult tasks I have ever undertaken."

Neal sensed how much William cared for his daughter. It was embedded in the creases of his face, in the tilt of his smile when he spoke of her, and in the flash of his eyes when he thought about her.

William continued, "Neal, you have come highly recommended from a good friend of mine, and I'm counting on you to keep my girl safe, by any means."

How much trouble could one woman be? Neal wondered.

Pushing the button on the house's intercom system, William asked one of his maids to track down his daughter and have her meet him in the study.

Neal had no idea why he was anxious about meeting this woman who seemed to have a reputation for being a bit of a troublemaker. He was a well-trained agent, measured among some of the deadliest and most well-equipped mercenaries in the country.

So, why am I anxious?

William finally took a seat. Neal knew from the file he received on the diplomat that he was in his late fifties, but the man didn't look a day over forty. His skin was as dark as midnight, which made his smile stand out and his dark eyes shimmer.

He had two sons with his first wife and later married a Russian woman who he'd met when he was stationed at the embassy in Russia. Dana was a product of that marriage. With a Nigerian father and a Russian mother, Dana had quite a bit of culture embedded in her.

William's voice drew Neal's attention.

"As you can see, she likes to keep her old man waiting, but she is the only woman I will wait on."

William fixed himself a second drink. He took a seat and drummed his fingers on the table next to him. He glanced up, occasionally, and smiled. Neal's attention was taken from William's peculiar behavior when the click-clack of heels traveling down the hall signaled the daughter's approach.

When Dana walked through the door, Neal was thrown off guard. Years of practice in keeping a poker face helped conceal his surprise. The guard, Howard, had been right; the diplomat's daughter was stunning. She was not only beautiful, she possessed a shock effect. She took his breath and held on to it for a few seconds before deciding to let him breathe again.

Neal took one look and understood what the guard meant by her being pretty enough to be against the law. She had a look and an air about her that made him stare, despite years of discipline. She was poised yet relaxed, imposing yet welcoming, classy yet sexy. The woman was a walking contradiction of the most impressive features he'd ever seen.

She had a face so uncommonly beautiful, Neal lost his poker face, for a moment; something he didn't do often. Her complexion was considerably lighter than her father's, but their features were close enough that William was unmistakably her father.

Her honey-brown skin was so perfectly hued, it seemed like an artist had no doubt mixed different shades of brown until the mixture was perfect.

She wore light but noticeable makeup that highlighted big brown eyes. Her shimmering lip gloss highlighted full, lush lips. Incredibly long lashes, he noticed at a distance, sat under perfectly arched brows.

Her navy skirt suit was so exquisitely constructed; it seemed the designer himself paid her casual visits. The skirt kissed well-defined legs that supported a perfect frame. The deep V cut of the jacket gave way to a sheer tan top beneath.

Neal's eyes refused to stop scanning her incredibly delectable presence.

Delectable? I don't think I have used that word before.

Thankfully, her preoccupation with her father kept her from noticing him checking out her perfect hourglass figure. He had never seen a woman so meticulously put together. She was imaginably the living definition of gorgeous.

Her sexy ankle-cut, tan boots added flavor, but should have been illegal in forty-nine states. Neal had never seen heels that high. If he had to guess, she was probably five-five, at the most; but the heels made her appear closer to six feet. He noticed that even the gunshot on her arm had healed into a cute little discolored, heart-shaped mark. In the few seconds it had taken her to

walk into the room, Neal committed her to memory. Thankfully, he hadn't forgotten his manners and stood upon her entry.

Her presence was enough to throw him off guard, but her perfume also reached out and grasped his senses. The fragrance was as beautiful as she was and acted as a prelude to the magnificent creature he would soon face.

She gave her father her attention, looping an arm around his. Her tone remained low as she shared some funny comment that had her father laughing out loud.

Neal determined that he would be on constant guard with her around. He hadn't even uttered a word to her, yet they'd had a conversation. She had taken a wrecking ball to his senses without knowing it.

She gave her father a peck on the cheek and took her time wiping her lip gloss from his face. William waited until she was done before speaking. He took her delicately by her perfectly manicured hand and ushered her towards Neal.

"Dana, I'd like you to meet Mr. Neal Erickson. He's going to look after you until things are safe for us again. Sweetheart, I want you to treat Mr. Erickson with the utmost respect."

He addressed her as a father would an unruly child.

She flashed him a despondent look and exhaled a sigh.

"Dad... honestly, when is our family ever going to be safe? I have no intention of spending the rest of my days being watched and followed."

William gave her the *please-don't-scare-this-poor-guy-away* look as his head shuffled between her and Neal. Dana took a deep breath before turning to face Neal. A few careful steps brought her closer as she took in his presence for the first time. At first, she seemed poised to unleash her attitude, but her posture relaxed as she reached out her hand.

"Mr. Erickson, nice to meet you."

"Ms. Diallo," Neal stated, while inclining his head.

The fact that she targeted his eyes and not the distinct scar that spanned a large portion of his right eye and traveled along his cheek spoke volumes about her. As a matter-of-fact, it seemed she hadn't even noticed his scar.

Neal was used to people—men and women—looking at his scar and ignoring the rest of him. Dana did the opposite, which was an impressive feat, considering his scar was a hard target to miss. She presented a part of herself that he immediately respected, a part she probably wasn't even aware she possessed.

He searched her eyes for truth, or deception, and only found a hint of mischief reflecting back at him. She was dangerous. He sensed it in the firmness of her prolonged handshake.

Was she sizing him up or checking him out?

He couldn't tell. She came across as delicate, pampered, and wealthy; but everything about her was exactly what she intended him to see. Nevertheless, Neal admired the lovely woman before him. He realized, a few seconds too late, that no other person had the ability to move or sway his mind so easily. Within seconds, she had found a way in.

Once she'd let him see enough, she loosened her grip on his hand and turned to her father.

Neal put his game face on. He reminded himself that Dana had the ability to pull her father's—and most likely all men's—attention.

Don't fall for it.

Before leaving, Dana inclined her head towards Neal once more.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Erickson."

“You as well Ms. Diallo,” he replied, while fighting to keep his eyes from sweeping her body one last time.

Her father stopped her from walking out.

“Honey, wait. Are you going out today? I’d like Neal to escort you.”

She flashed him a smile that shined brighter than the lights hanging from the vaulted ceiling.

“Daddy, I’m going to relax in my room, so you don’t have to stress about me going anywhere and getting my head blown off my shoulders.” She pointed one of those perfect nails in Neal’s direction and finished her speech. “You can send Mr. Erickson to my room, if that will ease your mind. You worry too much.”

The lines beneath William’s eyes grew deeper as he shook his head.

“Honey, you know I don’t like you talking about getting killed. I’ll see you for dinner later.”

He kissed her forehead before letting her proceed.

William waited until she was a ways down the hall and made a point of expressing to Neal how much stress Dana caused him.

“See what I have to deal with, Neal. My boys are so easy. Having a daughter is delicate and stressful work. But, I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to my baby girl.”

Neal could almost touch the care in William’s voice and could only offer a nod in reply to his statement. Although he didn’t have children of his own, he was fairly certain he understood William’s concerns.

Neal was informed that he would be taking a room in the Diallo home, across the hall from Dana's. Once again, William warned, "Do not underestimate my daughter’s ability to do whatever she wants, no matter who is supposed to be protecting her."

William paused for a brief moment, ensuring he hadn’t forgotten anything.

"My sons, Daniel and David, only spend nights here occasionally, but you'll get a chance to meet them later this evening."

Neal listened to William intently, absorbing yet another warning from the worried father about his daughter.

For the second time that day, the question crossed his mind: *Can one woman be that much trouble?*

Neal chalked up his attraction to Dana as nothing more than his dry spell, wreaking havoc on his senses. A series of back-to-back assignments hadn't allowed him any downtime. As a result, he hadn’t looked at a woman, let alone touched one. A woman as beautiful and as privileged as, Dana wouldn’t give him a second look anyway; so why was he wasting time thinking about her.

He reminded himself, again, that he was there to protect her from whoever wanted to harm her.

Chapter 4

Suspicious

Later that evening, Neal met the Diallo brothers at what the family called a small dinner party. A small party for them accommodated at least twenty people who mingled about the family's oversized dining room. Food was served from three tables, each with attendants standing behind them. A pianist sat behind a grand piano, playing upbeat musical tunes.

Neal was underdressed, in his usual jeans and T-shirt, but didn't stress about it. After having met the Diallo brothers, David and Daniel, they voiced their concerns to Neal about their sister and seemed as protective of her as their father.

Neal kept an eye on Dana, studying and observing her. She played her role well, acting innocent and docile in front of her family, but Neal wasn't fooled. Every instinct he possessed screamed that she was anything but what she conveyed to her family. He hadn't had any alone time with her, but based on the many side notes he'd gotten from her family and the other guards, he would venture to say she was definitely putting on a good performance.

She'd changed into a creamy white, silk jumpsuit that likely cost more than he made in a month. Like her earlier attire, the suit appeared to have been sewn onto her body, hugging her curves and gliding along her perfect frame.

Neal lost sight of her in the blink of an eye. He scanned the area, searching for where she could have gone.

"You're in deep thought, Mr. Erickson. Are you thinking about me?"

His head jettied around, surprised that she snuck up on him.

"Call me Neal. And yes, I was thinking about you."

He could tell that his straightforward answer surprised her.

"I was thinking about how good a performance you're putting on in front of your family. Thankfully, I can see a bit deeper than your surface."

She raised one of those perfectly arched brows.

"Everyone is entitled to their opinions, Mr. Erickson. And even if you saw deeper, you couldn't handle what's under my surface."

This time his eyebrows shot up. She had purposely ignored his request to address him as Neal, and her words were as sharp as ten thousand tacks.

"My opinions happen to be right, Ms. Diallo. And I don't think I'd have a problem handling what's under your surface."

The surprise on her face after that statement was priceless. He turned his eyes away from hers. He had trouble deciding if they were flirting or waging war.

She closed the space between them so quickly Neal didn't have time to hide his surprise. Another pair of those illegal heels had her eyes inches below his. Peering up at him, her eyes projected a daring glint that captured his sensible resolve.

"Save yourself the trouble, Mr. Erickson. I would devour you."

He'd never been one to back down from a fight, or whatever it was they were having. He met her thunderous gaze with a glint just as strong. At this point they were so close to each other the warm flow of her breath stroked his face.

"Ms. Diallo, you have obviously never been disciplined. The only way you will devour me is if I let you."

One of those lovely eyebrows raised a hair. A smile danced across her eyes but never made it to her lips.

"We'll see," were the last words she declared before giving him back his personal space.

She turned towards the party, her side view not hiding her territorial stance.

Neal took a deep breath.

What in the hell just happened?

He'd never had a word-sparring contest with anyone like that before. The fact that this was their first actual conversation didn't stop them from bantering back and forth like they were already

acquainted. He took a deep breath to relax as she shot him one last daring glance before walking away.

Neal forced himself, once again, to concentrate on the reason he was there—to protect her. She was definitely putting on a performance, but what she didn't know was that he could put on a performance as well. He had no doubt they would clash like two titans. The craziest thing about it was he believed he would enjoy it.

The creases of a devious smile bent the corners of her painted red lips. Dana was up to no good and would have thought less of herself if she didn't try to get one over on her new babysitter. Last night, he'd surprised her. She wasn't used to anyone calling her out, or taking a stance against her.

Nevertheless, it seemed ditching her new sitter would be easier than she thought. Unlike her last three or four protectors, Neal seemed more relaxed. He didn't watch her like a hawk, nor did he seem the least bit impressed with her, and it vexed her a little. The way she looked had gotten her through many situations and so had her speed.

Smiling, she reflected on her brief interactions with Neal. He was the best looking man she'd seen in jeans and a fitted T-shirt in a long time. He was toned in all the right places and possessed a pair of mesmerizing blue-green eyes that captured her attention at the slightest glance. His dirty blond hair was complemented by honey-hued skin and well-defined, kissable lips.

Thinking of his lips, she found herself wanting to trace the lines of them. His height was also a contender for her attention, standing taller than a well-designed skyscraper. A first for her, she found herself immediately attracted to him.

Don't go there, Dana, she reminded herself.

Mr. Erickson might fool her father, but she knew better. He had secrets, lots of them, from what she could tell. She shook off thoughts of her hot new babysitter and returned to her devious task at hand.

At six in the morning, Neal was likely in bed, and she was making a clean getaway by leaving an hour earlier than she'd informed him.

She hummed the tune to Jeopardy as the garage door rose. Navigating her car down the driveway, she sat impatiently as the gate slink open at a lingering pace. Two of the guards waved, unable to see inside her Mercedes due to its dark tint. None stopped her to ensure Neal was with her, likely assuming he automatically would be. She turned onto the road that would lead her to the little slice of privacy she sought. Watching the gate closing in her rearview mirror put a smile on her face.

"Yes. I'm free," she giggled to herself.

"What are you free of, Ms. Diallo?"

Neal's voice leapt across her seat and struck her in the back of the head before landing in her ears.

Dana jerk the steering wheel, nearly sending the car into one of those two-hundred-year-old trees that lined the isolated street. Their house was miles away from the next property, nestled among a tree-lined, woodland area.

Neal scared the hell out of her. He sat in her backseat, eyeing her in the rearview mirror.

Dana was at a loss for words, for a moment, as she mentally picked her heart up from the front seat.

"What? How in the world did you get back there? You...you."

He seemed to like that he scared her half to death. Dana was fairly certain he hadn't been in the vehicle.

Or had he been?

His eyes reflected a serious glare in the mirror.

"Ms. Diallo, my job is to protect you, not lie in bed asleep while you sneak away. I had a sneaking suspicion you would try something."

She cleared her throat.

"Call me Dana. And yes, I thought you were asleep. All I'd like every once in a while is some alone time. You have no idea how frustrating it is to be under the watchful eye of someone every waking moment of every day."

He sat up in his seat, giving her a clear view of his face in the mirror.

"Ms. Diallo, I understand your situation better than you might think; but I wouldn't be here if you didn't have a legitimate threat on your life. You may not like it; but until we can either eliminate—or clear—the threat, you're stuck with me."

"Mr. Erickson, what makes you think you're going to last that long?"

Even in the mirror, she noted a hint of mischief, lingering behind his eyes.

"Call me Neal. And you might be surprised at how crafty, and persistent, I can be. What I lack in looks, I make up for in charisma and cleverness."

He wasn't a pushover, that's for sure. The fact that she liked that about him had her twisting her lips to banish a telling smile. She'd never tell him so, but he was right. He wore those C's—charisma and cleverness—with confidence. And despite how he viewed himself, she thought he was very good-looking.

The fact that she got close enough to see that you could classify his eyes as either green or blue spoke volumes about her attraction to him. Then her eyes lingered at his soft-looking, kissable lips that seemed to hold as many secrets as those eyes of his. She'd scanned his tall stature, thoroughly admiring the definition of his strong frame.

Most men with facial scars often wore their hair longer, but not him. He wasn't afraid to let everyone see every part of him. He didn't seem to care if people accepted him or not.

Mr. Neal Erickson was nothing like the other guards. He made her think about him after the briefest introduction. She sensed his eyes on her.

"Ms. Diallo. Where are you headed? This is not the way to your office."

His voice had grown considerably softer as he scanned their surroundings.

How does he know the way to my office already?

She took an irritated breath before answering.

"Mr. Erickson, like I said before, please call me Dana. And if you must know, I planned to use my freedom doing something I would enjoy, not that you care about my enjoyment."

He released a low grin that ticked her off.

She snatched the wheel sharply, making a U-turn. His smile dissolved into a frown, along with the words he was about to speak, as his body went halfway across the backseat. He gripped the passenger's rear door to keep himself upright.

After he straightened, his eyes bore into hers. The rearview mirror was their dividing line.

"Ms. Diallo. I didn't say you had to forgo time you would enjoy. I have to be around, so I can do my job."

The sharpness of her voice grew more intense.

"It's Dana, Mr. Erickson. Call me Dana. My personal enjoyment is just that—personal. It won't be the same with company. I'm better off going to work and making myself productive, if I'm going to be watched."

"Neal, call me Neal, Ms. Diallo," he said, as his voice inched up a notch.

She hid a smirk, knowing she was pissing him off. Was she finally seeing a crack in that handsome poker face of his?

"Maybe we can figure out a way for you to get some personal enjoyment. I'll keep my distance, so that you can have a little privacy, if that's what you need."

Surprised by this declaration, she didn't answer but appreciated his effort. When she thought she had him, he'd found a way to put things back on an even keel.

Chapter 5

Wet Panties

Once at her office, Neal scanned every corner of the large space. Her office was sparsely furnished but immaculately decorated. A large cherry wood desk sat in the center in front of a large black leather chair. An array of futuristic metal tables and statues sat in strategic areas and presented a common theme throughout her office.

The place would have been too dim if not for the wall of glass windows that made up the right side of the room. The windows were tinted, making the light project with a hazy glow. The other side of the space presented a wall of shelves. Some of the shelves housed books and some contained decorative vases and more of those futuristic metal statuettes. Two designer gold-and-red, striped chairs sat in front of Dana's desk and helped bring color into the space.

The large painting appeared to hover on the wall behind her desk. It was an explosion of colors and, although simple, it was likely as expensive as everything else in this space. Another smaller desk sat, displaced near the windows. Neal assumed it was where Dana's former guards sat. He decided on another area. The last thing he wanted was to sit watching her all day.

Once he was satisfied, and somewhat familiar, with her workspace, Neal planted himself in the entryway, located near the exit. The partially mirrored portion of her front wall was designed so that it gave him a view of her. He sat at an angle that kept her from seeing him.

She probably didn't think so, but he wanted to provide her some semblance of privacy. He situated himself so that she wouldn't see him, unless she stepped away from her desk. He couldn't imagine going through life with someone constantly watching him.

Occasionally, he would glance up and observe her work. He was intrigued to find that for a wealthy woman, she didn't mind working hard. She had a problem with being told what to do, but she didn't act as spoiled and as privileged as he'd expected.

Wait. It's too quiet.

The shuffle of paper and the click of fingers striking the keys of her laptop stopped. Even the periodic phone conversations stopped.

He thought nothing of her bathroom break announcement, but it should have triggered an alarm that she might try something. She couldn't possibly get away through her bathroom window because it sat atop a twenty-five story drop.

Neal decided to check on her anyway, figuring he better take heed to the repeated warnings about her crafty nature. For all he knew, she had a plan, even one that covered a twenty-five story getaway.

His first few knocks went unanswered. He knocked harder.

"Ms. Diallo, are you okay?"

No answer. He turned the knob, finding the door locked. She'd been in there at least ten minutes, more than enough time for her to formulate an escape plan.

"Ms. Diallo, I'm only going to knock a few more times before I kick this door in."

A muffled *thump* found its way to his ears and increased his concern.

"Ms. Diallo, are you okay? Open the door or I will."

"Give me a second, please," she called, in a voice that was too cheerful for her.

He had no doubt she was up to something, but hearing her voice eased a little of his stress. She cracked the door only a hair. One of her beautiful eyes scanned him before she sprang the door the rest of the way open.

Neal stood in place, observing as she stepped from the bathroom. A few strands of her hair had fallen from the perfectly pinned bun she seemed to favor. She stood before him, taking him in, for a moment.

"You don't have to wonder what I'm doing every minute of every hour."

She handed him a piece of crumpled material. Observing the material that dangled from her finger, he noticed it was panties, and they were dripping wet. The amount of mischief pouring from her eyes could have filled up a room.

"I had a little accident. Mixed up the dates of my period. Had to wash these in the sink." She shoved the wet panties into his hand. "There you have it, proof that I was washing up and not escaping."

He didn't believe her one bit and was certain she knew it. He stood there, holding wet blue silk panties. Instead of being shocked by her actions, he checked out her ass as she walked away. He wondered if she wore any panties since he was holding the pair she'd supposedly taken off.

He stood in place for a moment, wondering why she felt the need to distract him. There was a large amount of mischief hidden behind her glowing beauty, a moment ago. She was up to something and he wanted to know what. Neal cleared his throat.

"Ms. Diallo, I'm not here to make your life difficult. I'm here, in case you need me."

She sat behind her desk before glancing back his way.

"For the hundredth time, call me Dana."

He kept calling her Ms. Diallo, and it occurred to him that he did it because she refused to call him Neal. He walked to his area and hung her wet panties on the arm of his chair. He was starting to think his job may end up being a lot more difficult than he'd anticipated.

Dana wasn't done by a long shot. Escape plans and wet panties were only the beginning.

She had plans; but he was determined to keep her safe, whether she wanted him to or not.

Chapter 6

Cloaked

Two weeks of following the straight and narrow with Neal, Dana found that she was about to go crazy. She couldn't stand the day-to-day repetitiveness of it all. She needed the excitement

her double life offered, and her father was blocking her with his security geeks. She was itching to unleash Sevyn, needing to hunt something, or someone. While driving, she glanced at Neal.

“You don’t talk enough, Mr. Erickson. You should talk more.”

His gaze never met hers.

“Not much to talk about. I’m here to keep an eye out for your well-being. That is, when you allow me to.”

She laughed, and then said, “If someone wants me dead, or injured, then I will be, no matter who’s around me. Always remember, the scariest people never reveal how scary they truly are. They *show* you right before they take your life.”

He tilted his head slightly.

“You’ve got a good point, Ms. Diallo. But I’m here either way, and I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

She observed him as best she could while keeping an eye on the road. He had her curiosity soaring. Not only was he not like the other guards, he wasn’t like anyone she’d met. He was calm and relaxed; but at the same time, he wasn’t gullible. He damn sure wasn’t afraid to speak his mind when he did speak.

He was distracting and interesting to look at. He had a huge moon-shaped scar that sat above his right eye and ran along his cheek. She wondered how he’d gotten the scar but dared not ask. She believed his imperfection made him more interesting.

Thinking about it, his scar resembled art. It made his face unique in a way that she appreciated. She liked that no one else would look like him, or could ever copy or resemble him. With his height, low hair and radiant eyes, he was a delight to watch.

She found his hodgepodge of incredibly charming and sexy features interesting. His olive skin bore a rich, warm tone. Cream and honey. He was the cream and honey she liked to add to her coffee. He had a kind of low-key charisma that likely melted hearts no matter where he went. The thing she found most interesting was that he didn’t seem to know it.

His calming voice halted her thoughts. She had park and was sitting there, staring at him. He bore an expression she couldn’t read.

“If only I could read thoughts, Ms. Diallo.”

She presented a cheeky smile.

“My thoughts would probably scare you. They definitely would confuse you. Why do you insist upon calling me Ms. Diallo? I don’t like it. Sounds like you’re addressing an elder.”

He shrugged, absently.

“I keep calling you Ms. Diallo for the same reason you keep calling me Mr. Erickson. In reference to your thoughts, I’m sure they would confuse me, but I’m not one to frighten easily. I’ll admit this though, you do have a cloak of mystery surrounding you. But it won’t stop me from doing my job.”

She didn’t reply. His banter with her should have made her angry, but all it did was turn her on.

For the first time, Neal noticed Dana observing his scar. Instead of distaste, her expression appeared one of wonder. She’d never mentioned his scar, which he found most surprising. As he thought about it, she was one of the only people that looked at him like he didn’t even have scar. She stared into his eyes or observed his mouth when he spoke. Each time they locked eyes, he felt trapped under a sorceress’s spell, a weakness he hated to admit to.

Now, on the way up to her office, he followed her into an already packed elevator. Undoubtedly, she assumed he would let it go and take the next elevator, which would give her time to disappear on him.

He entered the elevator and squeezed past her, stepping to the back wall. More bodies squeezed into the cramped space with every stop. Dana ended up being pressed and pushed against Neal several times.

The third time her body collided into his, she didn't step away. She glanced up, allowing her eyes to search his. Neal was left speechless and unable to move the hand he rested on her waist. Her arms were pinned against his chest, and she made no attempt to right herself.

With only her eyes, she dared him to step away from her until she found the answers she sought. She wanted to know if he was attracted to her, and he'd be damned if he didn't let her see it. He was sure she sensed it as he attempted to move his hand from her waist only to have it slide over her arm and land back around her waist. For the life of him, he couldn't move.

Finally, she blinked her eyes and he was released. He stepped away, breaking contact so he could catch his breath. She appeared to know exactly what she was doing to him, and Neal was finding he didn't have any defense against it.

The man that entered at the next stop would surely breach the elevator's weight limit and send them all plummeting to their deaths. Neal assessed the man who was easily three hundred and fifty pounds. His face was naturally cheerful, the kind of big guy that was skinny at heart.

The man squeezed his large body right next to Dana, sending her against Neal. She stumbled and Neal automatically placed his hands at her waist to steady her. Her body heat shot waves of longing into him. His fingers tingled as her perfume automatically closed his eyes. Her intoxicating contact forced him to step away or become a puddle under everyone's feet.

The last thing he wanted to do was move away from her, but he was left with no other choice. He couldn't allow her to sense his weakness—his inability to resist her pull.

Finally making it to her office, he watched her work.

When she grew tired of sitting behind her desk, she would periodically pace while talking to the voices coming from her speaker. Every once in a while he sensed her eyes on him when she stepped away from her desk.

Although he acknowledged a connection with her, he was determined to ignore it.

Chapter 7

Puppet Master

Dana had no idea what type of magic Neal possessed, but his caress turned her mind and body into a tingling jungle of madness. She enjoyed his touch, so much so she did nothing to step away from him the second time she found herself close to him on the elevator.

Maybe, the second time was a stumble she directed, but it had gotten her exactly what she wanted. She wanted to see if Neal's touch would be as potent as the first one. Unbeknownst to him, he brought out in her a side she'd put on ice.

To her utter terror, forcing herself to fall in love with someone wasn't the smartest thing she'd done. Pressure from the men in her family to find a man and settle down, coupled with her own desire to find love and passion, drove her to force relationships. The relationships always ended with her being the "horrible, heartless, loveless bitch."

After more than a few rounds of bad romances, she gave up and opted for letting men know—up front—her intentions. It didn't matter what she attempted when it came to relationships, she always found herself left wanting more.

Her sex life was nonexistent, and her personal life was a mess. She'd dated five men in the past year and had first-date sex with all of them, only to be left disappointed and unsatisfied. All she had left to look forward to was work.

Her assistant, Jordan, cracked her door.

"Ms. Diallo, Brad is here. He informed me that you are expecting him."

Dana shook her head in dismay, not ready to deal with Brad and forgetting that she'd called him. She called him—unfortunately—due to desperation. Brad was her latest attempt. Since she had no desire to seek out anyone, she decided to give Brad another shot. Dana hit mute on her current call.

"Give me ten minutes, Jordan, and send him in."

Neal listened to Dana talk money and finances too complicated for him to follow. He had to admit that she wasn't just a pretty face and magnificent body, she was also smart. So smart in fact, it was only a matter of time before she came up with a plan to ditch him and strike out on her own.

The man who must have been Brad walked into Dana's office and threw an arrogant head wave in Neal's direction. Neal didn't bother speaking to the smug-faced man.

The man stood in front of Dana's desk with his arms folded in front of his chest.

"You called, and like your puppet, I'm here."

Dana stepped around her desk and stood in front of the man. He dropped his posture quickly upon her approach.

"Brad, my family is having a gala next month. I need a date."

"Danalyn Diallo, are you serious? You used me and haven't called me in over two months, now you're asking me to take you out. What is it? Couldn't find someone else to use on short notice?"

Neal smiled. At least the man knew he was getting used.

Dana sighed like Brad was the one wasting her time.

"Look, I don't need the extra words, Brad. Either you want to be my date or not. I'm a busy woman. I don't have time to babysit your hurt feelings and upset nerves. I told you the deal from the start."

The man's tone shifted from arrogant to whinny.

"I want more. More than being the guy you use whenever you want." His voice grew softer, but Neal was able to discern his words. "Are you going to use me up in the bedroom like you did the last time? If so, I'm all in. What about right now? We can go anywhere you want. We can do anything you want."

At this point, Neal stood and glanced around the corner in time to see the man reach out and stroke her arm. She slapped his hand away.

"When I say, Brad. Not before."

She slapped his hand away for a second time.

Neal stepped forward and repeated her words.

"She said when she says, not before."

Brad peered up appearing to have forgotten Neal's presence. His irritated look did nothing but urge Neal closer. Brad's arrogance returned.

"You stay out of this, bodyguard. If you weren't disfigured you might stand a chance. She favors pretty boys."

Brad reached for her again.

Neal realized a few things. Dana didn't make good choices in men and this one referred to himself as a boy. Clearly chosen for his looks and not his personality, he was spoiled—based on his appearance—and a dick—based on his personality.

Before he realized what he was doing, Neal had Brad's face kissing the accounting reports on Dana's desk.

Brad cried out, "Let me go. You're breaking my damn arm. You're a fucking lunatic!"

Neal repeated, "She said when she says, not before. Do you understand?"

Brad yelled at the top of his lungs, "Yeah, you crazy bastard, I understand. Dana, call off your dog!"

Neal tightened his grip when the man called him a dog. Brad's yells turned into screams. What Neal found most interesting was the fact that Dana stood there, looking at them, with a smirk on her face. She enjoyed this. The craziest thing was this poor sap he roughed up would likely still be her date, if she wanted him to. Neal bent close to Brad's ear.

"I'm going to let you up. If you try anything crazy, I won't hesitate to put you on your ass. You understand?"

"Yes. Shit. I understand. Now let me up."

Neal let go, and Brad shot up, rubbing his sore arm. He glanced between Dana and Neal and took to a brisk walk towards her door.

Dana yelled after him, "The Viennese Hall at seven pm. I'll have Jordan send you an invitation."

Brad didn't answer, but it didn't seem to bother Dana one bit.

Neal had to know.

"He is still going to take you out, if you want, isn't he?"

She smiled, and said, "More than likely; but if you're around, he might have second thoughts."

Chapter 8

Sneaky Opportunist

Neal was awake most of the night after discovering that Dana had snuck away from the house. He wished he'd increased his security checks to ensure she didn't try anything. She'd been asked to leave her door unlocked, to allow access into her room, in case of an emergency.

Neal realized his mistake came in attempting to preserve Dana's privacy. Instead of entering her room to do a physical check, he would peek in. He'd fallen into one of Dana's traps and aided in making her escape easier.

He searched every corner of her room before discovering he'd just missed her. The loose hangers in her closet continued to swing and her bed was still warm.

Stepping into the hall, it didn't take but a moment for him to notice a slight billowing of the hallway curtains. Dana had left the window cracked. This was how she'd gotten away. Racing to the window, Neal saw nothing but darkness staring back at him.

He took his time searching the perimeter of the property. He interviewed the guards about what they observed, without mentioning that Dana was the reason for his questions. Like he suspected, none of them were the wiser that Dana was gone, and he didn't alert them to that fact. She had likely been doing this the entire time, slipping away as they were left guarding an empty house.

Neal searched for Dana most of the night, and it was only now that he started to fully understand why her father had been so firm in his stance on protecting his daughter. She was as slick as motor oil. It wasn't like Neal to lose anyone; yet she'd slipped right through his fingers, even with him only steps away, across the hall.

Awaiting her return, Neal posted himself next to the window she'd slipped out through. He hadn't found any feasible escape routes she could have used and had no idea how she'd made it past her own front yard. The place was as fortified and guarded as a maximum security prison.

Positioned at the window, he was perplexed, hearing her voice emanating from someplace within the house. He turned away from the window in time to see her step out of her room. He took in her well put together form with a questioning gaze. Dressed and ready to start the workday, she gave him a roguish look.

"Good morning, Mr. Erickson. How did you sleep?"

She knew damn well he hadn't slept. The smirk on her face revealed as much.

"I'm doing fine, Ms. Diallo. Didn't get much sleep last night, though."

How did she get back into the house?

Neal was at a loss, a place he prided himself on staying away from. Not only had Dana gotten away from him, she'd found a way in and out of the house without anyone noticing. She'd returned, dressed, and prepared to start her workday, like nothing had happened.

His first time accepting the offer, Neal decided to take her father's invitation to join them for breakfast. He needed to look beyond Dana's beauty to unscramble some of the mystery surrounding her.

Where was she going at night? Had she been sneaking away every night? Was last night the first time he noticed? He'd been her personal guard for more than a month and expected that she would try something sooner or later.

She could have been killed on his watch and that was unacceptable.

She flashed him a quick eye wink when he entered her family's dining room.

Is she purposely taunting me? Why can't I track her?

Neal watched pensively as she engaged her father in pleasant conversation about his upcoming trip to Afghanistan.

Neal assessed Dana, observing her from a different perspective. Instead of wealthy princess, he thought more along the line of sneaky opportunist. This time, she wore a baby blue skirt suit that, of course, highlighted her sophisticated elegance.

Neal noticed something else; she failed to conceal a series of large, fresh bruises on her arm. Since the sleeve of her suit jacket was three-quarter length, the bruises peeked from under her left sleeve.

She noticed that he saw them and attempted to adjust her sleeve. She glanced quickly towards her father to see if he noticed them. He didn't.

Neal didn't address Dana about the bruises; he wanted to wait until they were alone.

Dana removed her jacket and took a seat at her desk. Neal had already seen her bruises, so there was no need to hide them now. On the thirty minute ride to her office, he hadn't mentioned anything about her disappearing on him, or her bruises.

She'd been in such a hurry to get ready this morning, she didn't have time to pick out a better outfit and hardly had time to get herself into one. Her second job required a little extra effort and sometimes spilled into her regular job.

She'd found Neal waiting this morning when she attempted to sneak back into the house. She was already late for breakfast with her father, so finding an alternate route and getting herself ready had been a mad dash. Thank goodness she was faster than the average person.

She appreciated Neal keeping his mouth shut in front of her father. All her father would have done was panicked, stressed, and likely called for more guards.

Standing behind her desk, she gathered the supplies she'd need to start her workday. Neal stood, staring at her. They locked gazes. It was strange; he didn't even appear angry with her. There was only concern projected in his firm gaze.

She broke eye contact and involuntarily scratched her head. She didn't need him figuring out that she was attracted to him, or that she was fighting to understand him as much as she knew he was trying to figure her out.

Dana realized she wasn't going to be able to make Neal quit like the others. She would have to come up with a way to get him fired. Sleeping with him would be the quickest way. She cast away her nefarious idea and logged into her computer.

Neal didn't take his normal seat. He sat in one of the chairs in front of her desk and studied her. Under his penetrating gaze, she was unusually comfortable; carrying on like this was their normal routine.

"I've got something for you, Ms. Diallo."

She didn't glance up immediately. Her shoulders dropped as she sighed. He called her Ms. Diallo again.

"Please. Call. Me. Dana."

She glanced up and dangling from his finger were her blue panties. His face remained blank, but she sat surprised.

"I washed and dried them for you. I can hang on to them, if you want. If you have another accident, you'll know that I have an extra pair for you. Can't have you running around with no panties on. I'm here to protect you in every way that I can."

A smile lifted her cheeks. Mr. Neal Erickson was much more than your average bodyguard. She prayed he didn't figure out her secrets before she came up with a plan to get him fired.

Dana's assistant buzzed in a call that drew a little of her attention away from Neal.

As she talked into the phone, her gaze remained on Neal. He took a good sniff at her panties and returned them to the back pocket of his jeans.

Dana nearly dropped her phone but recovered. The last thing she wanted was to talk about financial portfolios when she had something ten times more interesting sitting in front of her.

She continued to talk as she reached to put her jacket on. She didn't have to turn around to know that Neal was standing next to her. He assisted her into her jacket, his closeness a welcomed intrusion.

She wasn't dumb. He'd only gotten closer to get a better look at her bruises. Once she finished her phone conversation, she turned to him.

"Let it go, Mr. Erickson. It's not what you think. I'm not being abused or hurt."

She couldn't believe she'd been careless enough to let him see her bruises in the first place. Concern danced across his face and the look affected her more than it should have. He'd actually given her more freedom than any of the other guards, and he hadn't ratted her out to her father for sneaking away from the house.

A crease of concern remained on his handsome face. His voice remained low and calm.

"Please call me, Neal. I'm not here to discourage you from doing whatever it is you believe you need to do. But. If it entails danger, I'd like to help you. It's my job to keep you safe, even if you insist upon doing things to put yourself in danger."

Her mouth dropped open.

Is he serious?

Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she liked her new protector. There was a difference in him that drew her in. He intrigued her.

Who was she kidding? She was insanely attracted to the man. The mystery surrounding him only made her attraction stronger. He seemed to understand and respect the fact that she had secrets. He hadn't even questioned her about sneaking away last night.

Now that he admitted he would follow her into danger, she debated whether or not she wanted to reveal some her secrets to him. She could tell from a glance that he was serious.

Would he tell my father? Would he try to stop me? Would he understand? Would my secrets get him killed?

Chapter 9

Lust and Desire

The sound of her office phone saved her from having to respond to Neal. She talked on and on about investments and numbers, but her mind was on its own course.

Every once in a while, she would gaze up from her figures and find Neal's penetrating gaze studying her. She liked him watching her, but managed to ignore him as best she could.

The moment it popped against her leg, she knew her garter strap had snapped loose from her panty hose. Now she would be forced to hold on to the gossamer hose to keep it from slinking down her leg. Getting off the phone with Mr. Tabor wasn't likely, so she was stuck in her small dilemma.

A wily smile brightened her face as she turned and faced Neal. He sat in front of her desk, studying her every move. She muted her phone and picked up a pen and folder.

"Mr. Erickson, will you help me with something, please. I'm fresh out of hands."

He stood.

"Yes, Ms. Diallo. What do you need?"

It wasn't his words that raised her eyebrows, it was the enticing way he'd expressed them. When he step in front of her, she used the pen in her hand to lift the hem of her skirt and point at her hanging garter strap, daring him with her eyes to touch it.

"Will you fix this for me?"

She widened her stance, a little, as she bit the tip of the pen and observed Neal. She kept the folder in her other hand, a nonessential item she used in her scheming ploy. Getting rid of Neal meant freedom, but she was starting to have second thoughts.

To her surprise, he seemed to be considering her request.

Did he not care about getting fired?

His face gave away nothing as he stood, holding her gaze. She glanced at the hanging strip of fabric with its plastic snap affixed to the tip.

Neal inched closer, stepping into her personal space. Her breath hitched, revealing her surprise and excitement.

He had so suddenly distracted her that it took the sound of her caller's voice, blaring from her speaker, to pull her attention away.

"Ms. Diallo, are you there? Did we get disconnected?"

Her tongue skimmed her lips.

"I'm here, Mr. Tabor. You'll need to diversify more of your liquid assets to get the kind of results you're looking for."

When Neal took a bended knee in front of her, her words faltered yet her lips remained open. He kept his eyes on hers as she stood anxious to see what he would do next. Somehow, she found the strength to continue her talk with Mr. Tabor, but her mind was on the man kneeling before her.

He was so close, the warm flow of his breath bounced off her leg. When his hand made contact with her skin, she jumped and fumbled her words, giving Mr. Tabor the wrong figures. She corrected herself quickly.

"I meant one point two million, Mr. Tabor."

Her breathing sped up more than a few notches.

"Are you okay, Ms. Diallo?" Mr. Tabor's concerned voice questioned.

"I'm fine," was all she could manage, as she tore her eyes away from Neal's and watched his hand slip past the hem of her skirt and glide up her leg.

His stroke sent tremors up her back, and his eyes enticed her to keep watching. He held her captive as his hand disappeared under her skirt. He didn't lift her skirt like she expected.

Did he know enough about women's lingerie to reconnect her wardrobe blindly?

She didn't know, but she was game to find out. The visual of his actions made her knees go weak and her conversation cease. He reached his other hand between her legs and sat it flush along the backside of her thigh before letting it skim her warm flesh. The action sent his face closer to her pulsing hot center.

Dana swallowed the large amount of lust he so quickly built in her. She cleared her throat but words escaped her.

He'd found the two pieces of material he needed to reconnect as his hands maneuvered enticingly under her skirt. He'd spiked her heartrate the moment he'd made contact with her warm flesh.

It took willpower to control her movement and her mind. She wanted nothing more than to say, to hell with it, and ask him to spend time on the area he had burning with desire.

Both his hands danced temptingly around her thigh, brushing dangerously close to her pulsing middle. He made her wet with desire and had her aching for his hand to explore more than her leg. Her breath rushed from her mouth as she exhaled desire.

She jumped at the knock on her door. Since she had an open door policy, no one knocked on her door and waited. Immediately following the knock, her assistant Jordan peeked in.

Jordan's eyes went wide and directly to Neal kneeling in front of Dana. Dana could see Jordan's hand grip her door more firmly.

Neal peeked around Dana's hip, smiling at Jordan, as Dana stood frozen in place. Her brain instructed her to push Neal away, but her body wouldn't allow her to mount a protest. Neal didn't remove his hands either. He spoke in a smooth tone like they weren't caught in a precarious position.

“Ms. Diallo was so busy; she didn’t have time to get back into her clothes. She asked me to help her out. Since I’m the devoted help, I couldn’t very well leave her half-dressed, now could I?”

It didn’t occur to Dana until after he stated those words that Neal made it sound like they had been in there getting busy. Jordan failed to shrug away her shock as her eyes remained on where Neal’s hands were.

Jordan found a single word, “Okay,” and managed to drag her eyes up to Dana’s. Her words tumbled quickly from her mouth. The situation she’d peeked into made her anxious. “Mr. Tabor said the line went dead. I reconnected him, but you didn’t answer your phone.”

“I think I got it,” Neal announced.

His hand skimmed the hem of her underwear and Dana nearly passed out. Thank goodness Jordan saw only the side view of her face and her back, or she would bear witness to how truly weak Neal made her.

Neal removed his hand, and she was finally released from the seducing trance he had her in. He made a show of ensuring she was put back together properly. He brushed the sides of her skirt and straightened her jacket before stepping back to take one last glance.

Dana’s voice was low, but she was determined to regain some aspect of control.

“Send the call through, Jordan. I’ll pick up. Also, will you print the reports; so that I can start my net assets value calculations and update my accounts?”

Neal stepped away like nothing inappropriate had occurred. Dana’s eyes followed his return to his area.

Jordan answered, “Sure, Dana, no problem. I’ll get those reports started and send the call back.”

Watching Neal return to his seat, Dana became convinced. He was going to be hers; he just didn’t know it, yet.

Thankfully, it was Jordan who cracked her office door. Jordan had worked for Dana from the beginning and knew her personality enough to know that she was a tad bit open-minded. Jordan also knew how to keep a secret.

Dana wasn’t ashamed about it, either. Jordan was shocked, but no one could have been as shocked as Dana. After Jordan closed the door, Dana peeked around her desk for Neal.

She was tempted to lock her door and continue where they left off.

Chapter 10

Temptation

After her assistant closed the door, the smile he saw creep onto Dana’s face held mischievous ideas. Neal stepped away because Dana Diallo was pure temptation dipped in a tub of lust and desire. His heart continued to race with excitement.

Not even the presence of her assistant stopped him from wrapping his hand around her sexy, soft, warm, and silky leg. He berated himself for being so male and for being so uncharacteristically weak.

She was a temptress with a capital T. So much so she broke down every defense he believed he had. He could tell that she was attracted to him, turned on by him even; but he didn’t understand the how and the why behind the attraction.

Most women as privileged and as beautiful as her could have anyone they wanted, so he questioned what made her attracted to him.

His scar had been with him for seven years. Seven years, unfortunately, was as far in the past as he could remember. He was brought into the world at the estimated age of nineteen. As far as he knew, he had been picked up—and taken in—by the agency he now worked for, Top.

Top had run every test imaginable, investigating to find out what caused his amnesia, but they never found an answer. As a result, Neal had no idea where he came from, who his family was, or if he even had family. The only thing he'd emerged into his new world with was the huge scar on his face.

He awoke as a naïve boy, but the government built him into a hardcore man. Training agents happily took him under their wings, stating he could easily be molded into almost anyone. His ability to learn fast and to execute with first-rate precision was what drew their attention the most.

Neal harbored another ability that he had discovered during his training. He told no one about his discovery, not knowing if it was something he'd inherited from wherever it was he'd come from. He couldn't go around telling people he believed he had the ability to jump through space. He couldn't explain what he could do, so he was reluctant to reveal it to anyone for fear of being locked away or diagnosed as crazy.

Although he never revealed his secret ability to Top, he couldn't help but wonder if they already knew. It hadn't been lost on him that Top only recruited people that were a bit unusual, those that seemed to have something special lingering below the surface of carefully crafted normalcy.

Neal never found answers to any of his questions, but he vowed to never give up the quest to find out about his past. The disturbing idea that Top may be the reason he lost his memories in the first place surfaced from time to time.

Despite his lingering apprehension towards the agency he worked for, he couldn't deny that they provided him the best training in the world and gave his life a sense of purpose. He had so easily latched on to the world they exposed him to that it seemed he was built specifically for it.

His thoughts lingered back to Dana. There was something special about her he hadn't quite put his finger on.

Knowing she couldn't see him from where he sat, he watched her get back to work. He couldn't help wondering what she did during those secret times she managed to get away from him.

Where had she picked up those bruises she wore?

He wanted to gain her trust rather than force her to tell him her secrets, so he delayed questioning her. Nevertheless, he wondered what was so important she couldn't tell her own family.

He was deep in thought when he glanced up into the beautiful face of the woman that was surrounded by so much mystery it left him confused. He was the one missing nineteen years of memories, yet she possessed more intrigue. She hadn't lied when she stated her thoughts would probably confuse him.

Another interesting revelation about Dana was her ability to sneak up on him, seemingly appearing from thin air. She was standing so close, Neal inched his chair back a bit, playing it off like he was stretching his legs.

“I would like to go to the mall. I need to pick up some earrings I ordered and perhaps a bite to eat as well.”

“Sure.” He smiled despite lingering thoughts. “As long as you don’t have plans to ditch me while you’re there.”

She shot him a smile, before walking away, but didn’t reply.

Neal followed Dana to the parking garage without a word. He preferred for her to sit in the back when he drove, but she was the kind of woman that sat where she wanted.

He wasn’t looking forward to keeping his eyes on the road and off her. She parked herself in the front seat next to him, wearing a skirt that rose considerably when she sat. Neal met a lot of beautiful woman, but she was the *crème de la crème* and could seduce a man with one glance, if she chose to. She was the most distracting woman he’d met.

He started the car and kept his mouth shut. He hoped that giving her enough space to do her secret business, whatever it was, would win him a few points and hopefully a clue—or glimpse—into what she was up to.

He didn’t know all there was to know about women, but there was one thing he was certain of about this one—she held firmly to her secrets.

He believed she had many.

Chapter 11

Chasing Danger

Neal let his determination to track Dana override his affinity for being distracted and charmed by her. It would be impossible to protect her if he couldn’t find out what she was up to. If she decided to sneak out tonight, he sought a way to get a leg up on her.

He was doing a remarkable job by her father’s standard, but Neal knew better. Her father left him with a parting brief before departing for Afghanistan, ensuring that Neal was going to stick around.

William repeated himself several times, emotion crossing each syllable of his words. “Keep my baby girl safe, Neal. She means the world to me.”

Neal left William’s office to prepare himself for a long night. With her father gone, there was no telling what kind of stunts Dana had up her stylish sleeves.

He came to the conclusion that someone must have been picking her up when she snuck away. The house was isolated and Dana didn’t use any of the three vehicles she owned in the garage. Since he’d discovered her first disappearing act, his last three attempts at following her was a bust. He lost her trail even when he briefly spotted her sneaking through the darkness. No one could just vanish.

Or could they?

He walked the perimeter of the property, several times, trying to find out how she’d been getting out.

How had she plotted her escape routes? How had she gone unnoticed by the guards?

A mixture of determination and curiosity kept him searching to figure out Dana’s secrets. Filling his backpack with a few of his high-tech spy toys, Neal put on his all-black, stealth wear and prepared to catch the sneaky seductress.

When he turned on the reflective properties of his all-black jumpsuit and put on his hood, he could literally go undetected in darkness and in dim light. The suit acted as a mirror, reflecting

the night back into the atmosphere, making its occupant virtually invisible. He wondered if Dana had access to this type of technology. It would explain her disappearing acts.

As he made his way past the guards without so much as a loose twig breaking, he faded into the darkness to the inside of the fence line at the front of the house. Dana was forcing him to treat her like a target, one who harbored as many secrets as the agency he worked for.

Neal decided to unleash his training on her. He was also willing to use his ability, if it came to that. It may be the only way he could catch her and get answers.

After about a thirty minute wait, his night vision gear picked up what could have been a person. The object moved as a blur. Neal adjusted his gear, twice, before the person—or object—fell out of sight.

Could it have been Dana?

The movement was extremely fast, appearing as a blip through his lenses.

Neal adjusted his vision settings, to ensure he'd seen a person and not shadows of dancing light. Hearing footsteps thumping at a rapid rate and not seeing anything was perplexing.

Clearly hearing movement, he removed his night goggles in time to see a figure leap over the area he squatted in. Whatever it was, it was moving so fast the wind gust swept the shrub's leaves into his face. He'd strategically chosen this area because it was the only place he spotted fresh footprints.

The faint but unmistakable fragrance of Dana's perfume helped to expose at least one of her secrets. The figure he thought he saw, the one that moved too fast for him to track, was Dana. He hadn't a clue as to how she pulled it off, but it was another secret he added to the list of mysteries he was left to figure out about her.

She hadn't noticed him hunkered near the fence, thanks to his special government-issued stealth gear. The gear was so good at keeping him hidden that it even concealed his heat signature from other tech devices. If there was any spyware out there better than what he had, he was certain that Top knew about it and acquired it.

He stood, listening and searching. She was gone.

How had she gotten across the nearly ten-foot metal fence?

He didn't have time to waste, trying to figure it out. If he were to track her further than the yard, he had to keep moving. Determined not to lose her this time, he got himself to the other side of the fence in time to pick up a familiar sound. The crunch of breaking rocks against pavement and the unpleasant intake of exhaust fumes alerted him that a car was on the move.

Although he couldn't see anything, the creaks and cracks of rolling tires suggested she hadn't gotten far enough away for him to lose her trail. Adjusting his night gear, he picked up the heat signature of a small dark car traveling swiftly away. Following a car that was nearly invisible wasn't going to be an easy task. He also had to remain far enough in the rear that Dana didn't see him trailing her.

When she had driven far enough away from the house, the lights of her vehicle came on and nearly blinded Neal. He discarded the night goggles and kept up his pursuit. He used the residual light from her taillights to keep himself on the road. He had a thousand questions, but had no intention of losing sight of the diplomat's mysterious daughter. This was the closest he had gotten to seeing what she was truly up to.

If Dana caught him, he imagined he would have a difficult time trying to explain how he was trailing her car on foot. Based on what he believed he saw of her through his lenses, she had some explaining to do as well.

Neal followed Dana for nearly forty minutes. While catching his breath, he took in their surroundings. They ended up at Lamy Bridge. The bridge appeared to not have been in use by humans for years, so Mother Nature was taking it back. Vines and all sorts of shrubbery stake their claim on the bridge.

The bridge had obviously been decommissioned and was likely scheduled for demolition. It was the perfect place to conduct illegal business, if that was what Dana was up to. The moon peeking through the clouds gave the bridge an eerie feel. A few shimmering rays of moonlight lit the dark water below, making it dance and wave with life. At a distance, the bridge appeared to be swaying, hanging by tethered cables that were stretched and ready to snap.

Dana drove past warning and caution signs meant to stop access onto the bridge. She drove cautiously, traversing a steep incline until reaching a leveling point at the center of the unsafe bridge.

The few lights that scarcely illuminated the bridge showed her driving an all-black compact car. The car seemed to have some type of reflective paint that made it look invisible at certain angles. He'd learned about this type of paint, but assumed it was something only the government used. The general public had similar paints but not as scientifically advanced.

Since he worked for Top, he owned spy equipment and everyday improvements of many items that the rest of the world would never see and would never know existed. This paint was one of those items. The stealth gear he wore was another.

Since Dana was surrounded by secrets and her father had ties to the government, Neal wondered if she had special privileges on that front.

He followed Dana on foot, getting as close as he could without rousing her suspicion. She sat in the running car waiting for someone, and he wasn't going anywhere until he found out whom. Finding the perfect spot, Neal climbed atop one of the bridge's wide beams and positioned his body flat on his stomach, facing Dana's position.

An approaching vehicle caused his head to turn, and a hint of concern climbed into his body. The dim lighting revealed a dark colored Hummer. It drove up, facing Dana's car, and sat running for a stressful moment.

Five men exited the vehicle when the hum of the engine stopped. They were all armed and none made attempts to hide their strapped on weapons. Although he holstered his 9 millimeter, Neal was glad he brought his sniper rifle, too. He unslung it from his back and carefully set it in place. He didn't bring the tripod to stand it on, so he used the edge of an adjacent beam to hold the weapon in place.

As he zoomed in on the men, he found that the dim lighting wasn't deceiving his eyes. These men were strapped and prepared for battle.

Chapter 12

Sinister Intent

Dana exited her vehicle. The clicking of her heels echoed across the concrete as she stepped around to the front of her car.

What is she doing?

She was dressed in an all-black, tight-fitting jumpsuit, reminding him of a sexy superhero.

Is she wearing a wig?

She stopped feet in front of who must have been the leader of the group. The man took a step closer to her, and his men followed like he controlled them all by remote. They hadn't taken out their weapons, but their hands rested on cold steel.

Neal figured he could have been reading it wrong, but the men almost appeared threatened by Dana. He, on the other hand, was worried. He wasn't sure what Dana had gotten herself into, but it wasn't looking good for her right now.

How could she be naïve enough to meet these unsavory-looking characters alone, at night, and in a location where no one could hear her if she needed help, a location where she could be easily killed and disposed of? How was he supposed to protect her, if these were the kind of situations she subjected herself to?

The leader's voice carried across the bridge, a dreary echo that harbored sinister intent.

"Ms. Paxton, where is your backup? You are either the bravest woman I have met or the most naïve. You do know that we are dangerous men?"

Although he couldn't see her face clearly, Neal sensed a smile in the condescending tone of Dana's voice. He also noticed she'd been addressed as, Ms. Paxton, definitely an alias.

"I certainly know that you are dangerous, Mr. Drago, but I'm not afraid of you, or your men."

Hearing her address the man as Drago made Neal lose his breath.

It can't be.

The government had been after Luther Drago for years. He was so elusive, agents rumored that he might have the ability to shape-shift.

It can't be the same Drago.

It didn't take but a second for Neal to zoom in on the man's face, and the image that returned made his heart pump faster. What Neal couldn't understand was how Dana had gotten involved with someone so dangerous.

He took aim at Drago's head. Logically, if he killed Drago, the rest of Drago's crew would have time to hurt—or kill—Dana. He had no idea if Dana had backup on the way. Judging by their posture, and the way the crew was staring, their intent was to hurt—or kill—her.

The sound of Dana's voice sailed across the bridge, once more.

"You got what I asked you for?"

Drago motioned one of his men forward. The man went to the rear of their SUV and returned dragging a large, wheeled chest. He sat the chest between Dana and Drago, but closer to Drago's feet.

Dana stepped forward and bent low to inspect what was in the chest. From Neal's vantage point, there appeared to be a body inside the chest; but he couldn't be sure.

Drago asked her, "You got what I asked for."

She handed her briefcase to one of Drago's men. When Drago confirmed what was in the case, his smile grew wide.

He asked, "Where is the rest?"

Dana pointed at her car. She seemed to have no regard for the weapons that were clearly visible to her. The men placed their hands, seemingly readying themselves to shoot if she tried anything. She actually waved the men off like they were in her way. The men all stared around at each other, probably wondering if the pretty lady was crazy and why she didn't seem frightened.

She started up again.

“By the way, will you have one of your men help drag this chest to my trunk while I grab your other case? I'd appreciate it because I don't want to mess up my manicure trying to get that thing into my car.”

Drago gestured for one of his men to move the chest and watched him drag it towards Dana's trunk. Neal was confused. Dana was walking around like she didn't have weapons semi-drawn on her. She opened the hatch of her car and retrieved another briefcase. She remained at the rear of her car, waiting for the man to arrive with her chest.

Speaking to someone, Neal noticed—for the first time—that Drago had someone on the phone, likely listening to the exchange he'd been having with Dana.

Upon her return, Drago set a threatening stare upon her.

“I just got an update on you. You are not who you say you are. Don't try anything. I had a man posted here for hours before you arrived. He tells me you were actually stupid enough to come out here alone with no backup.”

At those words, Neal searched the darkness for the extra man Drago mentioned.

Dana shrugged casually.

“I came to do business and could care less about being alone here with you and your men.”

Neal noticed the man's threatening smile without his scope.

He waved a hand towards her car.

“Why did you have us kill him, anyway? He was a nobody.”

Drago must have been speaking of the body in the chest that Dana had traded him for. She closed the space between her and Drago.

“The one in the chest. He was my target. He's the lucky one.”

Hearing this, Neal didn't know what to think. Drago's face tensed. He appeared as confused as Neal was.

“I can't wait to rid this world of things like you.”

Neal grew more confused.

Things?

An unholy growl filled the air. It made the hairs on Neal's neck stand. Spying through his scope, he searched for what made the bloodcurdling wail. His sights landed right back on Drago. The hair-raising howl came from him, and it wasn't something human.

Drago's voice roared across the bridge, casting bizarre echoes.

His dangerous eyes roamed the expanse of Dana's body, like a wolf stalking prey. He continued to speak in an aggressive tone that Neal believed Dana needed to take seriously. A smile broke through his unpleasant glare.

“You are so damn sexy. I almost hate to kill you. But I can't wait to taste you. You smell delicious. The first time I got a whiff of your scent, I wanted to rip into one of your veins so badly, I had to leave the room. Now, I finally know why your scent caught me off guard.”

At those words, Neal was struck with a level of shock he rarely experienced. Drago was talking of killing Dana, ripping into her veins; yet she was smiling at him.

What in the hell is wrong with her?

As he struggled to make sense of Drago's words, Neal figured it best to prepare to start shooting, since Dana refused to take the man's threats seriously.

Drago made a hand gesture to his men before continuing his speech.

“I can't believe you were stupid enough to meet with a bunch of killers—alone. You do know who I am, don't you? I can't be touched. I'm Mister Untouchable to the authorities; and now that I know that you know my secret, I have no choice but to kill you.”

Dana's laughter put a deeper crease in Neal's forehead.

"I'm not afraid of you, Drago. You are the one that should be afraid. You should have practiced carrying a gun. Without one, you leave yourself vulnerable to people like me."

With his eyes more adjusted to the dim lighting, Neal clearly watched Drago's eyes go wide and turn a blazing shade of red.

"You are one crazy bitch."

Just as Drago positioned his lips to speak again, the gun went *pop, pop, pop, pop* in rapid succession.

Chapter 13

The Scariest People

Neal's heart stopped. He feared that Dana had been shot, until he viewed her with a gun to Drago's head. Since she wasn't harmed, his head snapped around, searching, to figure out what happened. He sat behind a sniper rifle, yet he didn't have time to react or to shoot. It didn't take him long to find that Dana had been the one shooting.

Apparently, when she went to her trunk, the case wasn't the only thing she took from it. Drago's entire crew had been laid out, all lifeless; they probably had no clue that their lives were in jeopardy. Drago stood in front of Dana, his eyes continuing to glow red. Neal was rooted in place, unaware of what to do at that point.

Someone fired off another shot. It wasn't Dana this time, and the sound traveled from a greater distance. It must have come from the hidden man Drago had spoken of.

Dana made a move that baffled Neal's mind and left him questioning not only who she was but what she was. He'd never seen a human move that fast.

She took Drago's back so quickly, Neal didn't have a chance to see her do it. She used him as her shield. Her arm pressed firmly against his throat as her weapon's muzzle kissed his temple.

Neal discovered one of the reasons she favored wearing heels. Right now, they made her closer to Drago's height, which gave her better maneuverability and aim advantage on the sniper. The toe-curling growl pouring from Drago's throat was otherworldly.

Dana yelled, into the night, "If you are smart, you'll reveal yourself. If you know who I am, I'm sure you know that I will not hesitate to chop this bastard's head off and burn it."

Neal was now certain of one thing. Dana was capable of handling herself. She was a dangerous woman; and fast, so incredibly fast it was mind-blowing. He sat behind a weapon with a scope and he hadn't spotted anyone, but she somehow seemed to know where Drago's last man was hidden.

Seconds later, the man came out shooting. Dana used Drago as her shield. Automatic weapons fire sent slug after slug into Drago's body. Neal witnessed the impact of each slug sending Drago's body harshly against Dana's. They stumbled back with each deadly impact as Drago screamed for the man to hold his fire.

Neal had the shadowy figure in his sights. With Dana's life in jeopardy, he didn't hesitate to send a round into the sniper's head, splitting it like a watermelon dropped from a rooftop.

Dana spun with a howling Drago in her grasp. She attempted to figure out who dropped the sniper.

As Dana yelled for him to reveal himself, Neal's mind drifted for a moment. He was certain he saw Drago take at least five slugs.

Why hasn't he dropped yet?

Dana and Drago faced his direction.

"If you don't want to die, I suggest you show yourself."

Neal shouted, "Dana, don't shoot. It's me, Neal!"

Dana must have recognized his voice because a bit of tension eased from her stance.

Neal took the scope away from his eye and climbed from his perch. Stepping from the darkness, his eyes immediately landed on the infamous Drago. The man was literally choked full of holes, but there he stood with only a few drops of blood dirtying his clothes.

Upon taking in Dana, Neal noticed that she wore a short-styled wig that sat lopsided atop her head from her struggle with Drago.

Neal needed her to explain this situation before his brain exploded. He and Dana stared at each other for a long while, long enough for Drago to come up with a plan.

Drago delivered a blow to Dana's hand, sending her gun clinking to the ground. He bucked, like a wild horse, and moved so fast, Neal's eyes could hardly keep up with him. Whatever speed-enhancing ability he had, Dana possessed it as well.

Neal caught enough to know that Dana took a blow to the face before she regained control. It didn't take her but a few seconds to get the fast-moving man under control.

Neal jumped, both at the action and from the sound. Dana twisted the man's neck with such speed, strength, and precision that Neal found himself both impressed and frightened.

Drago's limp body dropped to the ground, like a sack of rotten potatoes. Neal's eyes swept Dana for answers as she stepped across the body to retrieve her weapon. She stood back a few feet, aimed and shot, sending two slugs into Drago's chest and two into his head. This was definitely overkill.

Now, Neal finally understood the statement Dana had expressed some time ago, "The scariest people never reveal to you how scary they are. They show you right before they take your life." The realization smacked him in the face; she had been talking about herself.

As she marched towards the open hatchback of her car, Neal apologized.

"I'm sorry. If I hadn't interrupted, he never would have been able to hit you."

After seeing her shoot five men without remorse, Neal stood in place as Dana dug through her trunk. His intended words faltered, as she marched away from the trunk with a machete.

What is she going to do with that big-ass knife?

If the knife was any indication, she wasn't done with Drago. She returned to Drago's lifeless body. Standing over him, she raised the knife high above her head, preparing to hack him into pieces.

As if a moment of clarity hit her, she glanced up, and said, "Neal, I'll explain this to you later, but I have to take his head. This bastard isn't dead."

The first chop went halfway through Drago's neck, sending squirts of blood a couple feet into the air. The chop opened his neck enough to reveal fragments of bone and chunks of unidentifiable parts. Not much blood seeped from his bullet wounds, but it now gushed onto the dirty pavement from his neck.

The second chop connected with the remaining flesh holding Drago's head to his body before the knife hit the pavement beneath. A spark flickered from the force of the blow.

Neal was reluctant to move or let out the breath he was holding. As much as he hated to admit it, he was afraid. Drago had been shot at least nine times and Dana had snapped his neck.

How could he not have been dead?

Oh, my God. The poor woman has gone mad.

Neal didn't know what to do, so he stood there while Dana hack the man's head clean off his body. He prayed she had an explanation for killing five men and now believed she needed to hack one of them into parts. He'd even gotten himself involved, killing one of the men for her.

Drago had been a target on Top's Secret radar for nearly five years. Neal stood in place, observing Dana, standing there with the man's head in her hand. She'd gotten a hold of Drago's shoulder-length tresses, so the head dangled from her fingers like a chandelier.

When she took a step towards him, Neal took a step back. He staggered back a bit more when Dana lifted the decapitated head and stared into its eyes.

"I finally got you, you bastard."

Neal wondered what her intentions were for the head as she walked past him and headed towards the rear of her car. He remained rooted in place, but it didn't stop his eyes from taking in the rest of her actions. She sat the head someplace and beckoned for him.

"Neal, will you help me with this please?" She was asking him to help with the body in the chest.

There is a logical explanation, Neal attempted to convince himself.

Neal did as he was asked because, at this point, he didn't know if his own life was in jeopardy.

They maneuvered the body in the chest enough to make room for the head. Dana picked up the head, stuffed it inside, and slammed the chest shut. Neal helped Dana slide the chest further into the compact space of her trunk.

"I'm not crazy, Neal. If that's what you're thinking."

You look crazy to me.

He didn't voice his thoughts. Two months of answers couldn't have explained what he'd witnessed and participated in.

"You killed five people and hacked off a head. Why?"

She placed her hand on the hatchback of the car.

"I'll explain it all once we get out of here. All I ask is that you keep an open mind."

She slammed the hatch shut, walked around, and climbed into the driver's seat.

Neal thought his mind couldn't be any more open. He'd seen all sorts of unimaginable scenes in his line of work; but this was, by far, at the top of his list of weird and deadly. This situation defined a whole new level of insane.

As Neal climbed into the front seat of the compact car, he ensured both his weapons were easily accessible.

What is she going to do with that head?

Neal had never bore witness to a beheading, and Dana's had been brutal. The sight of her lightning-fast movement also fought to stay at the surface of his mind.

Chapter 14

The Dead Don't Die

Since Dana informed him that she would explain later, Neal refrained from asking questions right away. The amount of confusion he harbored made him change his mind rather quickly. He needed some answers before he burst.

“How were you and Drago able to move so fast? Do you have an undocumented ability of some sort? Is it something you take that makes you move fast? There is no way anyone knows what you can do or they would lock you in a lab and study or clone you.”

Dana stared straight ahead.

“I operate under the codename Sevyn. When I wear the wig, I’m Sevyn, or it means I have gone under.”

With those words, she jerked the wig off and sat it on the seat next to her.

She thankfully continued, “I was given that name by another woman like me. I didn’t tell her anything, but I think we sensed it in each other, sensed that there was something extra within us, the same way I sense something in you, Neal.”

Neal’s back stiffened at those words. He breathed a sigh of relief when Dana continued to talk.

“She and I, we don’t have the same ability, but she has a special gift nonetheless. When we were on assignment together, she pointed out that I moved seven times faster than the average person. She started calling me Sevyn. I liked the name, so I kept it.

“Most agents know her as Smoke. If you ever meet her, you’ll understand why. I think she is hiding a serious ability. Anyway, I’m honestly not sure how I’m able to move so fast. It all started after my mother was murdered. It was as if the horrific incident sparked something in me.”

Neal calmed his nerves as best he could. Dana couldn’t talk fast enough to tell him all he wanted to know.

He asked, “You’ve told no one of your special gift? You keep that part of yourself hidden away until you need to use it? Do people usually die when Sevyn comes out?”

Neal nearly missed it, but Dana inclined her head.

“Before I answer you, I have to ask. Are you not freaked out about this? You’re handling this with more ease than I would have expected.”

Neal shrugged.

“This job sometimes doesn’t leave me much room to be freaked out. Mentally, and physically, I have always been able to handle more than my share of chaos. But this time, I have to admit, I’m totally freaked out.”

Silence filled the cab of the small car. The tight, suffocating space was alive with tension, mostly Neal’s. Dana seemed at peace, like chopping off heads and killing groups of people was something she did often.

The dash lights illuminated her face with an unnatural glow. Neal stared at her, for a paused moment, as he gathered his thoughts.

“You do realize you took out Luther Drago? The government has been after him for years and you have his head in your trunk.”

Dana didn’t say anything for a long while before she asked, “How do you know his name? How do you know who the government wants? You’re not just some protection officer are you? You also killed someone without a second thought back there. And dare I ask, how were you able to follow me?”

Neal was determined to find answers, and Dana was taking her time about giving them.

“You first. What is this all about? I need some answers, Dana.”

If Dana was connecting the clues as they were starting to line up in his head, Neal was thinking they might end up at the same conclusion. He had literally—by naming Drago—divulged to her that he was a government agent.

She took in a deep breath.

“I have been doing this, officially, for the government for three years now. I kill for the government, cleaning their kill list in exchange for killing Drago’s kind. But, you’re not off the hook either. It didn’t take me long to realize that you weren’t the average, every day bodyguard. How do you know who Luther Drago is?”

He stared at her, his penetrating glare pushing through the darkness. He didn’t want to put his cards out there first, so he deflected.

“You’re a spy for the government? Is that why you work so hard to keep secrets from your family? Is that why you couldn’t tell me anything?”

“Yes. And I need you to keep my secret. You’re one of only a few who knows the kind of work a diplomat’s supposedly innocent daughter does. Technically, I don’t exist in this world. And if something ever happens to me, I’m well aware they’ll make it look like an accident. Now, it’s your turn.”

Neal wasn’t sure how to tell her that they were likely a part of the same team. She probably wasn’t going to believe him. He decided to try anyway.

“What if I told you we work for the same team?”

He sensed her assessing him through the dark. He was tempted to tell her to put her eyes back on the road, but she turned back in time to relieve his stress.

Her voice was hollow, like she was talking and thinking at the same time.

“I wouldn’t believe you. It would be too much of a coincidence, and it may mean my father knows about me, which puts his life in serious danger.”

Neal reassured her.

“Don’t worry, your father has no idea who I truly work for, nor do I think he knows your secrets. He knows you have them, but he doesn’t yet know what they are. The agency I work for is smart and strategic in their planning. If they thought an agent needed help or needed to be spied on, they would find a way to put us together.”

“If we work for the same type of agency, what sector do you work for?”

Neal cleared his throat and took a deep breath.

“I work for Top. Top doesn’t have sectors, they create them.”

The sound of screeching tires reached his ears after his seat belt snapped against his chest. His head flew off the headrest as he quickly lurched forward. He reached out and gripped the dashboard and door panel.

“I take it you nearly snapped my neck because we truly do work for the same team?”

She shook her head, rapidly.

“There’s no way. As far as I know, there are only fifty Top agents in the entire country, at any given time. The job is so dangerous, you damn near have to qualify as crazy before they take you on.”

Dana leaned towards him in the seat. She had her eyes level with his.

“Prove it. Tell me some things only a Top agent would know.”

Neal smiled.

“Well, only a Top agent would be doing some of the shit I just witnessed. I still don’t understand the head thing, although Top only gets involved in cases that straddle the line between normal and abnormal. I have seen many things I can’t explain, but tonight went to a whole new level for me.”

He tilted his head in thought.

“You haven’t done it yet, but you will call a cleanup crew to clear the bridge. And before day breaks, the scene will be so clean that no one will know that you—or anyone—was there.”

Neal snapped his finger, remembering something else.

“The body you have in the chest will be picked up by one of Top's body snatchers. Like the bridge, all you have to do is provide them with a set of grid coordinates. Since he was on Top's kill list, they will build their own crime scene to make his death look like whatever they want it to.

“Like I said before, if Top wants us together for whatever reason, they will make it happen. I didn't get this assignment, out of the blue, for nothing.”

Dana was unusually quiet, probably trying to process the fact that they worked in the same underworld. Top was about as far under as one could get. Dana retrieved her phone, hit one button and started talking.

“Clear Sevyn, 47-6262 North, 122.3359 West. Put the headless one on ice for a few days.”

After she hung up the phone, Neal sensed Dana glancing his way. He wondered why she wanted Drago's dead body on ice.

“You're likely hiding an ability also,” Dana reiterated, sounding sure of her words. “If I'm to tell you all my secrets, you need to come clean. I sensed something different in you the moment we met.”

Neal didn't like being put on the spot.

“If you tell me why you took the head, I'll tell you my secrets.”

As if on cue, a guttural groan rattled over the seat. Neal's head whipped around, staring into the blackness in the rear of the car. He kept his voice as even and as calm as he could manage.

“What is that? Please tell me that wasn't *that* head making that noise?”

Chapter 15

Secrets Revealed

Neal sat impatiently through Dana's long pause. She cleared her throat after another moan sounded.

“Yes, that is the head moaning and the very reason I took it. I have killed that bastard two times already. It took me a while to figure out the only way he and his kind will stay dead is to separate the head from the body and burn it. His kind is what killed my mother. He was one of the four that murdered her.”

Neal watched Dana's knuckles strain against the skin of her hand as she gripped the steering wheel tighter.

She continued, “You know as well as I do that the government has a way of finding out whatever they want. When they found out I, as a teen girl, was tracking what killed my mother, they picked me up. They seemed more interested in how I had made repeated contact with the things I was hunting and lived to tell about it.

“Long story short, the government recruited and trained me. They don't know about my secret ability, if they do, they have never disclosed it.”

Neal had no idea the world he'd been in for years dove this deeply into the unknown.

“I saw Drago take five shots from his own man and four shots from your gun. You snapped his neck and chopped off his head. You've already killed him twice before now. What in the hell is he?”

Her body stiffened. She gripped the steering wheel so tightly at this point that it appeared she was ready to rip it from the steering column.

“The government knows they exist, just as I think they know people like you and me exist. I don't know what they are, and I don't like what others are calling them.”

Neal couldn't remember a time when he'd been so speechless. He glanced in the back of the car once more.

“What is that? I can handle unusual, even a little paranormal activity, but this is beyond anything I have encountered.”

Dana's shoulders hunched.

“Honestly, I don't know what he is. A bullet to the heart and head puts him down, but he won't stay down for long. I discovered six months ago, by accident, that burning their heads kills them, but only if it's separated from their bodies.

“The first time I killed Drago was three years ago. I blew up his car. When I went after his buddy months later, Drago walked around like nothing had happened. I have been hunting the four that murdered my mother for nearly nine years. I have killed those same men over and over, ignorant to the fact that they regenerate and heal so rapidly, they are almost indestructible.

“Each time they re-emerged after I thought I killed them, I wondered if I was going crazy or seeing ghost. Since I now know how to kill them, I have killed two. Drago will be the third. Once I'm done with him, I'll track the last.

“I also discovered that they have a strange attraction to me, and I'm not sure if it's the way I smell, or the way I look. There are times when it seemed my scent temporarily distracted them. They have made attempts to bite me or eat me—I don't know which. All I know is my urge to kill them becomes so intense, I can't help myself.”

Neal had so many questions to ask he didn't know which to ask first.

“How is he able to function without the rest of his body? I don't understand. Usually, the government will be all over something like this, studying and testing it. They have doctors that can find out what that thing is and why it doesn't die easily.”

Dana released a sigh.

“What makes you think the government isn't already studying them? Before I stumbled along, who knows how many of those things they tested. Sometimes, I think that the government might be the reason for them and for us; genetic testing gone wrong or something. You work for Top, just as I do, and you have seen the equipment and technology they have access to. They have been privy to this type of thing long before we got here and will be long after we are gone.

“The government uses me to kill targets on their list and, in return, they give me a license to kill the bastards that killed my mother. I had to find a way to get Drago to trust me enough to meet with me, so I hired him to kill a marked target.

“In exchange, they wanted—of all things—a few vials of my blood. They claimed it was for research. I, of course, pretended like I didn't know why he wanted my blood. I was almost tempted to stand around and see what would happen if he drank the acid I put in the vials.

“The second case I gave Drago was filled with cocaine. His kind doesn't become addicts like humans do. Drugs that are uppers help them stave off their thirst for blood. We take aspirin for headaches; they take drugs for their blood-aches.”

Neal was confused about what they were dealing with, and Dana seemed reluctant to name them. The moans became louder and more frequent.

“Has the government labeled them?”

“I don’t like to say the word the government calls them. Although I’m exposed to unbelievable circumstances, I don’t want to confirm—or acknowledge—that such creatures exist. When I’m in contact with them, I don’t play around long enough to study them.

“I have never seen fangs. I don’t stop to see if they will cast a reflection in a mirror, or if they are allergic to garlic. I have never taken the time to brandish a cross. All I want is to get rid of them. The mere sight of them sickens me, makes my blood boil; and I can’t control my urge to kill them.

“And despite what you may think, they don’t have a problem with daylight. Some of them are pale and some aren’t. So far, the only way I can distinguish them from us is by their scent, their speed, and their weird attraction to me. They give off a sickly sweet scent that is so strong it’s suffocating.”

The picture Dana was painting started to reveal itself. Neal took in her dark form.

“They asked for your blood in exchange for killing a man, and they would like nothing more than to bite or eat you. I think I agree with the government’s label. What else could they be but vamp—”

She cut him off.

“Noooo. Don’t say it. Don’t speak that word. The v-word was my first conclusion. Given all of the weird, hard to explain, and even paranormal things that I have encountered, I refuse to believe that v-word creatures exist.

“Why would a group of vampires be interested in killing my mother?”

“I’m making a staunch effort to wrap my head around it. I’m holding out for science to explain them, and myself, for that matter.”

Another moan filled the car. Neal was less on edge than he had been the first few times. Dana flipped off the headlights. It had just dawned on him that he was so engrossed in finding answers; he hadn’t paid much attention to where they were going.

Dana turned into an alley that led to a town of abandoned warehouses. The way she drove along the dark, tight alley with no headlights made Neal wonder if speed wasn’t the only ability Dana possessed. Their surroundings were so intensely dark, he could hardly see his own hands inside the car.

Her voice snuck up on him as easily as he knew she could.

“In case you are wondering where we are going, this is where I take their heads to burn them. I was brought here by a target the government assigned me to track. He brought me here to eat me, dismember me, or burn my body. He was a homicidal maniac and probably planned to do all three. He was one of them. Not one of the ones that killed my mother, but one nonetheless.

“Since I have dipped into their world, I come in contact with them more often than I’d like to. The incinerator works in one of these old warehouses.

“When he brought me here, the thing had no idea I was as fast as him. I managed to get him wedged between two beams and commenced to chopping off his head. I tossed the head in the fire, and he started yelling and spilling his guts. To stop me from burning his head completely, I learned valuable secrets about them. Detaching their body parts is the key to killing, or permanently hurting, them. If the body remains fully intact, they can be hurt but they don’t die.

“I figured I would start using this place to get rid of them, since my target no longer needs it. I listened to his screams and watched his head burn until there was nothing but ash left. Once his head was destroyed, I was set to burn the rest of his body; but without the head, his body turned into a puddle of blood.”

Neal didn't know whether to be afraid or very afraid. The beautiful, diplomatic princess was a stone-cold killer. She talked about burning heads and bodies turning into bloody puddles like it was normal. How she managed to keep the details of her deadly life from seeping into her normal, prim and proper life was impressive.

He now understood why she snuck away. A large part of her life was filled with monsters, and she had to literally become a monster to keep them from consuming her.

Neal asked another question.

"When you were shot by cops in that truck, did it have something to do with these...things?"

"It was them. Apparently, the last one I need to track is some type of a leader to them. I think I got too close to him. A group of them ganged up on me and almost succeeded in killing me by setting up that truck scene. They are clever in keeping themselves hidden and good at avoiding anything that leads to them being discovered."

Neal didn't like anything about this new world Dana was introducing him to.

Chapter 16

Family Crest

Dana drove through a huge hole she'd discovered in the side wall of the old abandoned warehouse. She was aware that her actions probably had Neal on edge, but he had secrets, too. He had deflected her question about his ability, but she hadn't forgotten. It was a question she was definitely going to readdress.

She drove far enough into the dark building that they wouldn't be seen by the lonely guard that drove past once every two hours.

When she opened her car door, the automatic interior lights illuminated the car enough for her to see Neal's eyes searching the darkness.

"You can get out, if you want," she announced to him.

Dana reached blindly into the back of her car and retrieved a lantern. The bright beams cut through the thick darkness, making the area around her car spring to life.

Neal exited the car, taking careful strides. He kept his gun at the ready, and she didn't blame him. Her world was filled with creatures that weren't supposed to exist.

After opening the trunk, she cracked the chest open a hair and cast a stern voice.

"Don't you dare bite me." She pointed, as if chastising a hardheaded child. "If you do, I will make you suffer." She was talking to Drago's head.

Dana opened the case fully and Drago's burning red eyes darted up angrily. Neal pointed his weapon at the thing.

"Return me to my body, and I'll give you the last one."

Drago's words gave Dana pause. He definitely piqued her interest. It had taken her years of broken bones, bruises, and scrapes, chasing ghosts, killing and re-killing monsters; and still, one remained at large—the main one. The idea that she could find him faster was tempting. She snatched Drago's head from the chest.

"I don't believe you. You were ready to kill me on that bridge. Why? Does your leader know that I'm looking for him? Did I get too close? Did he order you to kill me? What is his name?"

The leader had been the one that took the biggest bite from her mother. When things became chaotic, he'd snap her mother's neck. The others contributed, but the one that had caused her mother's death was the one Dana wanted the most.

She didn't know his name, but she remembered the tattoo on his wrist. An octagonal shaped crest, outlined in black, with hieroglyphic symbols she didn't understand. Seeing that crest all those years ago had helped her track the others.

Drago wore his crest as a neck tattoo. The first two monsters she'd killed wore their crest on their wrists, like their leader. Since they all bore the mark, Dana assumed it to be their covenant symbol or possibly a family crest.

A toe-curling scream that wrinkled her face in anger, spilled from Drago's mouth.

"What in the hell is your problem? I haven't touched you, yet."

He took harsh breaths which made her question, briefly, where his oxygen was flowing to.

"They are moving my body. I can feel it. I have been around for one hundred sixty years, and this is one of the freakiest, scariest things I have experienced."

She didn't care about his discomfort.

"Enough with the theatrics, Drago. Answer my questions before I start lighting your face on fire. And I will take my time, burning you, until there is nothing left."

That statement got Drago talking.

"His name is Linkin. No one knows where he lives. All we know is how he looks. He will only meet with us on his own terms. I have never been to his house."

Dana shook her head.

"Let me ask you something, Drago. How much do you value your life? Do you have a strong will to live when your life is in jeopardy, or do you not care since you likely don't have a soul?"

Drago's eyes shot towards Neal, who stood a safe distance away, observing. Dana noticed that although Neal gripped a 9 millimeter in a lowered position, his finger rested on the trigger.

"I'm telling you what I know."

Drago's voice went up a few octaves. The flicker of the cigarette lighter made his eyes grow wide. Neal leaned in their direction, eyes riveted to the action.

"I don't know where he lives. He's never revealed that to any of us. Please! Don't!"

The thought of making Drago suffer pleased Dana. As far as she was concerned, he'd pretty much admitted to killing people for over a century and a half, feasting on human flesh and blood.

She stuck the flame to his cheek which ignited a shriek loud enough to wake the dead. Since his head wasn't attached to his body, she had no idea if his wounds would heal.

"Start talking or you're going to need a good witchdoctor to fix your face."

The fire continued to eat at his cheek until the stench of burning flesh found its way to her nose. Neal fanned a hand in front of his face and scrunched up his nose.

"Damn, that reeks."

"He owns the Harrington Building! Stop. Please, stooooop," came Drago's frantic cries.

At those words, Dana let the flame die. She knew of the building. It housed apartments, offices and businesses, and a restaurant on the bottom level. She didn't have a reason to go to the building; but the restaurant was popular, from what she knew.

"Keep talking, Drago. This is a new lighter, and I also have an incinerator at my disposal."

"A friend of mine, Brandon, works for Linkin; but like I told you earlier, we never see him."

Dana wasn't concerned about the leader's looks. She would never forget any of their murderous faces. She was particularly interested in knowing where to find him. She'd worry about identifying him, right before she chopped off his head.

She wondered if Drago understood he had given his friend, Brandon, a death sentence.

"What's his full name?" She flicked the lighter. "If your friend works for him, there should be a name on his paycheck, shouldn't it?"

Drago's head twitched as he talked.

"He uses the name Linkin Michaelson for business and when associating with people. That's all I know."

"No. That's not all you know. The crest on your neck says you're from the same covenant, or you're a family member. You need to spill some god-damned beans, or I will spill whatever your brain is made of. I will open your skull, scoop out parts of your brain and make you watch me burn it."

Drago was the monster, but after those words, he looked spooked.

"Does he live in the building? Is he ever at his building or the restaurant?"

Drago took too long to respond, so she flicked the lighter a few more times.

"I have never seen him there. But he likely makes an appearance at least once in a while."

Dana continued to torture Drago until she got tired. Once she believed she had as much as she was going to get from this round, she muzzled him and returned his mutilated head to the chest.

Since she and Neal were out virtually all night, they would only get a few hours before she was due to go into the office and start her workday.

Chapter 17

Brazen Behavior

When Dana crept through the window she'd left cracked, the dimly lit house accepted her with welcoming warmth. She gleamed past one of the security guards so fast, she thought she saw the wind from her passage ruffle his hair. She didn't stick around to see if he noticed her. By the time she made it to her door, Neal was standing there, smiling.

The perplexed expression on her face must have been evident. She'd left Neal outside. She foolishly assumed he was looking for a way over the fence and past the security guards. Instead, he beat her into the house.

"I want a full explanation. Secrets, remember. We aren't keeping them anymore."

A *swish*, followed by a muffled *pop*, were the sounds that kept Dana in place. Her left hand covered her chest as her right kept Neal from seeing how wide he left her mouth hanging open. She stifled a scream, least she have every guard on the property coming to check her status.

Neal had disappeared before her eyes. His reemergence, across the hall at his bedroom door, left her standing in utter disbelief.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when he phased out of sight and flashed right back in front of her.

Neal turned his hands up, nonchalantly.

"Figured it would be easier to show you because I can't explain how it works. It is how I was able to follow you. I don't know what it is that makes it happen, nor do I know what it's called.

"All I know is, if I can see it, or have an accurate idea of where I will end up, I can send myself there. I don't know if I'm jumping through time, or if I'm phasing in and out of space, or if my molecules are breaking down at a rapid rate of speed and moving faster than light.

“You’re the only person that knows. I have always been afraid to tell anyone because I thought I was crazy. I thought I had a mental disorder that allowed me to convince myself that I had this ability.

“When I saw the way you and Drago moved on the bridge, when I saw a head talking without its body, and after all you have revealed to me, I feel like I can finally breathe. I’m free from the mental prison I put myself in. I’m not alone in *this*. Whatever *this* is?”

Captivated, Dana didn't know what question to ask first.

“What do you feel when it happens? What, where....”

Neal laughed at her. She asked the next question before she gave him a chance to answer the first one. He patted her arm.

“Why don’t we prepare ourselves for work? I’ll explain it as best I can on the drive to the office.”

She reached up and almost hugged him. She was fast, but she was sure he didn’t miss her gesture. After all the secrets they'd revealed to each other, she felt closer to him than she had to anybody. He was the only one that knew who she truly was.

She stepped into her room and took a quick shower. She couldn’t wait to get back to Neal, so he could fill her in on his amazing ability. Now that all of their secrets were laid out on the table, the crushing weight of the world lifted from her shoulders.

A knock sounded at her door as she was pinning her hair up.

She swung her door open with bobby pins poking from her mouth, like a bunch of metal buck teeth.

“Come in,” she called, her words muffled but understandable as they breezed by the metal between her lips.

She wore her hair up so much, Dana could pin it into any number of elaborate or simple buns. She applied the last few pins as Neal step through her door. Closing and turning the lock, she stood facing her door for a moment before turning to face Neal.

What she was about to do was a bit scandalous, but Neal had to know by now that she was attracted to him. She dropped her black silk robe, revealing a nude-colored bra and pantie set that was so sheer you could literally see everything.

Neal stood at the foot of her bed, watching her with smiling excitement in his eyes. She let him look and turned slightly in each direction so he got a better view.

Dana didn’t know why she thought he would be embarrassed. After all, he did have a pair of her panties. He had sat in her office and watched her with lust-hazed eyes as he sniffed them. Their little office foreplay session had raised her blood pressure to its max. She took a lazy step closer to him; their eyes locked.

“Neal,” she called, seductively.

His face gave away nothing, but his eyes conveyed a well-versed story of longing and desire.

“Yes.”

She took another lingering step closer.

“I don’t think I’m going to make it into work today.”

“Why not?” he asked, with a face void of emotion.

She glimpsed it in his eyes; he knew damn well why she wasn’t going to make it, and it was all his fault. She fondled her breast and let her fingers meander along the curves of her body.

“I’m warm to the touch. My blood pressure is elevated. My breathing is a bit erratic. I need you to alleviate my pressure and help me regain control of these strong urges I can't shake. Will you do that for me, Neal?”

He smiled then.

"I'm here to help you get through whatever you need. What do you need me to do?"

Dana's smile brightened the interior of her room. She took the final step. Since she was without her heels, Neal towered over her. Her forehead barely reached his chin. She favored heels because she hated being looked down upon. However, she liked Neal looking down at her.

Neal's downward gaze sent jolts of erotic intentions straight to her brain. Maybe it was the lust in his eyes; she didn't know and she didn't have time to think on it too much. He had asked her what she needed him to do, and he deserved an answer.

"I need you to alleviate my suffering."

What she didn't tell him was that she suffered from sexual starvation. Finding a man that could handle her sexual appetite was a daunting task, and she hoped Neal was up for the challenge because she planned to devour him.

She could no longer restrain herself. Whatever he was about to say was crushed between his lips and hers. She used her speed to sling her arms around his neck and yanked his face to hers, surprising him. She reminded herself to move slower, be normal, and stay at a normal person's speed, no matter how much Sevyn wanted to hurry things along.

Speed was never her friend when it came to sex, so she did her best to calm her raging hormones. She slowed her kisses into more delicate and tender presses and, in return, was rewarded by Neal's memorable kisses. The man literally made love to her mouth.

When she finally unhinged her arms from around his neck, a hint of hesitation found its way into the corners of his mouth and the edges of his eyes.

He asked, "Are you sure?"

He asked the question as his hand slid, feather light, across her nipple. And he was the one who claimed she was putting on a performance.

Dana didn't answer his question. She used her speed, sliding his hands around the bend of her ass until he cupped it.

"Did you really ask that silly question? This is all I could think about after you put your hand up my skirt. You have no idea how badly you made me want you. If my assistant hadn't come to the door when she did, *this* probably would have happened *then*."

They didn't waste any more words. Dana helped relieve Neal of his clothes. She admired his strong male frame which was toned enough to produce a dictionary of definition. She took off his pants but not his boxers. She was both afraid and anxious to see what was under his last stitch of clothing. Her hand skimmed his solid chest, his toned abs, and finally made the journey to his boxers.

Neal stood, watching, perfectly content with letting her explore whatever piqued her interest. She liked that he didn't hesitate to stroke and caress whatever part on her body called his attention.

She looped her thumbs into the waistband of his boxers and shoved them down. The large bulge under the material of his boxers had her yearning to see what he was hiding. She shoved his boxers down until she felt the tip of his penis stop them; then she took great care in sliding them past the area growing bigger before her eyes. The tip of him surfaced; and she inched the material further, at such a slow pace, it glided along his hard, peachy flesh like she was peeling back a layer from a ripe banana.

But this wasn't fruit, it was all male. She swallowed her excitement when a good six inches was unveiled and more remained hidden. When he was fully revealed, her lips drifted apart and she stood, staring, like she'd never seen a penis before.

At first, she was surprised; then a smile bent the corners of her mouth as she stood, taking him all in. Her hands rested against his thighs as she continued to hold onto the rim of his boxers.

She licked her lips, her first time seeing one so gloriously big. The possibilities with him were endless. Her line of sight swept the glorious expanse of his well-endowed penis a few more times, to ensure she wasn't imagining it. Finally, she forced her eyes to meet his unreadable gaze.

"It seems I have found another of your big secrets." Her statement put a smile on his face. "Is that right?"

Her hand gravitated towards that tempting jewel. With the first caress, she closed her eyes as she imagined him inside her. Fondling him, she continued to be fascinated as she stroked from the base to the head. She couldn't tear her eyes away to see if her touch pleased him.

The low whimpers that escaped his throat and the slight sway in his body informed her that he was enjoying it.

She hadn't decided yet if she was more fascinated with his penis or his amazing ability to transmute from one place to the next.

Reluctantly, she let go and sent his boxers the rest of the way down. A temporary lapse in control allowed her need for speed to take control. She jumped out of her underwear, and she and Neal went speeding into the bed.

The bed groaned its resistance under their crashing weight as they bounced upwards, a few times, before settling into the cushiness of the mattress. Their temporary laughter gave way to their unrelenting lust.

Dana pressed her lips firmly onto his and graciously accepted his offered tongue. Neal never let his hands leave her body. His touch electrified every part of her.

She bent her legs, straddling him, as he sat up, moving with her. She gazed into his eyes. The intensity in his dreamy glare scared her as much as it excited her. She broke eye contact by reaching towards her bedside table. Hating to break complete contact with his body, she stretched her body to open her bedside drawer. She removed a sleeve of twelve condoms and thanked her lucky stars she'd purchased a variety of sizes.

Again, Dana assumed her behavior would surprise him, but the look on Neal's face was easily interpreted. His C's were there, on display. His charisma and confidence had her giddy. She didn't care that she was being forward and brazen.

"If we can manage it, I would like to use each and every last one of these, before we leave this room."

He bent forward and gave her a playful peck on the lips.

"Since you asked, I will do whatever it takes to make it happen."

He had no idea how happy he'd made her. She knew good and well they couldn't use all those condoms, but she was damn well going to try. Knowing he was willing to go along with her was amazing. Seeing what he had to offer made the escapade that much more appealing.

She tore off one of the condoms, her eyes straying to the surprise cradled between their bodies. She scooted backed enough for his penis to spring free. Wrapping her hand around it, her tongue refused to stay inside her mouth as she licked her lips.

"May I?"

He tightened the grip he had on her thighs. His lust heavy eyes remained on hers.

"I'm all yours."

Did Neal have any idea he was like a big, tasty package of drugs, telling an addict to take what she wanted? She presented prim and proper to her family and associates, but in the bedroom, she didn't like to limit herself.

Her eyes remained on his as she clinched the condom wrapper between her teeth and tore the edge with her thumb and forefinger. She held him, firmly, as she rolled the condom on, enjoying the hard and silky texture.

"I'll give you foreplay later. Right now, I can't wait to get you inside me."

Condom in place, she kept her hand firmly wrapped around him, as she raised herself higher on her knees.

Neal took advantage of her breast passing so teasingly close to his face. His tongue grazed each of her hard nipples. He enjoyed seeing all of that lust in her eyes as she forced herself to keep things at a normal pace.

Her pulsing wetness hovered above the tip of him, as she eased herself down. The first few inches stopped her; a mixture of a sigh and a moan escaped her.

The sensation of sliding into her froze him. Neal clinched his fist and squeezed his eyes shut so tight his head shook involuntarily.

Slowly, Dana, she reminded herself. Don't rush it.

She eased a bit more in, enjoying the firm sensation of his throbbing hardness plunging into her. She started a gradual wave of her body, working him in as leisurely as her brain would allow.

"Jesus, you feel good."

She draped her arms around his neck, as her body kept to a slow dancing rhythm. Her movement coaxed harsh breaths from Neal. Savoring every splendid second, she leaned her forehead against his and failed to keep her fluttering eyes open.

Although they were shut, it didn't stop her eyes from rolling to the back of her head. Each dancing rhythm sent profoundly addictive waves of pleasure into her core. The waves vibrated outward until they spread all over her body. She lifted her head and kissed Neal, pressing her lips firmly onto his before seeking out his tongue.

He let her devour him, and she took advantage of his giving nature. She found herself plunged upon a world of pleasure so compulsively addictive, she was losing herself and didn't care about how misplaced she'd become. Sheathing every enticing inch of him was a feat she thought would be impossible and proved how ravenous he made her. Her lips raked his ear.

"Let's switch. I don't know how much longer I can control myself."

He drew her firmly onto him, sending his hard desire even deeper.

"Oooo!"

His action made her scream out her desire and kept her moving.

He assisted her movement, kissing her neck with light flicks of his lips and tongue until he reached her ear.

"You don't have to control yourself with me. Do whatever pleases you."

She shook her head, like an addict trying desperately to kick a long, ongoing habit.

"I know when I can't do something; and right now, I'm losing control. I want us both to enjoy this. You have no idea how much discipline it is taking for me not to...not to..."

His throbbing hardness stole her breath once more.

Neal's words rushed out, between ragged breaths, against her trembling lips.

"I'm not altogether sure I can control myself. You already have me on the verge of losing my mind. But, for you, I'll do my best."

Without further word, he flipped her. Their connection stayed in place. Neal was planted so comfortably between Dana's legs, it seem like he'd been there before. His first few strokes took her breath and didn't give it back. His continued efforts took what was left of her mind. Her mouth was stuck in an exacerbated O.

"Oh. God. Neal."

The man made love like nobody's business. If she'd known this earlier, she would have let him get this session started. She made a confession that she would never have made under any other circumstances.

"I take back what I said about you not being able to handle what's under my surface."

He smiled, but it was stolen by a wave of pleasure that made him cry out.

"You're devouring me, Dana."

He reached down and pulled her inner thigh upward. The move tilted her, sending him impossibly deep. Her harsh gasps had her nearly hyperventilating. At this point, he had her all pants and unintelligible vocal cries. He kept a firm grasp of her inner thigh as he worked her body with the precision of a master love maker.

She was dying and pleasure was the taker of her soul. He wasn't even moving fast, yet he had her body on fire. If he kept this up, she was going to pass out. His lusty words poured into her ears.

"Am I alleviating your suffering, Dana?"

"Oh God. Yes. Yes...."

She couldn't have strung together a complete sentence, if her life depended on it. Neal didn't know it yet, but there was no damn way she was going to let him end this affair. He had opened a door she wasn't going to let him shut.

She knew no other way to express herself but to scream, huff, and heave out her breaths.

"About to. About to..."

That was all she could manage as her body shattered. She came undone, and she loved every juicy pleasure-filled moment of it. Neal followed suit.

Neal's cries registered, but Dana's ears were too clogged with flowing pleasure as it crawled up and down her body, lingering on the surface before sinking teeth into her.

After what seemed like hours, Dana fluttered back to the real world. Neal gave her the one thing she'd been craving for years—satisfaction. The orgasm was so mind-blowingly good, she would stalk him all the rest of his days to get another.

He satisfied her sexually; and she would be damned if her exhausted body didn't crave more, even as he lay atop her, recuperating from their episode.

Chapter 18

Hypnotized

The delicate slide of fingers coaxed Neal's awakening. Manicured nails traced along his abs and made a descent to the portion of him barely covered by the sheet. His gaze made its way up and found curious eyes, staring at him.

"Hey, beautiful."

There was no mistaking the lustful glint in her eyes, the slide of her tongue across her lips, and the placement of her hand on his penis. Hungry eyes captured his.

"Can I have some more, please?"

He didn't know where she'd dragged them from, but the sleeve of condoms was back. A huge smile danced across his face.

"You can have as much as you want. Besides, I love alleviating your suffering. I love the way you let me alleviate your suffering."

Accompanying his words, his manhood jumped in her hand, like it was a part of the conversation. Dana wanted more, and more was exactly what he intended to give her.

Neal didn't know how long they had been out, this time, but the position of the sun indicated it was at least noon. He vaguely remembered a guard knocking on the door. Dana had thrown on his T-shirt to greet the man. She informed the guard she was sick and taking the day off. Neal had passed out since, but he knew the guard would eventually return. It was their job to have eyes on Dana.

Neal shook his head, trying to shake off Dana's mesmerizing effect.

He didn't have a self-esteem problem, but found it difficult to believe a woman that gorgeous was interested in him. Maybe she was lonely. Never mind what he thought, he couldn't help touching her.

She was one of the most insanely beautiful women he'd ever seen. Her body was a perfectly sculpted piece of art. He ran a hand up her thigh and let it travel along her stomach until he cupped a perfect caramel breast with its small raisin, hard nipples. She stirred, her smile greeting him before her eyes opened.

Three condoms were missing from the sleeve now. Neal had never tested his stamina and was learning that with Dana next to him, it wasn't hard to summon the strength. His will to please her was as strong as the large amount of desire she stirred in him each time she expressed she still wanted him.

Although she made his desire soar, there was a question he'd been dying to ask her. He brushed aside a lock of hair that fell from her bun. Surprisingly, the bun remained in tuck after all of the shaking and moving they'd been engaged in. He sat up, bringing her up with him. He assisted her over his thighs, loving their closeness.

"Why don't you ever wear your hair down?"

She paused as if he'd doused her with freezing water. Her eyes remained on his chest, a bit longer than he liked. He placed a thumb under her chin and made her look into his eyes.

"What's the matter? Is something wrong with your hair? I feel like I can tell you anything, and I hope that you feel the same."

She didn't say anything for a long while. Her eyes remained on his as she started to pull bobby pins from her hair. Neal counted ten hairpins, so far, and the bun still hadn't fallen.

She started, "Okay. This is going to sound crazy, but I think my hair has something to do with why the monsters I hunt are so attracted to me. When I wear it down, it seems they are more fascinated with me than usual."

Neal laughed.

"Dana, you're a beautiful woman. I don't think you need your hair down for men to fall all over themselves. Sometimes you are oblivious as to how men react to you. Since it is my job to watch you, I have seen the stares, the lurking eyes, and men tripping all over themselves. They make fools of themselves to get your attention. It's not just monsters you're attracting."

She didn't seem convinced at all.

"My hair makes me different, somehow. I can't explain it. I can only show you."

She untwisted her bun. Neal stared as long tresses of hair fell past her shoulders and cascaded down her body like a dark, curly curtain. Now he understood why she needed all the hair pins. Her hair was thick, wavy, and so long, it stretched past her chest and brushed her stomach. She'd turned to the side, so he couldn't see her face, as she shook the last remaining coils loose.

When she turned to face him, Neal's smile dropped. He sat frozen. He couldn't move nor could he find words. She was so radiantly beautiful; she'd knocked the oxygen clean from his lungs. His mouth moved, ready to spill words, but they floated away without being spoken. His eyes drank her in; her beauty had possession of his senses. He only had the will to sit there and stare.

She called to him.

"Neal, are you okay? You're staring at me like I stare at the monsters."

He cleared his throat, but he couldn't shake the effect of seeing all that beauty. He'd never seen anything so profoundly attractive; and he was in such awe, he couldn't move even as his brain screamed for him to. He couldn't talk, even though he moved his mouth.

She raised both her hands, taking each side of all that lovely hair, and shoved it back.

Neal stopped her.

"Wait. Let me look at you for a bit longer."

She let him look, and he was grateful to gaze upon her glorious beauty. She turned away from him and started the process of pulling her hair back.

Neal shook his head a couple of times. He cleared his mind enough to think straight. Her beauty had taken his voice and his concentration. He recovered, some, from whatever she'd done to him as he watched her braid her hair in one long plait. Once done, she glanced back at him.

Was it embarrassment he saw in her eyes?

"That's why I don't wear my hair down. It's why I wear a wig when I'm working. I don't know what it is about my hair being down that makes me so different, but it makes normal men more aggressive and reckless in their pursuit of me, and it does strange and different things to the monsters. I never know what it will make the monsters do.

"Sometimes, it works in my favor, giving me an advantage over them; and sometimes it makes them want to eat me—or drink me—even more than they already do. You, it seemed to make speechless."

Neal took a deep breath.

"Okay. I get it. Your hair is as much an ability as your speed."

Although he didn't admit it, Neal hadn't fully shaken off the affect.

She asked, "So what did you see that is so different than when I have my hair up?"

He thought about how he would explain it.

"Well, it's like when you see the most beautiful thing in the world, and you only want to marvel at it, and take it in, because your mind is convincing you that you may never get a chance to see it again, and the last thing you want is to forget it."

She raised her eyebrows, but didn't comment. He continued.

"Looking at you with your hair down is like that, but to the tenth power. If I'd been someone you were tracking, you could have easily taken me by simply letting your hair down."

She shrugged.

"Now you know."

He hugged her then, sensing she didn't view her hair as an advantage. She stared, quietly. Neal sensed it in her stare. It was time for her to turn the spotlight on him.

"You have another secret too."

Although he didn't answer, he was sure his face gave away his questioning glare.

She continued, "Neal, sometimes, I see this deep sadness behind your eyes that you try to hide, but I see things a bit faster than the average person, remember."

Neal presented a sad smile.

"It's not a secret you see Dana. It falls more along the lines of a mystery."

Her confused expression was enough for him to continue.

"Seven years ago, I was diagnosed with having amnesia. The best doctors don't even know what kind of amnesia I have. I'm missing nineteen years."

She threw up her hands and utter disbelief flashed across her face.

"Wait, you said nineteen years? You're only twenty-six. What am I missing?"

"I was essentially born at nineteen. Agents found me and handed me over to Top. I was in a Top medical facility for months. They ran numerous tests, trying to figure out what caused my amnesia, but they never found an answer. And so far, neither have I. Whenever I have downtime, I try to look into my past, but I have yet to find anything."

Dana had a look of pity on her face; but quickly changed it, likely knowing he didn't want her pity.

"Top estimated that I was at least nineteen. The only thing I came into this world with is this scar."

Neal could see all sorts of wheels turning in her head.

She asked, "So you have no recollection of your childhood, your past, or your family? No memories at all? Wait, how did you learn everything so quickly? Technically, you're only seven, but you don't appear to be at a disadvantage."

He shook his head.

"I remember nothing. Anything before the day I was found is blank. Two agents carted me from the top of the Anderson Building in DC. I don't even know how I ended up on the top of that building. I woke up and stared into the twin faces of two agents; at least that's what they told me. I'm not at a disadvantage because I was born or reborn with factory settings. I knew how to read, write, communicate and learn.

"Top thinks that I must have had some type of tactical training also. Everything they taught me, I learned at an accelerated speed. It was like I had been groomed to assume the life of a Top agent. The weirdest thing about my situation is that every test they ran on me says that there is nothing physically wrong with me that would obstruct my memories. It's like someone literally stole the first nineteen years from me."

Dana hugged him long and hard.

"I know you don't want my pity, but I can't help being sympathetic to what you must feel. But, what if within those nineteen years there are things that are so horrible that it is a good thing you don't have your memories?"

"I have thought about that, and it's one of the things that keep me from obsessing about my situation."

Neal wanted a lot of things from Dana, and her feeling sorry for him wasn't one of them. He changed the subject.

"I want you to sit on my face."

Those words sent Dana's senses souring. As she stood to take off his T-shirt, he protested. "Don't take anything off. I have to taste you, right now."

Shit!

That was even better. With his help, she was zipped up to his face, like she'd climbed aboard a carnival ride. She didn't know how he had unwrapped her so fast, but he'd pulled her panties to the side with one hand and his other was wrapped around one of her ass cheeks.

As her pulsing wet core slid against his strong waving tongue, she closed her eyes to sensations that had her gasping for air. Lustful cries spilled from her sensually parted lips. His tongue was hot and firm and hypnotic. Her attempts to breathe were sabotaged each time Neal twirled his tongue. His expert actions gave her mini orgasms that kept her from voicing her pleasure.

Each word she struggled to say was stolen. He lifted her body's weight and when he wanted, he'd let all of her weight rest on his face and mouth. He was deliberately burying himself in her pulsing flesh and her juices, and his moans confirmed he was definitely enjoying it.

Knock. Knock.

Two hard knocks at her door caused them to both freeze. Why hadn't she re-locked her door? She was under constant watch, so everyone knocked and freely peeked in her room to check on her. Just as she thought it, her door opened.

Howard, one of the guards, cracked the door. He peeped in. Dana sat there, on Neal's face, caught in the act. She stretched the shirt to cover Neal's head and sat, staring like she wasn't getting freaky with the man that was supposed to be protecting her.

"Hey, Ms. Diallo, I'm checking to make sure you're okay. I was doing my normal rounds and thought I heard a scream."

Howard didn't appear all that surprised by their display. She took a quick glance back and, luckily, at the angle she and Neal were in, it was possible Howard hadn't noticed Neal under her, yet. Neal's body lay flat; her body and the shirt that covered his head, gave Neal the right amount of concealment to keep him hidden in plain sight.

Howard gave her a strange look.

"Ms. Diallo, what're you doing?"

She sat in an elevated kneeling position, with her legs spread. One hand gripped the edge of her mattress, while the other fought to hold the shirt over Neal's head. She didn't have complete control of her winded breathing either. How could she? Neal still had his tongue buried inside of her.

She said the first thing that came to her mind.

"I'm okay. I wasn't screaming. I was meditating and simply trying to relax my mind."

She was sure Howard didn't believe her ridiculous lie. He wrinkled his face in confusion, oblivious to what was actually happening. He truly had not noticed Neal. Neal must have figured as much because he hadn't moved an inch. She glanced back once more. Her tousled bedding and numerous pillows helped to conceal Neal.

Howard inclined his head. "Well you have a good night, Ms. Diallo."

The creases of his face gave away his attempt to figure out her actions. She flashed a smile, continuing to hold the odd position she was in.

"Howard, will you do me a favor before you go?"

"Sure."

She flashed an awkward smile.

"Will you lock my door for me?"

He turned his body further into the room, not paying much attention to her. He reached around and twisted her lock from the inside. He seemed afraid to look in her direction now.

Inches away from shutting her door, he stopped. His expression indicated he had one last thing to say.

"Ma'am, may I suggest something? May I speak frankly?"

"Yes, Howard. Sure."

"Ma'am you should start dating, because looking the way you look, you could make a man really happy. A woman as beautiful as you shouldn't be trying to please herself."

She nodded.

"Okay. That's good advice."

He inclined his head once like his statement had made a profound impact on her life.

Once Howard closed the door, Dana let out a raged breath, only to have Neal steal it away. Once he knew the coast was clear, Neal continued where he'd left off, sending instant pleasure into her.

It hadn't taken but a few intoxicating flicks of his tongue to make her forget the predicament they had just been caught in.

Chapter 19

Suit Up

As much as Dana wanted to stay snuggled up to Neal, she had work to do. The need to check out Drago's lead called, and she didn't want to drag Neal into her world of madness again. It's why she was sneaking away from him at one in the morning.

They had managed to use seven of the twelve condoms in less than a 24-hour period. She never expected that Neal would go along with her crazy request to use all twelve, but she loved that he was willing to accept the challenge. Early on, she'd gotten the impression that he wasn't one to give up on anything, easily. He'd not only given her the best sex of her life, but he'd managed to do it, repeatedly.

It was time to set aside her fantasies and suit up. She put on the sleek new black catsuit her agency, Top, issued to her. It was made from some new bulletproof material, had built-in night vision, and a few other features that would come in handy.

The long sleeves were fitted with a thin metal ring that could be used for striking an adversary. The suit was also flame-retardant, shock absorbing, and had built-in chest and back protection strong enough to stand up to a close-range shotgun blast.

She added her own special design to the suit—a slot to strap on her favorite knife, or machete, as some might call it. It had a serrated hitch close to the tip that sliced jaggedly into flesh, and necks, when her goal was to chop off a head or a leg or an arm.

The suit was like an apparel version of an armored car. It had been cut to fit her body perfectly. She snapped her black blade into place, along her hip, and secured her .45 and three extra clips. Wig in place, weapons in place, she was ready to take on whatever monster that decided to test her.

The handheld grappling hook device she possessed resembled one of Batman's or Spiderman's toys. The full item was an extension of her suit. The sleeve wrapped around her shoulder and upper back for lifting support. The only exposed part was the portion of the device she controlled with her hand.

According to Drago, she needed to get up to the eleventh floor of the Harrington Building. Sevyn aimed the instrument that had a five-story reach. Once the finger-sized hook was embedded into the concrete side of the building, Sevyn tugged the tiny metal cable that would be holding her weight. She tested its strength, amazed that something so thin was so strong. The tensile strength of the metal must have been off the charts.

Whoever built their spy toys was a genius. By squeezing the small metal portion of the device attached to the palm of her hand, she could activate, aim and shoot the cable, and retract. She became airborne in an instant and found that loosening her grip slowed the speed at which she traveled up.

Once Sevyn reached the fifth floor, and was more confident using the device, she aimed it five more stories high. Before taking off, she observed the outer perimeter of the building, noticing that the eleventh floor seemed the only one that had movement; it was the reason she decided to enter the building at a lower level.

Drago didn't give her additional information about this building, but she didn't plan to leave until she'd found something substantial. If there were no monsters here, she'd at least snoop around until she found information on the monster she most wanted—Linkin.

The closer she rose to the tenth floor, the more frenzied her urge to kill grew. There were certainly monsters here. Her urge had never grown this strong unless they were around to trigger it. After unhooking her device, she retracted it but kept the part attached to her hand ready. She was swift, not crazy. If forced to make a fast getaway, the bad guys probably wouldn't expect her to jump from a tenth floor window or balcony.

On this particular balcony, however, she noticed lion statues. They sat there as if guarding the place. She glanced up, noticing not all of the balconies had the protective statues. She wondered what they represented.

Everything was deadly silent; even as the wind swept past her ear, it whispered softly. The only movement was the clouds, as they revealed the fullness of the moon, peaking at her like a giant eye in the sky.

Of course the door would be locked; but thanks to Top, she had a fix for getting into the building quietly. The small cutting device was no bigger than a cigarette lighter and it cut through the glass like butter.

Sevyn cut a small square in the bottom of the glass wall next to the sliding glass door. The opening resembled a doggy door. She made the cut behind a curtain, which would not only conceal her entry, but would make for a fast, well-hidden getaway, if she had to run.

She sat the glass square away from her passageway and slid into the room. Now she understood the statues on the balcony. She was inside someone's apartment. In the dim lighting, she easily recognized leather sofas and chairs, crystal vases, and handcrafted art pieces. Italian-styled furnishings lined the place with linear precision.

Sevyn snooped a bit, but didn't find anything substantial before exiting the apartment. The sharp contrast between the dimness of the apartment and the light in the hallway made her more aware of her surroundings. The hall was clear, so she made her way to the stairs.

Tiptoeing up the stairs, the closer she got to the next level, the more it gave her clues as to what was going on.

The muffled sound of music and laughter greeted before she opened the door. Thankfully, she had speed on her side as she prepared to navigate another long hallway.

Within seconds, she reached the double doors that led to the party; but like everything around this place, the doors were locked. Thankfully, her new suit came with a tiny blowtorch. It didn't take her long to melt away the lock and inch the door open.

There were people everywhere; so many in fact, they camouflaged the monsters. The monsters were in there because her blood boiled to kill them. Her only way to tell monster from human was to get up close and personal. She couldn't alert the monsters to her presence, nor could she kill these crazy foolish humans, who likely didn't know they were a part of the menu.

As if the elements were giving her a clue, her eyes landed on the fire alarm. A devious smile bent her lips as she sent the grappling hook into the nearest light, smashing it. She retracted her device and smashed another light, for good measure, making the space outside the exit darker.

She took the time to sneak around and bar the front door of the large room, ensuring she would herd all of the partygoers in her direction. This back hall didn't have an elevator, so she propped open the stairwell door.

She aimed to take inventory of the monsters as they exited. Once she pulled the fire alarm, it didn't take long for people to come zooming out the door. She'd used her device to boost and post herself above the doorway. As the stampede of people continued to pour from the room, Sevyn noticed that none of the monsters had exited. Had they laid a trap for her?

Once the fire alarm stopped, and the last of the people walked into the stairwell, one of the monsters stood directly below her. He stared around like he knew she was there. Happy he hadn't looked up, she sent up a silent, thank you.

"We know you are here. I caught a whiff of your scent the moment this door opened. Clever, getting rid of the humans. We've all been put on alert that there was a hunter in this city, so we expected to run into you sooner or later. "

Now that Sevyn had a monster standing below her, her odd angle had her arm giving under her body's weight.

Why hadn't she done more weight training like she'd planned to, or drop that extra ten pounds like she'd intended to?

The man stared around for a long while. The darkened doorway helped in keeping her hidden. The man propped the doors open and, thankfully, stepped back into the room.

Sevyn took his gesture as an invite. She jumped from her position, using her speed to surprise the man who'd only taken a few steps into the room. He turned, with his hands up. Sevyn sent her machete into his neck so fast, he never uttered a sound.

His head hung unnaturally off his shoulder at a forty-five degree angle; the opening was a wide gaping hole of blood and exposed flesh. The monster was in such distress, his face—even while his neck hung nearly off his shoulders—expressed his fright.

Sevyn was poised to give him a second whack but was grabbed from behind. She didn't struggle against the firm hold. Instead, she leaned forward and snapped her head back with such force, she prayed she'd broken something on the thing's face. The lick must have been a good one because she was released rather quickly.

Her problem now, she was surrounded by four. All were monsters.

Chapter 20

Taking Heads

They had her surrounded, and they used military precision to close in on her. Her hand shook as she struggled to stave off her impulsive urge to kill them. She spun, taking them all in. What surprised her most was that they were the ones that appeared nervous. Drago had been right; there were monsters here, but none of them was Linkin.

She smiled. At least she'd get a chance to ease her urge and rid the world of some of these blood-drinking leeches. Machete in one hand, Sevyn used her speed to draw and aim her .45. Her aim was off, due to the grappling device attached to her palm. She adjusted. Sevyn loved the surprise she left on their monstrous faces when they first noticed she was as fast as—and sometimes faster than—they were.

One raised his hands.

"Please, Miss. We don't want no trouble. We have heard about you and have nothing against you and your kind. We are trying to live in peace."

My kind?

Sevyn let out a huff.

"Trying to live in peace by eating people and drinking their blood? You are cannibals and monsters, and you deserve whatever you're going to get."

The thing continued to talk to her, but Sevyn didn't want to hear it. She ran, blade-first, into the one in front of her, sending her blade through his chest. Her rapid movement sent two of them back a few paces.

Just as quickly as her blade plunged into one's body, she was turned by a strong force and spun savagely by the one at her back. His rough handling helped with the retraction of her blade, giving her more pulling force.

When her knife forcefully jerked from the thing's body, out flew chunks of what she hoped was the bastard's heart.

She didn't wait around to see how badly she'd damaged him. She slung her bloody blade blindly, striking some part of the monster that had her back. As soon as her blade planted, she fired at the head of one of the two in front of her. The head shot dropped him, but his jerky body told her he wouldn't be down for long.

Her knife must have been planted deep in the one still hanging onto her from behind. She couldn't jerk it free. Restrained around her shoulders, she was forced to strain her arm at an unnatural angle in order to hang onto her blade. She refused to let go, even as the pull threatened to snap her arm.

Another ran towards her. His eyes on her legs gave away his plan. He'd foolishly spoiled his plan. The impact from the bullets she released slammed into his forehead. His head snapped back with force. Sevyn was surprised his head wasn't torn off his shoulders. The chest shots she'd gifted him with jerked his body backward a few feet. The powerful *punch* of the bullet's impact sounded like drumbeats.

She continued holding onto the stuck blade as she let her body fall to the floor. Using her body weight was a good idea. It did the trick, setting her blade free.

The force also sent her to the floor, hard. The impact knocked her breath away for a moment. The fall didn't stop her from shooting at what was in front of her though. The one she shot earlier hobbled towards her, holding his chest. The hole in his forehead was visible but not bleeding. The one who had her back was still back there, groaning.

She spun, swung and sent her blade through the calf of his leg. The vibration of the blade's impact let her know she'd struck bone. The scream he let out made the hair on her neck stand. Since the knife was planted deeply, Sevyn yanked hard enough to send him tumbling onto the floor. By the time his body joined her on the floor, she'd put two slugs in his head and two more in his chest.

She dropped her empty magazine and reloaded with lightning speed. But the gun was knocked from her hand before she could incapacitate the last two. One took her back while the other clutched her feet. Her machete remained embedded in the leg of the one writhing in pain at her feet. They took her without weapons. If she didn't take their heads soon, they were all going to heal and get back up. She couldn't afford to let that happen.

She struggled to break free, but most of the monsters had an advantage. She may have been faster than some, but most of them were much stronger than she was.

They were speaking again but Sevyn refused to listen. She had a one track mind when it came to these things. Her eyes landed on her gun, which had been flung across the room, and on her machete, planted in the leg of their downed buddy. The ones she'd put down had started to move and groan. She bucked, struggling to break free. The freaks were recovering, and her work to put them down was going to waste. One of the two that carried her, yelled.

"Ma'am. We are not your enemy. Not all of us are killers. Did you notice we were not trying to kill you?"

Sevyn continued to try to jerk herself free of their hands, but her harsh movement only left her bruised.

"You're not trying to kill me because you want your food alive when you eat it. And, if you're stupid enough to not fight for your soulless lives, that's your business. I want nothing more than to rip your hearts out and chop your heads off, so I can look into your tortured eyes as you burn into ash."

One had the nerve to say, "Man, she is as brutal as they say."

His statement put a wrinkle in her forehead.

Did they all know about her now?

Her struggling ceased, a plan had emerged.

One monster supported her under the arms, which left her hands dangling. She twisted her wrist until she found the angle she wanted. If she could line up her hand just right, she may be able to free herself. She let loose a low groan as they approached the doors she'd torched open. A frown creased the face of the one that held her feet.

He asked, "What are you—"

The rest of his question never registered, Sevyn sent the grappling hook into the wall nearest her gun. She squeezed the retracting device and her body lurched from both their grips. She went flying through the air the first few feet, then slid on her butt the rest of the way across the floor, zooming by the first one she'd dropped. When she slid by the second one, she gripped and snatched her blade from his leg.

She eased her grip on the retracting level, slowing herself in time to keep from slamming into the wall. She didn't have time to unhook the grappling device. Thankfully, she had enough play in the wire to grab her gun and take aim at the two coming her way.

One dove behind a large table. The other was too far in the open to hide as one of her slugs missed his head. Her second shot landed in his chest, knocking the top portion of his body off kilter from the bottom. The bullet slowed him, but he continued his approach. She sent him sliding to the floor with two more shots into his chest.

Finally, she jerked and snatched hard enough that the hook on the grappling device fell from the wall. She retracted, aimed, and shot the hook into the right eye of the wounded but still approaching monster. It pleased her to watch him scratch at his eye, in disbelief. The grappling hook was embedded in his head.

When she retracted the device, his body came sliding, headfirst, towards her. She sat with the machete raised high, waiting for his head to get within striking distance. His head stopped just before it hit her right angle. Kicking him repeatedly, she forced his body into position. Sevyn sent the machete into his neck and enjoyed his suffering screams as she continued to hack at his neck a few more times.

She glanced up in time to see the last one run from the room. She didn't waste any time chasing after him because the rest of his friends had nearly recovered. It was probably a good idea to let one get away. Hopefully, he was scared enough to exaggerate what he'd witnessed tonight and by the time her story reached his friends, she would be the big, badass monster they should all be afraid of.

Sevyn had to collect the heads now or be forced to start the incapacitation process again. She used speed and their weakened states to hack away two and a half more heads. She'd never taken four heads at once, so she took a moment to situate them before preparing to leave the building.

She considered leaving the easy way by going through the lobby but didn't have a good enough story to explain to lobby security why she carried four heads.

Speaking of lobby security, she wondered why they hadn't shown up. She shrugged her shoulders and got back to work, figuring they likely worked for the monsters.

The small sack she carried specifically for head collection was stuffed with three of the four heads. The last head wasn't so lucky. His hair was too short for her to catch a hold. She sank her fingers into the mush of its butchered neck to get a grip. The moans and screams the head released were unholy, but she enjoyed the misery he expelled.

She didn't have time to muzzle the condemned beings as she returned to the tenth floor. The heads were a choir of pleading cries and yells. They were all begging to be spared, promising they weren't bad or dangerous creatures.

She made it back to the apartment without a problem. She tossed the sack of heads through the small cutout first. Both she and the head she held like a bowling ball couldn't slid through the opening at the same time. She spiked her blade into the head and tossed it through before she shimmed through.

Once on the balcony, Sevyn stood in place silently assessing her surroundings. The strange sense that she was being watched overtook her. Un-piking the head from her blade, she stood, poised to fight whatever decided it wanted a piece of her.

The only sound came from the faint drip-drop of blood falling from her blade. Even the heads were quiet, which she found peculiar. After waiting for what seemed like an eternity, Sevyn strapped her blade in place, gathered her heads, and prepared to grapple her way back down the building.

Finding the ground level clear, she hiked to her car a half-mile away and headed to the warehouse. She had some burning to do, and she planned to enjoy it.

At five in the morning, she only had an hour to clean up and take a quick nap. The thought of climbing into bed with Neal was a pleasant one.

He greeted her as she lowered her head onto his chest and let her tired body melt into his welcoming warmth.

"How many did you kill?"

Surprised by his question, she wondered if he'd been awake when she left.

"How do you know I was out hunting?"

He sat up.

"Drago gave you a lead last night that you never mentioned again. When I woke up and noticed you gone, I figured you went to check it out. I'm worried about you, Dana, but I know you can handle yourself. I also know that nothing I say, or do, will stop you from hunting the monsters that murdered your mother. I'm here for you, no matter what, no matter how dangerous."

She liked that he exhibited genuine concern for her. What she liked better was that he didn't try to make her decisions for her, or tell her what to do. It was a quality that made her respect him that much more.

"I appreciate that, Neal. More than you know." A smile found her face. "I took four heads tonight. You should have heard the dreadful commotion they made while I let them watch me burn their friend's heads."

Neal's lingering stare stalled her words. He eyed her, squinting one of his eyes in thought.

"I say this with no negative connotation intended. But, after meeting Sevyn, I am not sure Dana is who you are. You're beautifully frightening, Dana-Sevyn. You have the essence of a princess in Dana, but your soul has been touched by death in Sevyn."

She smiled, and said, "Thank you."

Neal laughed, and said, "The fact that you took that as a compliment validates my statement."

Dana's gaze shot up to the ceiling, in thought. She imagined she could be a bit disturbing and scary at times, but she strived to make up for it when she wasn't hunting monsters.

Worry crept into the edges of Neal's eyes as he checked out her bruises.

He asked, "Are you in pain? Those look like they hurt."

These were the kind of war wounds she didn't mind one bit.

"For four of their heads, every bruise is worth it."

Neal drew her onto his chest and kissed the top of her head. Her entire body and mind relaxed. She was sure that killing monsters took pieces of her soul, but she was starting to believe Neal was the key to restoring it. He had no idea that he provided her with the most peaceful place in the world.

Chapter 21

Traffic Stop

In the middle of bumper-to-bumper traffic, Neal maneuvered around vehicles until they came to a complete stop. An accident up ahead stopped their trek to work. Dana didn't mind it. Time alone with Neal was fine with her. He cut the engine.

"I don't think we're going anywhere, anytime soon."

Dana got comfortable. Turning towards Neal, she put her legs up on the seat as her back rested against the door panel. After kicking off her heels, she laid her head back against the glass and placed her feet against Neal's thigh. He could see straight up her skirt. Judging by the way his eyes skimmed up her legs, it appeared he enjoyed the view.

He took her right foot and gently rubbed it. Dana relaxed further into the door panel. Not even the door's knob, poking into her back, bothered her while Neal was massaging her. He knew how to make all of her cares and worries disappear with a touch. She released a soft moan.

"That feels good. You have magic hands."

He ran his hand up her leg.

"You're ruining me, you know. I'm not going to be any good for any other woman."

She laughed out loud.

"Good. Means I get to keep my claws in you."

He paused for a moment.

"Are you sure you want to go into the office? You've hardly had any sleep in the last forty-eight hours."

"I'll be fine. I've gotten used to getting by on little sleep."

She sat up, a bit, and glanced around; traffic hadn't moved an inch.

"I'm sorry for getting you involved in this mess of traffic. But, when given the choice of a nap or sex with you, I couldn't resist choice number two. We could have left an hour ago, if it weren't for me and my overactive libido."

He smiled as his tongue slid across his lips.

"Dana. Dana. Dana. You have no idea how good this feels. To have a woman like you look at me the way you do, it's almost too good to be true."

She truly liked him. He had a quiet way of pulling emotions from her, some she didn't know she possessed.

She rose and kneeled close to him. Cupping the back of his head, she ran her fingers through his baby soft hair and watched him close his eyes to her caress. He had no idea that his mere presence drew her in, so much so she feared the way he stirred her emotions.

She sat higher on her knees, pressing her body into his side. She wanted to kiss him so badly she bit her bottom lip and held it between her teeth.

He wanted her to kiss him, she could tell, but there was worry hidden behind his eyes.

"I don't think we should...be this close in public."

The impact of his words was crushed under the weight of their closeness. His statement had no effect on her. As she slid her right leg across his lap, her backside rubbed against the steering wheel.

His hand automatically went to her waist, but something was wrong. He was way too serious, and he carried too much worry in his expression.

"What's wrong, Neal? What's bothering you?"

He stared into her eyes, his gaze searing into her deeply. He appeared terrified. He'd made her stomach come alive with butterflies last night, and the day before, but this was different. This time her stomach clenched with so much anxious energy it made her jittery.

His gaze remained locked on hers, freezing her in place as it penetrated into the deepest depths of her soul. That's when she spotted it, as clearly as he likely saw into her. This was the first time he'd let her see him like this, open and extremely vulnerable.

Nervous energy and heightened emotions kept her face hovering slightly above his. She knew that if she kissed him, truly kissed him, with this much emotion driving her, there would be no turning back. If she were being truthful with herself, the damage had already been done the first time she let him touch her.

He had asked her something about being close in public.

"Are you telling me to stop, Neal? I don't take rejection well."

He was putty in her hands, and she knew it. His eyes never strayed from hers as she lowered her lips to his. She stole his breath and lost hers. The kiss was so impactful, she had to have a few more.

Neal stopped their kiss. His breathing harsh.

"Why me, Dana?"

She was confused.

"What?"

"Why me? You're perfect. Wealthy. Strong. You can have anyone you want. Are you having fun with me?"

She was confused but determined to understand him.

"Why are you asking me this? Do you regret us being together?"

He shook his head.

"No. But. Why me?"

She considered his question for a moment.

"Why not you? Are you saying that you're not deserving of a beautiful, strong, and wealthy woman?"

His hands tightened around her waist.

"Do I need to spell it out? I'm damaged, Dana. Most women take a look at my face and stare at me like I'm one of the monsters you hunt. You pretend there is nothing wrong with me. I can tell that you're attracted to me, but I don't understand it. It seems genuine, so it confuses me."

She took a deep breath, unsure of how to explain this to him. Her hand rested against his neck. She used her thumb to tilt his face to hers. The tremble in her hand and her labored breathing told on her. She overflowed with emotions for him.

His eyes searched hers for an answer. She scanned his, wondering if this intensely uncontrolled *thing* had been hidden between them the entire time. They both jumped at a horn blowing behind them, but their eyes never strayed from each other.

"Neal. I don't see you as damaged. When I look at you, I see a strong, vibrant, confident man that is also considerate, affectionate, and mindful of other's feelings. I don't pretend that nothing is wrong with you because nothing is wrong with you."

She reached to caress his scar, but he turned his face away from her hand. She turned his face back.

"Let me ask you this. The way women look at your face, or stare at your scar, has it ever stopped you from getting a woman into bed?"

He smiled, a little, then.

"No, not really."

"Are you sure you haven't been misreading what you think women see in you?"

He shrugged.

"I have never cared before."

Now, she understood.

"I haven't mentioned your scar because I see past it. I see you, Neal, and you are not your scar."

She reached to caress his scar this time, figuring he needed reassurance that her words were truly genuine. She traced the puckered discolored flesh, every inch of it. She captured his eyes with hers while keeping her thumb on the scar.

"You never have to care, or worry, about how any other woman looks at you, Neal. They will never see what I see. They will never know what I know. They will never want you the way that I want you."

She kissed him then, leisurely and lovingly. She wasn't sure she was ready to tell him the part about her being in love with him, but there was that also.

The blaring chorus of horns was the only thing that lured her lips away from his.

"Do you understand me now?"

She'd stirred as many emotions within him as she'd stirred within herself. She traced his scar, one last time, before placing her lips against it. Neal crumbled into her arms then, and she folded her arms tightly around him.

Bam...Bam...Bam, the pounding vibrated against the side of her car, making them both jump.

With an angry glare, the driver of one of the cars behind them stood, staring. Neal rolled the window down.

The man vented, "If you don't mind breaking up your little love affair, the rest of us would like to get to work. Four blocks up the road, there's a good hotel. Maybe you two should check in and get the hell off the streets."

The man was ticked off, so Dana suppressed her urge to laugh.

"Sorry, sir. We're moving."

She unglued herself from Neal, so they could stop blocking traffic. The man returned to his car, and she watched him wheel it angrily. He sped past them, taking his anger out on his engine.

Dana appreciated the interruption. She was a few breaths short of telling Neal about the one emotion she held towards him that she was most afraid of—love. He was the only man she'd connected with in this way and on such a profound level. The revelation was as remarkable as it was mind-boggling. But, she'd messed up so many relationships in her past, she was afraid to even mention the word relationship to Neal.

She sat in her seat with an overwhelming feeling of peace and wonderment. A peace she'd never experienced...a kind of peace that came from her association with Neal Erickson.

Chapter 22

Consequences

Upon arriving at Dana's office building, Neal sensed the half dozen cop cars out front had something to do with Sevyn and her head-taking spree.

When they got into the elevator, Dana stated, "I got a bad feeling my night job has finally spilled over into my day job. I'm praying those cop cars have nothing to do with me."

Getting off the elevator, Neal and Dana were stopped in their tracks. They were prohibited from going any further by two cops, until Dana explained her position.

They wandered down the hall towards Dana's office space. When they turned the bend and entered the lobby, they both froze.

The lobby of her workspace was in shambles and gave a hint as to what the rest of her office would look like. Parts of the ceiling had been ripped out as tiles and wires clung to what was left up there.

Dana called her brothers, who were both panicked since they were not allowed on Dana's floor, although they all worked in the same building.

Neal's tennis shoes slushed against the floor with each step. The sprinkler system had been triggered and shut off, so the floor was covered with flowing water. The furniture had been

tossed about as desks, chairs, and paperwork sat in heaps and wet piles. Jordan ran to Dana, in tears.

"I tried to stop them, but they were crazy. I thought they were going to kill all of us. They tore up the place. I thought we were all going to die."

Dana attempted to relax Jordan, with a reassuring voice and gentle pats, but the woman was clearly in shock. Neal observed the other workers. They sat huddled near each other, wrapped in blankets. They talked in low murmurs. Any unfamiliar sound had them jumping and unconsciously ducking for cover. The cops had sequestered Dana's office area. None of the workers had been permitted to leave. They were all being interviewed.

Dana rubbed Jordan's shoulders.

"Please, slow down. Tell me what happened. Is anyone hurt?"

Jordan took a few deep breaths.

Neal left Dana to gather information from Jordan. He observed the trashed area further. When he walked into Dana's office, he only stole a quick glance before one of the cops ordered him to join the rest of the group.

The way Dana's office had been trashed, Neal found it hard to believe it was the monsters that were responsible. From what little he knew of them, they weren't this careless and reckless. He wondered if the cops already had surveillance footage.

He and Dana had to find out who trashed her office. If they hadn't already done so, these guys would eventually find their way to Dana's house. Thankfully, no one at the office had been hurt.

Based on Jordan's account, four gun-wielding men entered and overtook the front office clerk. They were all shoved into the conference room. They stood frightened, watching through the conference room's broken glass, as the men tore up the place. They'd all had a gun placed to their heads as the bad guys yelled at them for information on their boss. The men also had been searching for something from what Jordan could tell. She said she thought the men were looking for a dragon.

Upon hearing Jordan's shaky words, Neal and Dana both agreed that the men were likely looking for Drago. Dana had been right. Her night job had finally spilled into her real life, and her entire family was in danger.

The more time he spent with her, the more respect Neal gained for Dana. She was an extraordinary woman. She was a Top agent, so she had a contingency plan for a contingency plan. She informed Neal that she had put a series of plans in place that should keep the monsters away from her family, even if they discovered who she truly was.

Impressed, Neal watched Dana put one of her contingency plans in place. She had a plan that would fly her entire family out of the country. She called people she had on speed dial. She used pictures of her torn apart office as part of her plan. She had an elaborate lie and actors in place, leading her family to believe that they were in grave danger, targets for kidnapping and ransom.

The rouse wasn't a complete lie as Dana believed her family would be dragged into her dealings. She led her brothers to believe the authorities had ordered their travel plans, sending them in different directions. In less than two hours her family was flying to safety.

The actors she hired to pose as law officials pulled her brothers from their offices, followed them home, and waited while they packed. Her father was already out of the country, but he received official word of the situation as Dana had planned it. She received a report and confirmation when her brothers were safely in the air.

She later informed her brothers and her father that she was on her way to safety, accompanied by him. Neal had conferred briefly with her father and, of course, he made Neal promise to take

care of his daughter. William Diallo likely had no idea his princess daughter was the calling the shots.

With her family safe, Neal didn't have to ask to know that nothing was going to stop Dana from unleashing Sevyn. Neal had no intention of stopping her, but he was sorry for whoever, or whatever, got in her way.

Neal drove back to Dana's house. He stole glances at her preparing for battle in the seat next to him. She adjusted her bun into a flat braid she pinned in place. She pulled on a wig from her glove compartment. His neck shrivelled taking her in before putting his eyes back on the road.

Did she keep wigs readily available in every compartment, in case she needed to let Sevyn loose?

Although he never thought he'd admit it, he liked Sevyn. Sevyn was scary in a kill-people-with-no-remorse kind of way. He was starting to believe Sevyn was needed, after seeing the incident on the bridge, Dana's torn apart office, and also after Dana informed him of the four heads Sevyn had taken only hours ago.

He'd only briefly mentioned it to her, but Sevyn seemed like an entirely different person than Dana. Dana professed she was acting, but Neal was confused about which persona she was pretending to be—Dana or Sevyn.

Is it okay if I call you Dana-Sevyn?" he asked.

She laughed. This wasn't the first time he'd asked her this question.

"Why?"

"In getting to know you, I honestly don't know which one you truly are."

She gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

"You are the only one that can call me that."

They returned to Dana's house to change and pick up their gear. The guards were a part of the contingency plan and had been notified that they were relieved, with pay, until further notice.

In the short time Neal had become familiar with Dana's home; it now seemed empty without all of the guards milling about.

Guns, knives, stealth gear, Sevyn's wigs, tech devices, and Drago's head were all loaded into her car. Neal was surprised to discover the Mercedes Dana usually drove was bulletproof. He gawked at the arsenal of weapons she kept hidden in a secret trunk compartment and a secret panel in the floor behind the driver's seat. She informed him that the underbelly of the car was reinforced to withstand an explosion.

Neal whistled his surprise. He couldn't believe he had been driving around in the equivalent of a small tank. The most impressive thing was she'd managed to keep the integrity of the car the same.

Neal drove. He had no idea how Dana was able to ignore Drago as he yelled, repeatedly, promising leads to Linkin's whereabouts.

While they had been changing, Dana told Neal she wanted to start the hunt at Drago's house. Then, they would return to the Harrington Building, since it had been crawling with monsters last night. One of the four heads she burned knew Drago and snitched, giving her what she hoped was his address.

Drago's voice had become nails on a chalkboard. "I don't know where Linkin lives but his number one guy lives at the Harrington Building. Did you check out that building?"

Sevyn pointed a finger at the head.

"Your little business venture turned up five of your soulless friends. I think there is a possibility they were waiting on me. I found no trace of Linkin, and I couldn't make them cough up any substantial leads. As a matter-of-fact, none of them even knew who Linkin was. But, I did burn an address out of them: 156 Falkner Boulevard."

The silence that filled the car after Dana's announcement felt deafening.

Dana smiled. Drago's silence confirmed she'd secured his actual address. His head sat on the seat next to her. She glanced at him.

"You die today, Drago. I found you. I'll eventually find Linkin. I hope you've made peace with whatever demon you worship."

She placed her phone to her ear.

"Thirty minutes, Charlie. Torch the cold headless one."

Drago screamed, like a mad man, promising leads that Dana no longer cared about.

Chapter 23

Free Falling

Dana had had it up to her head with Drago and his faulty leads. It was because of him that all of her employees could have been killed, or worse—eaten. She was sure he knew more than he told her, but she couldn't figure out how to get him to talk. He was willing to die with his secrets.

They were now heading towards Drago's house, in the hopes that they could dig up clues that would lead them to Linkin.

Neal's voice jolted Dana from thoughts of killing more monsters.

"We've picked up a tail. Most likely they are more of *his* friends. It seems they were waiting for us."

A quick peek through the passenger's side mirror revealed two Lincoln Town Cars. She prayed the big, beefed-up, yellow Hummer speeding through traffic was late for a meeting and not a part of the convoy that was meant to follow them.

Neal's firm grip on the steering wheel was the last thing Sevyn caught before her head and back slammed into her seat. Drago's head went rolling along the side of her leg as she fought to regain control of her body. The Hummer wasn't hard to miss, as its engine roared, gearing up to ram them again.

Sevyn shoved her heel into Drago's face. The action helped hold her steady in her seat, and she enjoyed crushing his face.

"You did this, you bastard. You have somehow lured us into a trap."

As they reached the peak of the Flotante Bridge, Dana didn't like the scene developing. The bridge had been built unusually tall, crossing into the newly developed Flotante community. The area was a raised, man-made community of shopping plazas, businesses, and overpriced apartments and condos. From afar, the community appeared to float high above the water.

More of the bad guys approached from the opposite direction against the flow of traffic. In broad daylight, on a busy bridge, the probability of innocent people getting hurt was great. Her enemies were planning to use the bridge's limited escape routes to trap them.

Sevyn pressed her heel into Drago's right eye, aiming to inflict pain. Despite his pain, Drago screamed at her.

"You were going to kill me anyway, you bitch. Now, my brother is going to kill you, and I hope I'm around to see it. My earring is a tracker. I've been waiting for my brother to find me before your demonic ass burns what is left of my head."

Now Dana understood why the convoy had been waiting for them, here. They couldn't track them to her house. It had taken her months to outfit their house and surrounding areas with scrambling devices. If anyone attempted to locate her by planting a tracker, it was not likely going to work. It was an idea that her father had actually agreed with her on.

Drago's crew had likely been waiting for them in two areas, the last area where they lost the ping of Drago's signal and the only bridge that lead to and from Drago's house.

She drove her heel deeper into Drago's eye; his bloodcurdling screams filled the inside of her car as the screeching of their tires joined the loud mayhem.

Neal maneuvered the car like a pro racer as Dana gripped the front bar and headrest. She attempted to send her heel through Drago's brain. It wasn't going to kill him, but it would cause him pain. She was angry at herself for letting things get this messy. Now, Neal's life was in jeopardy because of her.

The speed odometer had climbed past ninety and the bad guys remained on their tail. Cars cleared a path as if they'd rehearsed their movements. A second blow hit her car and sent her body lurching forward and just as quickly the seatbelt snatched her back.

Neal fought the steering wheel, attempting to correct their out of control spin. It was no use. The Hummer hit them with enough force, in the right spot, that it executed a perfect pit maneuver. At their speed, they were certainly headed for instant death.

Sevyn watched, helplessly, as the side of the bridge flew closer, rushing towards them at a rate of speed that even she couldn't contend with. She did three things: clutched Neal's hand, closed her eyes, and prayed.

The crunch of metal, and the bangs and snaps of her favorite car crashing into concrete, invaded her ears. She and Neal were helplessly slung about as twisted metal punctured, stabbed, and pummeled them. Flying debris and glass aided in beating and battering them.

Although it was useless, Dana fought to shield her face behind the bend of her arm. A sharp jerk sent her head and elbow smashing into the side window. Her eyes flew open long enough to see that their momentum was substantial enough to keep the car moving. They were going over the side.

Every bit of her breath was sucked from her body when the car went airborne. They were freefalling into the dark waters that waited below, waving and urging them to drop faster.

Dana's heart leapt into her throat as her chest heaved with an attempt to take a breath. Drago's one good eye stretched wide with fright. She squeezed Neal's hand, only to have him jerk it free from her grasp. Snapshots of Neal's actions showed him frantically trying to free himself from his seatbelt.

What is he doing? We are about to die.

Once out of his seatbelt, Neal jumped on top of her, straddling and hugging her tightly to him. She admired that he wanted to protect her, but they were free-falling off the side of a bridge in a deadly drop. Covering her with his body wasn't going to save her. If the impact of such a fall didn't kill them instantly, the water would finish them off. Neal put his mouth to her ear.

"I love you."

Before she could render a reply, her breath was taken and her body was ripped apart. Although she sensed herself being torn apart, there was no pain and her mind continued to produce logical thoughts. Dana was dying and didn't have a chance to tell Neal that she loved him back. She'd

had many chances to tell him how she felt, but let her stupid fear of a four letter word deter her. She thought about her brothers and her father and fond memories of time spent with her mother surfaced as well. At least her family would be okay.

Sound, smell, sight, touch and the bitter taste of blood in her mouth all came to her at once. She was rolling, with no control of her body. Pain reminded her that she was still alive as something hard dug into her flesh, scratching and scraping her with every turn.

Had she fallen free from the falling car?

She thankfully stopped rolling. Her face landed against something warm and moving. She raised her head, slowly, praying the accident had left her in one piece. The sight of Neal glancing down at her put a smile on her face.

Were they dead?

A quick glance of her surroundings suggested they were on the surface of the bridge. She lay atop Neal in shock; it took her a moment to piece the events together. Their winded breathing had them both heaving to get precious oxygen into their lungs.

When she was finally able to talk, her words rushed from her mouth. "You did this. You pulled us from the car with your ability. Neal, you lovely genius. I lo—"

Again, her words were interrupted but this time by the red dot on Neal's forehead. When she turned her head, about ten well-armed men had them surrounded. It took Dana a few seconds to assess the men.

Their gear and precise tactical movements implied they were well-trained and possibly from some paramilitary group. If the monsters had taken to using well-trained combat types, her mission to find her mother's killer had just gotten more complex.

One asked, "Where is Drago?"

She couldn't contain her hate for that particular monster.

"He's dead. I had his body burned."

The man smirked at her.

"No, we picked up his body just in time. Don't worry; we didn't kill your friend. Despite what you may think, we're not all monsters."

It sounded like the man was trying to convince himself more than her.

"Drago's head was in the car. I hope the impact smashed it to oblivion."

The gun wielder laughed this time.

"Darling, your car is floating. Drago is going to be all right. Bastard's got nine lives."

Before she could get a word out, her horror was confirmed.

The radio chatter announced, "We found his head. He's missing an eye, but he's going to be all right once we get him reconnected."

The man who did all of the talking glared at Dana.

"You better be glad we saved him. If you had killed Linkin's last brother, there is no telling what he'd do to you. You have likely started a war. You better pray that we're not already too late."

So, his name is Linkin and Drago is his brother.

Dana had no idea what the man was talking about where it concerned starting wars, but she didn't take too kindly to threats, especially from humans that worked for monsters. She was as angry as a bed of disturbed fire ants because Drago was still alive. She sneered at the man.

"You better be glad you're human, otherwise I'd find a way to kill you."

He didn't comment, but he did have a curious look on his face.

"How did you two get out of that car? I saw you both inside before it went tumbling off the side of the bridge."

She didn't answer. She rested her head against Neal's strong chest. He'd been quiet the entire time; and if she knew him as well as she thought, he was trying to find a way out of this mess.

She was jerked up by two men and detained, at gunpoint, by two more.

What did these people think she was—a terrorist?

They handled Neal in much the same manner. Dana considered speeding away, but these guys had planned their setup well. There wasn't anywhere she could run that would lead her off the bridge, except for over the side.

She imagined she and Neal appeared to be the bad guys being apprehended by the authorities. People sat in their cars and gawked, but none interfered as she and Neal were carted away.

Chapter 24

Dungeon

Neal had no idea where they were being taken. He'd considered morphing, but he wasn't going anywhere without Dana. They were chained up like dogs in the back of an old white van. The van, with the dark tinted windows, reminded him of one that rapist and kidnappers favored back in the day.

Their captors had been smart in not seating him within reach of Dana. He planned on breaking them out of the van, but he would have to have a physical hold of Dana to take her with him. Back on the bridge, he had no idea if his plan was going to work when he couldn't stop her car from tumbling over the side.

He had never even thought it possible to take another person into a morph with him, but he had been desperate. The idea of Dana crashing to her death had been unfathomable, and he'd been willing to try anything to save her.

When the momentum of whatever propelled him through space sent him and her tumbling back to the top of the bridge, he realized he'd discovered a new twist to an ability he'd once cast off as a hallucination. Being around Sevyn had him embracing and discovering himself, despite the many years missing from his mind.

Now, he was anchored to the metal paneling in the back of a hulled out van. A black sack was thrown over his head, like the tint in the windows wasn't enough. Wherever they were being taken, it was a secret their captors intended to keep.

He wanted to morph next to Dana, so he could get them out of the van; but his ability had been stalled when they covered his head. If he couldn't see or had an accurate picture of where he was going, he was reluctant to use his ability.

Although he didn't have it down to a science, he knew enough to know that he could leap into Dana's body, or a part of her body, and kill her. He wasn't willing to take that chance, so he sat in place, blind and filled with anxious energy.

The sound of yelling and rumbling indicated to Neal that Sevyn wasn't making the men's task of restraining her to the van easy. The moment the struggling stopped; a small prick was the last thing Neal felt. They were being drugged, so he wasn't even going to get the chance to guess where they were being taken.

Dana grunted. She and Neal had a day from hell and it kept getting better. She stared around, wondering where they'd been taken. From the looks of things, she was inside a prison cell, lying atop a bunk with a mattress as hard as cement. The walls were insane-asylum-white with a dingy cement ceiling. A lopsided bulb sat within a socket that had spilled from its housing.

The faint sound of someone moaning drew her attention.

"Neal?"

He yelped in pain before returning her call.

"Dana-Sevyn?"

He'd been calling her that more often. After meeting Sevyn, he seemed unsure of what to call her. Although she believed she was one person with a codename, he insisted that Dana and Sevyn were two different people. When she asked him which he liked best, he claimed he couldn't decide.

Dana was hesitant to take in the rest of her accommodations. She called back to Neal.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Got a headache from hell, but I'm okay. What about you? Are you okay?"

Dana scanned the rest of her surroundings before answering.

"Yeah, I'm great. It seems I have landed us in a damn dungeon."

Her head ached like it had been ripped apart and pieced together by a bunch of kindergarteners. She forced herself to sit up. The chamber she was confined in appeared to be straight from the show *Game of Thrones*.

The entire front wall was thickly rusted iron bars and concrete. Dana forced her aching body towards the bars and peered through the cracks. There was nothing but cement walls that created an eerily deserted hallway that led to two large iron doors. Neal's low murmurs found her ears.

"Neal, are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm trying, but I can't use my ability. Otherwise, I would have gotten us out of here by now."

She attempted to use her speed, but nothing happened.

"I think they have blocked us, somehow. I think this place is ability-proof, so that we won't have a way to strike back at them. It probably means that they know what we can do and likely have gifts of their own."

"I used to think that I was crazy Dana-Sevyn. That my ability was a part of a psychotic break or some type of hallucination. Now that I know I'm not crazy, and would like nothing more than to use my gift, we are stuck in a building that restricts it. Go figure."

They both laughed despite their situation.

Dana was thankful that she and Neal hadn't been separated. Although she couldn't see him, knowing that he was next to her relieved some of her stress. She smiled, remembering the admission he'd made to her when he thought they were freefalling to their deaths.

"I love you."

Dana didn't realize she'd fallen asleep, until the clink of the lock opening her whining door woke her. She and Neal had been right about their abilities being muted. She couldn't use speed to get the upper hand on the approaching men.

As a matter-of-fact, she rose with a sluggish motion and her body ached down to the bones. Whatever they had been injected with kept her drained of energy. Since she couldn't fight, she kicked uselessly, screamed, and acted like a fool as two men picked her up and carted her away.

"Put me down, you monster lovers. You're committing acts of terror against humankind by siding with flesh-eating, blood-drinking monsters. Put! Me! Down!"

She and Neal were carried through a dimly lit maze of halls and sparsely furnished rooms. Although June had brought warm weather, the inside of this place was freezing.

Darkness seemed to covet this place, shielding it from being fully viewed or explored. Every once in a while, Dana noticed the flicker of a candle and everything that gave off light was turned to the lowest possible setting.

Behind her, Dana heard Neal's feet scrapping against the hard stone floor. Neal was the civilized one while she continued to yell and curse. She intended to resist all the way to...

"Where in the hell are you taking us?" she shouted.

They stopped. The humans turned her and Neal over to the monsters. These were not like the ones she'd encountered previously. These were unnaturally pale and garnered a certain level of sophistication that was surprising to see.

As she struggled, Dana never stopped assessing her surroundings. Slowing their captors down was exactly what she intended to do, so she could see more and, hopefully, spot a way to escape this dark labyrinth.

They were in some type of mansion; no, lair was a better word for it. From what she could tell, almost everything was made of stone. She observed people milling about in the background ignoring the commotion she was making.

Did the men of this place carry around women kicking and screaming all the time?

During her struggle, Dana lost her wig.

Good, she thought.

Upon noticing that it had tumbled from her head, she caught a glimpse of it on the floor before the darkness swallowed it. She never stopped struggling, yet she started taking pins from her hair. Having her hair down couldn't make her and Neal's situation any worse than it was, so she prayed that it would at least distract these dungeon guards.

Neal must have seen what she was doing. His eyes met hers when she wiggled her way from one of the pale hands that carried her. Her partial freedom lasted only a few seconds, but it was seconds she used to pluck free pins and attempt to see where the hell they were being taken.

As they descended stairs, the darkness grew thicker. Dana's hair was nearly loose. She wondered if she were being taken to the man in charge, the one she had been chasing for years. Each time she thought about Linkin, her blood started to boil.

She snatched her hand away from one of her captors and managed to kick the other in the face when he dropped her feet. She spun her body, which jerked her other arm free. Both of the pale-faced creatures were so stunned, they took a full second trying to grasp her actions.

A little of her speed returned. She kicked one of the men in the forehead and spun quickly to kick his friend in the center of his chest. She had broken loose, and she planned to take advantage of her freedom. She sent her foot crashing into a nearby table made of what appeared to be glass. The table shattered into clattering shards.

Her actions caused Neal to execute his own uproar as he broke free of his men.

Not wasting a millisecond, she grabbed a piece of glass in each of her hands. One of the thick shards was as long as her forearm and about an inch thick. She didn't know if it was shock or her

hair that stunned the man, but it gave her a chance to send the largest shard harpooning into a pale head.

She didn't wait around to see if the head shot dropped him. She sent the next piece sailing towards the other's chest. Her adrenaline—or whatever propelled her speed—returned, and she now moved at full throttle.

The next thing she knew, her hand broke through his body. Determined and focused, she'd shoved the shard so deep and hard it had punched clean through his body and came out the back. Although the glass had made it through, her hand hadn't. Flexing her hand while it remained inside the man, she realized she'd jammed it against bone. The realization of her action didn't shock her as much as realizing she'd stopped herself from pulling her hand free of his body.

She'd missed his heart in her hurried attempt to inflict damage, but adjusted her hand so she could search for it. Finding her mark, she stood there, literally palming the man's heart. She didn't understand, nor could she recall what propelled her to reach for his heart. Her brain seemed wired to know exactly where to go to take the monster's heart.

The *thump* of his heart as it pulsed inside her hand was the last thing she felt before she lost traction and went flying into space.

Chapter 25

Truths be Told

Dana was airborne. And, at the rate she hurtled through the air, she was likely about to crash into one of those stone walls. She was fast, but not fast enough to stop a midair toss by a monster strong enough to throw a human. Someone, or something, had gotten a hold of her and tossed her.

She sensed the wall closing in on her head. She braced herself for a major concussion, or a possible skull fracture.

Puff...Swish... was the sound that whisked into her ear. Her body was snatched in a different direction. Someone incredibly fast had kept her from slamming into the wall, headfirst. The scent was familiar. The sensation of him was familiar. There was only one person who had the ability to make her feel warm and secure. She was in Neal's arms, and had no idea how she'd gotten there.

Swish...Puff. They stopped so suddenly, Dana's first order of business was to acquaint her feet with the floor again. A quick glance at Neal, standing before her, almost made her smile, until she noticed the distressed look on his face. His eyes were locked on her hand.

Dana hadn't noticed that something was moving inside her hand until she'd seen Neal's surprised gaze. Her mouth dropped at the sight of a bleeding, quivering heart as it sat in her cupped palm, pulsing with life.

Blood drizzled down her arm as she fought to put order to all that had recently happened.

The moment she realized she was palming the thing's heart, her intent was to jerk it from his chest. At the moment she attempted to jerk the monster's heart out, another monster—likely his friend—slung her in an attempt to save his buddy. The force at which she was tossed must have helped her snatch the heart. When Neal saved her from crashing into the wall, the detached heart was transported with them.

Dana raised the heart level with her eyes, not believing what she saw. A soft *pop* made her jump. The heart literally exploded in her hand, splattering her and Neal with blood. She didn't have time to analyze the details of the exploding heart as thoroughly as she would have liked.

She searched the darkness for the monster that had thrown her and for the one whose heart she'd taken. She couldn't see well enough to know if he had exploded like his heart had.

Could this be a new way of killing these things?

Glancing in the direction in which the thing had been, a shadow past across her eyes. The hairs on her neck stood as a chill ran up her spine. Whatever lurked in the darkness was far more dangerous than any of the other monsters she'd encountered. Neal's voice found her ear.

"I don't know how they are doing this, but they have stopped me, again. I can't get us out of this place."

The shadow peered from the darkest corner of the room. Dana could only discern that the pale figure was tall and thin. It took another step in their direction, revealing a small portion of its face.

Was it purposely keeping its features in the darkness?

Normally, Dana would have stormed into him, ready to fight and do battle, but her every instinct pressed her to stay in place. Apparently, her and Neal's abilities were coming and going in fits and starts.

Neal must have picked up the same dangerous vibe that she was receiving from the creature in the darkness. They stood, silently awaiting the reveal of the darkly shrouded thing. Although portions of room were lit by dim lamps or candles, it was peculiar, watching the creature use whatever shadows available to cloak itself.

The flickering of the candles could have been playing tricks on her eyes, but it appeared the creature drew darkness from varied places and used it to hide itself. The darkness covering its body was so implicitly placed that they only saw what it wanted them to see. A corner of its pale face and right arm stood out against the darkness.

Dana was so distracted by the figure, she hadn't noticed that everyone—or everything—in the room stopped moving, stopped fighting, and stopped doing anything. They all stood, unmoving, watching the figure.

Was he the one that slung her across the room?

The shadow-man made a dramatic entrance and demanded their attention, whether they wanted to give it or not. When it allowed one half of its body to penetrate the darkness, Dana took a step. Neal gripped her hand tighter. He must have thought she was about to start a fight, but she only sought to get a better look.

Its presence called to her in a way she didn't understand. Oddly, she felt drawn to this dark figure, even as she fought her urge to kill it.

The figure controlled the darkness, manipulating it in some strange way by controlling the amount of light that surrounded it. Although, the most shocking thing in the room, it wouldn't reveal itself, completely.

Dana never dropped Neal's hand and was glad she had him to hang onto. The creep factor was on overload and she glanced around, waiting, for something to explode, for someone to drop dead, or for something to burst into flames. She sensed that something crazy and deadly was about to happen.

A loose strain of her hair sailed about before waving against her cheek. It was him. The figure was incredibly fast and stood in front of her before she realized he'd even moved. She couldn't decide which happened first, her going airborne or her losing her breath. Both happened so

quickly she didn't have time to react. The firm grip Neal had on her hand was useless. She'd been snatched away.

Dana lost Neal's grip so fast, it was like she'd never had it. The Dark One had taken her, and there wasn't a thing she could do about it. She sat across his arms; her arms had somehow found their way around his neck, holding on for dear life.

She was fast, but this monster was twice as fast. Normally, when she used her speed, she saw actual shapes as she zoomed by objects. Now, all she saw were flashes of light and darkness, indicating they were moving much faster than she'd experienced. When the bottom dropped from her stomach, Dana realized they were airborne.

Was he some kind of bat?

A sharp turn caused her neck to whip; but as quickly, her body lurched with a downward pull. They were descending, deeper within this stone lair.

Every molecule within her leapt forward and slammed into the front of her body, threatening to fly free. He'd turned her loose, setting her free on unsteady legs.

Dana struggled for balance, as the momentum from their travel was still in play. Unsteady on her feet, she danced across the floor for a few wobbly seconds.

He stood, feet away, staring at her—the monster that killed her mother. He was who the darkness had hidden so well. As Dana remembered it, darkness had shielded him the night of her mother's murder as well. She'd only seen him when he ran towards her for the split second he used to check on his injured man.

"He was my brother," his raspy voice declared as it tore into Dana's ears.

It was a voice she would never forget. Aside from her mother's screams, his was the only voice she remembered from that horrific night.

Dana didn't say anything, but her mind had burst into an explosion of thoughts. She wondered if he was somehow reading her mind. Her instinct to kill him made her body quake. She couldn't stop her hand from trembling, nor would rage let go of the hold it had on her thoughts.

She wasn't sure she had the presence of mind to stay in place. He was stronger and faster, she knew as much; so she would have to use strategy, if she were to take his head—or his heart. She glanced at her hand, still bloody from snatching and cradling a heart.

"The one you killed when you were a little girl, he was my brother and one of my only weaknesses. He is the only reason you saw my face and know the sound of my voice."

What in the hell?! He's reading my mind.

Dana scanned the room, attempting to plot an escape route, but it appeared they were in a room-sized tomb.

Her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, allowing her to see his ghostly pale and bony face.

"There's only one way out of this room, and I'm the only one that knows it. I didn't bring you here to kill you, if that's what you think."

Dana talked through gritted teeth, struggling to keep herself from doing something stupid.

"We are locked in a tomb that only you know the way out of? What do you want, if you don't want to kill me? My impulse to kill you is consuming me. The longer I'm in here with you the least likely I'm to hold myself in place. You are going to have to kill me, or let me go."

His cheeks rose in what she guessed was supposed to be a smile.

“You’re one of the strongest I have seen in a long time. I have never seen a huntress exhibit this much control. It is said that your impulse to kill us is stronger than our thirst for blood. I have never seen a hunter that can take a heart either. I don’t often find myself surprised, but it astonished me that you and your boyfriend broke through a witch’s spell and used your abilities. It is not often I’m left wondering, Dana.”

She was sure her slack-jawed expression showcased how shocked and confused she was. He talked of witches, abilities, and expelled hearts like it was normal.

A huntress? Is that what I am?

"Come now, Dana. There are people like me and you roaming this planet, and you don't think there are witches? I had a witch cast a spell on this place against all abilities, except for those of us that live here. You and your boyfriend found a loophole, somehow. And yes, you are a huntress."

Dana had no idea what he was talking about. All she wanted to do was rip his head off, torture him, and burn his decapitated head over a flame for at least a week. She shook off her insidious ideas.

He cupped his hand in front of him.

“I didn’t kill your mother, Dana. You were a child. There was no way you could have understood what you were seeing.”

Dana stood in place. The more he talked, the more she wanted to kill him.

“I saw you kill my mother. You bit into her flesh. You and your buddies drank her blood. Then, you snapped her neck.”

She folded her hands behind her back to steady them.

“What you saw was a part of a ceremony my family performs when one crosses over. I didn’t kill your mother. None of us killed your mother. We merely took a part of her into ourselves and in returned she would be given a part of us.”

A minute part of her will to kill him slipped away at the demented words he spoke. Nothing he said held logic and trying to make sense of it was impossible.

He took a step closer to Dana, and she couldn’t figure out if he was being bold, or trying to find a reason to get her to fight him.

“I didn’t bring you in here to fight you, Dana. I didn’t kill your mother, either.”

"What in the hell are you saying?"

She shook her head, angrily.

“You’re not going to play your mind tricks on me. I heard some of you know some kind of voodoo. You and your kind killed my mother. I saw it with my own eyes. The one that bit me died. I don’t know why he died, but I have been searching all this time to ensure the rest of you die, too.”

His voice grew more forceful.

“Dana, you have been killing your own family members. The one that bit you was my brother, Lazlo. He was your uncle. He was the weakest among us, so I’m sure he couldn’t resist the scent of your blood. Your blood is what killed him, Dana. The blood of a virgin huntress is toxic to us. It also smells so incredibly good that it’s nearly impossible for us to resist.

“Age makes us stronger, but not even age could have saved Lazlo. He’d always been a slave to blood. Although it wasn’t your intent to kill him, Dana, his death triggered your ability. After your first kill, you should have developed an irresistible need to seek out and kill our kind.

“Once a hunter—or huntress—makes his—or her—first vampire kill, it triggers your ability—or abilities, in some cases—and also feeds into your insatiable desire to kill us. You’re a huntress, Dana. It’s embedded in your DNA to rid this world of us.

“I understand you better than you can imagine. Like I mentioned before, your need to kill us is as strong as our thirst for blood, yet we share the same bloodline.”

He took a breath and she wondered why. It wasn’t like he needed air to stay alive. He started up again.

“In case you haven’t figured it out yet, I’m your great-great grandfather, Dana. I would have put a stop to this sooner if we could have identified you sooner.”

His words made her knees go weak. Dana couldn’t move. She had the sinking feeling that he was telling the truth, but she couldn’t accept it. She was not going to accept it.

“There is no way in hell I’m any kind of kin to you. You are a lying, murdering bastard. You killed my mother and you’re spreading lies and using trickery to justify it.”

Water filled Dana’s eyes at this point. Her unbearable anger wouldn’t let up. As soon as he dropped his gaze, Sevyn stared back at him. Totally out of control, sometimes it seemed she truly was two different people because Sevyn didn’t care one bit about dying. She pounced on Linkin, using her speed to attack.

Linkin straight-armed her so quickly she hardly had time to react. He yanked her back just as fast as she’d charged at him. She spun away from his tight hold and sent an elbow up to his face, but he ducked in time. Her leg shot up just as quickly, but the bastard was faster. She retrieved the knife she kept in her waistband and shoved it into his chest, but he didn’t even flinch.

Did he even have a heart?

Chapter 26

Hunter’s Gene

“Dana, stop it baby, please!”

The voice stopped her dead in her tracks. When the familiar voice touched her eardrum, Dana recognized it. It couldn’t be. She had watched her die. She had watched them all bite away pieces of her flesh. She had watched them all drank her blood. She had watched her neck get snapped. She had sat through her funeral and had kissed her cold cheek as she lay in a flower-shrouded coffin. She had watched her be lowered into a grave and had placed extra twice-kissed, white roses of the coffin.

Dana closed her eyes and turned on unsteady legs. She’d never been a fainter, but in this moment, her legs threatened to buckle. There, standing only a few feet in front of her was her mother.

Dana shut her eyes tight and shook her head, but the vision refused to go away. This was some type of a mind trick Linkin was playing on her. He could manipulate darkness; surely he could manifest a copy of her mother.

“It’s me, Dinky.”

The sound of her voice made Dana jump. A tear slid down her cheek, as her lips trembled in a mixture of emotion and fear. Her mother was the only one that called her Dinky. Not even her father knew of her secret nickname.

Even if this were a trick, seeing a full image of her mother, again, made her heart swell.

“How can it be? I watched you die. They killed you. We had your funeral.”

She was paler, but there was no mistaking her mother’s beautiful features. She’d always thought her mother was the most beautiful woman in the world. Each time someone complimented her mother, Dana felt proud.

Growing up, Dana had been told—by her father, brothers, and family friends—that she was a darker, spitting image of her mother.

What better compliment was there than to look like the most beautiful woman in the world?

Not only that, but her mother had been the nicest and most loving person in the world also. Her death had torn Dana apart. It had taken years for her to rebuild her mind and allow her broken heart to mend. Her wounds had scabbed, but Dana had never fully healed.

At only fifteen, she struck out on her own to do something as deadly as hunt for the monsters that killed her mother.

Dana wiped her eyes and shook her head again, not wanting to accept what was clearly in front of her.

“I’m so sorry, baby. I wish I could have found a way to explain this to you, before now.” She took a deep breath. “Linkin revealed to you the truth. They weren’t trying to kill me.

“I was becoming too dangerous to be around you. I didn’t trust myself around my own child anymore. I was such a danger to you that I had no choice but to cross over and stay away from you.”

The woman reached out and Dana stumbled back.

“Even if I believe any of the shit you two are feeding me, how are you still alive? Have you become one of them? Were you one of them the entire time?”

The longer Dana stood there, the more she sensed that this was truly her mother. The woman dropped her head.

“I didn’t have a choice, Dinky. In this family, you only have two options. You get the hunters gene, like you have, or you get the vampire gene, like I have. Not many people know that hunters are direct descendant of vampires.”

Dana stood slack-jawed.

Could any of this shit actually be true?

“I spent years chasing monsters to avenge your death and you’re saying that you are one of them? Have been one of them all along? You have been alive this entire time, and you let me believe you were dead?”

She pleaded, “Dinky, would you please have a seat, so I can explain this to you?”

The lady reached for her arm and Dana jerked away.

“No, I will not have a seat. But, I don’t have much choice but to listen to you; my great-great-grand over there is apparently the only one that knows the way out of here.”

Dana glanced back and noticed he hadn’t moved an inch since her mother started talking. The woman ushered a hand towards the man.

“This truly is your great-great grandfather, Linkin Pajari. When one is born with true vampire blood, three things will happen. One, you immediately become a vampire and grow into maturity at a rapid pace. Two, your vampirism lies dormant and may, or may not, manifest. In my case, it decided to manifest itself when I was well into adulthood. I have no idea what triggered it, but being around you had become dangerous.

“When I started craving human flesh, I knew something was wrong. The day I almost bit you was the last straw. I had to figure out what was wrong with me. I had cravings I couldn’t control. I went to every doctor I could find and none of them could tell me what was wrong.

“Linkin sensed my call. Our bloodline connection was how he knew I was out there. I had no idea that I was linked to a family of vampires because I didn't know what I was. I had no idea that vampires even existed. Traditional vampire families before your great-great-grandfather's time would cast out those like you or me. We were deserted and labelled as half-breeds and handicapped because we were underdeveloped by vampire standards.

“Back then, a lot of the discarded members later developed into vampires without having a full understanding of what they were. Those were the vampires that usually ran wild, killing with no mercy, or rules to follow.

“Those that inherit the hunter's gene developed such a strong hatred for our kind that they were blinded by rage and sought revenge on the beings that rejected them. The hatred was so strong that it sharpened their natural instincts and activated their abilities. These are abilities they would have developed had they become vampires. The original vampire hunters were the protectors of our kind. They hunted only enemies to vampires.

“Within the last couple of hundred years, the vampire species has teetered on the verge of extinction and can no longer afford to cast away what they once considered half-breeds. They came up with a plan. If we didn't immediately turn upon birth, they would entrust us to a human family that knows our history, in case we peaked later.

“The humans that took me were killed when I was fourteen, so there was no one to tell me, or explain to me, what I was, or what I might go through when, and if, the time came. By the time I got the call from Linkin to meet him, I was so desperate to figure out what was wrong with me that I ran to him.”

At this point, Dana started to remember. Her mother had been acting funny, snapping at her and getting angry for no reason, sometimes. She remembered her meeting with someone, several times, but it was always inside the hospital, so she naturally assumed her mother had been seeing a doctor.

Her mother continued, “Things had gotten so bad with me that your father was thinking of having me committed. I kept myself hidden and away from you as much as possible, by pawning you off on the nannies. One night things had gotten so bad, I locked myself in my bedroom.

“Although I didn't believe all of Linkin's accounts of our history, I was desperate enough to call him. You weren't safe being alone with me, and I refused to let anything happen to you because of me. I was turning, and I couldn't control myself.

“By the time the family got to me, I was so far gone that they started the crossover ceremony. They each had to take a part of me into their bodies—blood and flesh. I was losing my mind, so I fought them. All they were trying to do was help me. You heard my screams and assumed they were trying to kill me. They were actually trying to make the exchange, they take part of me and in return they feed me a part of them, their blood.

“A drop of blood from an immediate family member eases the turn, makes the process less hostile. I was turning and losing control, so they had a difficult time keeping me calm. You walked into my bedroom and as little as you were, you tried to help me, without concern for your own life.

“Your Uncle Lazlo held you down. Things went wrong when he bit you. The scent of your blood likely made him lose his composure. I wasn't fully turned and it was hard for me to resist the scent of it. When you saw them handling me so brutally, it was because I was becoming as strong as they were and it took three of them to hold me down.

“When your uncle bit you and died, it sent everyone into a panic. No one knew what it meant, so they broke my neck to shut me up, knowing that it wouldn't kill me. They locked you into the

closet and took me to complete the ceremony. After they coached me on how to fake my own funeral, I returned home and played dead until I was put into the ground."

Dana watched tears fall from her mother's eyes.

"I was the one that thought it best to stay away from you. It wasn't until after I had turned that I found out that you had the hunter's gene. You see, Dinky, I couldn't reunite with you if I wanted to. You'd only have the urge to kill me. When we found out that you started killing those you believed killed me, I begged the family to allow me to tell you the truth about us.

"Vampires are so few now that they fear becoming extinct and have started seeking out their own kind. Very few of us have the ability to reproduce and those that can are only producing half-breeds. Despite legends and myths, we can't turn whoever we want; we reproduce like any other species. There were a few of us that had the gift to turn anyone, but they died out hundreds of years ago. The family could have helped me turn sooner had they known how to find me. But I'm glad they didn't because I wouldn't have had the chance to have you."

Dana soaked it all in; and although her mother's sobs tore at her heart, she wouldn't relent. She didn't know whether to believe this inconceivable story, or follow her raging instincts that insisted she kill these monsters. She fought her urges and asked a question.

"If I understand you clearly, I'm a descendant of vampires. I have vampire blood coursing through my veins and by some glorious miracle, I hate vampires. Let's see, one of three things was going to happen to me. One, I'd immediately become a vampire, where I would have killed myself the first chance I got. Two, my vampirism would remain dormant and surface at some point, where I would have killed myself the first chance I got. Or three, I would go completely rogue, let my rage for being forsaken take control, and kill the very thing that I was born from."

Her mother threw up her hands, pleading for her understanding.

"Dinky, I know this is a lot to swallow, but it is all true."

Her mother appeared heartbroken. Dana wasn't ready to accept any of this as she folded her arms across her chest.

"If this is all true, we have nothing further to talk about. All I ask is that you never reveal yourself to my father. He was as broken up as I was over your death. I don't want him hurting all over again.

"I will never stop wanting to kill you, and you will never stop thirsting for my blood. There is nothing more we need to say to each other."

As hard as it was for Dana to turn away from the woman she used to love unconditionally, she found the strength to do so. As hard as it was for her to accept, her urge to kill her own mother was so strong that she would have done it, if she didn't think Linkin would stop her. She turned to Linkin.

"Are you going to let me out or what?"

He didn't say anything. Her mother was immediately in front of her with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I love you. Always have. Always will."

Dana didn't say anything in response. She zipped around her mother and ran forward with lightning-fast speed, knowing that her great-great-grandfather was fast enough to stop her before she followed her natural-born instincts to kill them both.

Dana didn't know if it took seconds or milliseconds, but she was back in the main lobby of the huge lair. The vampire she'd harpooned in the head was nearly recovered, but thankfully, he continued to suffer the effects of his head wound. The one whose heart she'd taken was a puddle

of blood on the floor. The realization pleased her. She'd discovered another way to kill them, and if it were up to her, she'd killed as many as she had to, if it meant finding their weaknesses.

She found Neal leaning against the wall she'd left him next to. Upon seeing her, he stood tall, but his face exposed his concern. She assured him.

"I'm fine. Let's go, before I change my mind and end up getting us both killed."

No one moved to stop her, as she and Neal walked towards what, she hoped, was the front door.

Chapter 27

Truce

After all the truth she'd discovered, Dana needed time to process it all. Since her office was under construction, she had a break from her day job. She also called a temporary truce with her newly discovered family. She had a strange sense her mother, or perhaps any one of her new family members, was watching her. She'd accidentally killed one, murdered at least two of them and had likely permanently disfigured another.

If their family history was true, she would find a way to keep killing them.

She had to accept that her mother died when she was ten, or risk opening a whole new can of worms. She became a stalker of the internet, libraries, museums and every online database she knew of, attempting to find anything that substantiated the story she'd been told by her mother and Linkin.

Although she found the story hard to swallow, she couldn't think of anything else that would explain her abilities. She'd done things that surprised and surpassed anything she thought she was capable of doing.

After discovering she and her family weren't the only supernatural creatures roaming the planet, she was more susceptible to believing things she never would have before.

Neal didn't pressure her for the details of what happened to her in the belly of that lair. She appreciated his patience more than he would ever know. She planned to tell him but, she had to figure out how much, and exactly what, she should tell him.

Dana welcomed her father and brothers back by throwing one of those fancy balls they favored.

There was one thing that could help alleviate Dana's suffering and ease her mind of monsters. He stood undressing her with his eyes. Neal had been the glue that kept her mind intact. And although she knew Top would eventually call for him, she planned to make whatever time they had left count.

They stood apart for a few moments, staring at each other. When she smiled, he smiled. He never seemed willing to risk her telling him no, so he followed her lead when it came to them being physical.

Dana had no reason to tell him no, but she loved the fact that he waited on her. She strolled over to him, loving the way his masculine presence drew her in.

Standing on her tiptoes, she allowed her lips to graze his ear.

"You intoxicate me. Do you know that?"

He smiled but didn't respond. At times, it appeared he had a hard time believing how desirable she found him. Despite his lingering bouts of doubt, it didn't take them long to become so enraptured they forgot about everything else in the world.

Hours later, when the dust settled and nerves calmed, Dana divulged everything to Neal. She told him about her heritage, about her mother, and about Linkin.

Neal took the news with ease and never cast one judgmental eye on her. After Neal's acceptance of her, spliced vampire gene and all, Dana knew that he was unquestionably the man for her.

Chapter 28

August Heat

The August heat had people, human and others, doing crazy things. The news headlines were an explosion of violent acts, both strange and crazy. For once, Dana stayed away from it. She was taking a break from chasing crazy. She realized she didn't have to hunt or chase the madness because it had been a part of her all along. Eventually, it was going to come knocking at her door.

She hadn't seen Neal in nearly two months. As she expected, an urgent assignment had torn Neal away from her. With Top, every assignment was an urgent one.

Her thoughts kept her company, as she sat swimming in financial documents. Work was the only thing that somewhat kept her mind off missing Neal. The scent of new paint permeated the space. It had taken nearly two months to complete her office restorations, and she took advantage by adding a few updates.

She had the bottom of her desk rebuilt and a secret compartment added into her office closet. The arsenal of guns and knives she kept there was enough for her to start a war. Her ten employees had finally returned to normal after their scare. The pay raise she gave them boosted their morale as well.

Jordan cracked her door.

"Dana, there is someone here to see you."

She didn't like to accept uninvited guest. Since she wasn't expecting Neal for another week, she prayed it wasn't Brad.

"Are they on the calendar? I didn't think I had anyone coming in today."

"So I gotta be on the calendar to see you now?"

Neal pushed the door open. The smile on Dana's face grew, instantly. Jordan gave her a head nod and walked away with a huge smile across her face. Dana realized this was probably the first time in a month her assistant had seen her smile.

Dana ran to Neal, tackling him with a strong hug. Neal kissed her with so much love and passion she went limp in his arms.

"I missed you so much."

She squeezed him so hard; he let out a strangled cough. When she released him, he stepped far enough back to look into her eyes.

"Wow, you did miss me."

"Yes. I missed you more than I miss burning heads."

They both laughed. His finger skimmed her cheek.

“That’s a whole lot of missing me.”

He had no idea how deeply he had reached into her heart, but she was determined to show him. His soft pecks slid across her lips and jumpstarted her already heightened emotions.

He had her pinned, unable to look anywhere except into his eyes, as he positioned her face between his palms.

"Dana, the kind of life we live has no promises that either of us will see tomorrow. I want to spend time with you, whenever it's available."

She nodded her head.

“Of course. Me too.”

The tightness of his face harbored both care and concern.

“Dana, I love you. I can’t go another day without you knowing how I truly feel. There is no doubt in my mind that I would do anything for you. I love you that much.”

She was so touched, she stood frozen, as tears threatened to fall from her stunned, unblinking eyes. She kissed him, her lips crashing into his in an emotional rush.

“I love you, too," she murmured against his lips.

She palmed his face this time, demanding his attention. There were times when it seemed he held reluctance about her attraction and interest in him. She wanted her words to soak in, this time.

“I’m telling you something you need to believe. I’m in love with you, Neal, so much so that I can confidently say that I don’t want any other man touching me, kissing me, holding me, or making love to me. You’re the only man that I will allow to devour me. I love you and I need you in my life. I don’t want you doubting my love for you. You stole my heart the day we met.”

They fell into each other’s arms. The abundance of flowing emotions had them both vying to show the other how much each truly loved the other.

The emotional embraces and kisses dissolved into steamy, passion-laden caresses. The unstoppable passion ignited both their senses and took possession of their minds. Dana’s labored breaths mingled with his.

“Let’s go, before my employees hear me lose complete control of myself. It’s bad enough you have me in here confessing my undying love for you.”

He laughed at her while she shutdown her computer and threw files into her desk drawer. She spoke into her phone.

"Jordan, I’m taking the rest of the day off. Unless it’s a matter of life and death, it can wait until Monday.”

Work be damned, Dana had more important things to do, and he was about six-two and sexy as hell. She grabbed her purse.

“I have an entire weekend to show you exactly how much I missed you and how deep my love runs for you. And I don’t want to be quiet about it.”

Dana and Neal ended up checking in to the Luxurious Sparks Hotel only a few blocks from her office. She walked in and scanned the room with fast roving eyes. After throwing her key card and purse on the table, she grabbed Neal’s hand and dragged him towards the marble steps leading to a huge, elevated four-poster bed. The room exuded sophistication, but neither noticed. They only had eyes for each other.

Neal stopped Dana before she climbed into the bed. His fingers turned the golden knobs of her buttons, wiggling them free of the small slices of material that held them in place. Partially freeing her from her pantsuit, her sexy red-laced bra revealed itself with each turn of his fingers. He licked his lips, suggestively.

"What exactly do you want me to do to you, Dana?"

She loved that he'd asked. Whenever she made her suggestions, he did to her exactly what she asked him to do. She shoved her hand into the waistband of his jeans and tugged him towards her as she inhaled his heady flavor.

"I want you to leisurely take these clothes off me, but in a way that excites my senses."

She put her lips to his ear and whispered more to him. She relieved him of his shirt, but didn't stop her words.

"Tease me as you disrobe me and use your fingers to make me dripping wet. Then, I want you to lay me right there and spread my legs."

She leaned into him, using her fingers to pull his ear to her mouth with a playful tug. She nibbled as she sent more seductive words into his ears. She took down his zipper and tugged his pants. Her words never stopped.

"By then, I would like be in the throes of my first orgasm."

She wiggled her finger for him to come closer. When his head reached her level, she bit his earlobe and whispered the rest of her dirty little fantasy in his ear. He jerked his head back, wide-eyed.

"Is that right? A threesome. You, me, and Sevyn."

Neal rubbed his hands together, like he was about to enjoy a feast fit for a king. Dana threw a finger up. She added another statement.

"If you have energy after that, I want you to make slow passionate love to me, and show me how much you love me."

He kissed her while continuing to free her from the rest of her clothes.

"Okay. I will be happy to alleviate your suffering."

Damn.

She loved this man. She had no idea if he could pull off any of the hot shit she asked for; but because she asked, she knew that he was going to attempt to make it happen.

Epilogue

Lying tangled in the sheets, and in Neal's arms, Dana never thought she would see the day when she knew she had found the perfect man. Floating in the aftermath of their lovemaking, she released a deep sigh as she peeled her eyes open. Her body sank further into the mattress as she found herself too satiated to do anything but lie there and breathe.

The ringing of her phone made her roll her eyes. A glance at Neal showed him out cold. The last thing she wanted to do was answer her phone. She'd informed Jordan that she was to receive life or death calls only, so the tone that specified a call from her office had her on edge. Her anxiety heightened when she swiped her finger across the shiny face of her phone.

"Hello."

"Dana, its Ryder. I need your help."

She sensed the desperation in the sound of his voice.

"Ryder. What's the matter?"

"It's my wife, I'm afraid she's been taken by a monster. I wouldn't have called you if I didn't think it was a matter of life and death."

Dana sat up, worried now. Her father and Ryder's father were best friends. Although the men had distance between them—one was in Seattle and the other in New York—they'd managed to keep their friendship going. She and Ryder had become fast friends when her father decided to let her go to school in New York.

Ryder had accidentally stumbled upon Dana's cache of training weapons. Although she had never revealed to him what she was up to, Ryder was no idiot. Each time he talked to her, he'd play the game of guessing what covert agency she secretly joined. She swore him to secrecy about what he'd seen and to her knowledge, he'd never told a soul.

She strained to project a reassuring voice.

"Ryder, I know you don't trust them, but for now, call the police. I'll put in a call to a contact I know in your area as well. I'm on the other side of the continent, so it's going to take me some time to get to you."

She paused and found Neal staring at her with concern etched on his face.

Ryder's broken voice returned.

"I know, Dana, but I also know that you'll know what to do."

They hung up after she received specifics on Ryder's location.

Dana called her contact in New York. Her next call was to the pilot her father kept on standby. She didn't use their private jet often, but this was an emergency. Neal offered to go along, but Dana told him it wasn't necessary. He insisted.

"Dana, I caught the gist of your conversation. Your friend is in trouble, and if I can help, I would like to. Please. You wouldn't let me protect you; the least you can do is let me help you."

She smiled. She couldn't tell the man no. She hoped she wasn't doing something she would regret.

End of Sevyn

NOTE: Don't worry readers. This is not the last you will see of Dana, Sevyn, and Neal. They have more v-word creatures to hunt and heads to burn. The couple will show up in other reads from The Smoke & Fire Series.

Questions to ponder from *Sevyn*:

1. Were you surprised to find that Dana was a decedent of vampires? Were you surprised to find her mother was still alive?
2. Do you think, Top, Neal's Agency is responsible for his memory loss?
3. Why do you think Neal found it hard to believe that Dana was genuinely interested in him?
4. Dana found out life-changing secrets because she was relentless in chasing down who she believed killed her mother. Do you think she would have eventually found out the same secrets had she not sought to avenge her mother?
5. Dana unknowingly killed her own family members, do you think that Linkin let her off the hook too easily or is he not finished with her yet?
6. Why do you think Top placed Neal with Dana?

Check out this short Synopsis of *Guardian Sixx* of the Smoke & Fire Series.

Running from a past that keeps kicking her while she's down, Zara is forced to live on the streets. Years of drugs and forced prostitution has her contemplating suicide. After meeting her savior Ryder, she knows that her prayers have finally been answered...until her brutal past comes calling.

Ryder believes he has the perfect drama free life with his feisty and sexy fiancée Nicole. When unseen forces lead him to Zara, one of the most remarkable women he's met; he keeps his distance. Caught in the middle of comfort with Nicole and happiness with Zara, he maintains his nobility...until a moment of jealousy causes Nicole to snoop into Zara's past and dredge up a monster that can kill them all.

Will the secret guardian that lingers at Zara's back be enough to ward off a demon from her past?

Check out this excerpt from:

Sparks - Smoke & Fire Book #1 Prequel Novelette

Introduction

Much too often we find ourselves wondering how a character was born. What made them into the hero they have become? What made them such a nice guy or girl? How did they become such a villainous monster or mass murderer?

This novelette gives off a few sparks of the flame that ignite two explosive characters from Smoke & Fire, Book #1 of the Smoke & Fire Series. Rage and untapped emotions are what ignite the fumes that make these characters burn off the pages.

Sori “Smoke” Knight and Mycale Thomas Phillips “Fire” are known for being deadly, sometimes lovable, and totally emotionally dysfunctional. Despite their flaws, they somehow manage to keep fighting for the good guys.

This novelette sneaks a peek into Sori and Mycale’s younger years, pulling us into the tragedies that tore into their core so deeply it left lingering sparks of madness. Learn what fanned Sori’s smoke and lit Mycale’s fire.

Part 1

Mycale Thomas Phillips - Fire

Waking up in an unfamiliar environment sparked panic. The hardness of the mattress, the stale musty air, and the suffocating stillness were all indications that he was no longer in his own room.

Shaking off the clouds of sleepiness, ten-year-old Mycale squinted against the stinging brightness of a blinding light.

“Mum. Dad,” he called out.

He even called out to his twelve-year-old big brother Mateo, but no one answered. Sure he was stuck in a dream, Mycale struggled to remain calm.

Lying flat on his back, Mycale made out a dirty white ceiling. The ceiling tiles had holes as if rats bore into them. The walls showcased white paint and nothing more. His football and race car posters weren't there. His shelf, lined with football trophies, wasn't there either.

Mycale focused, looking for anything familiar. A light shined, like a beacon, over his bed. There were no windows from his vantage point, and more beds started to come into focus.

Unable to move his hands, he couldn't shield his eyes. Blinking rapidly, the brightness made him fight to keep his tortured eyes open. Mycale scanned the area as best he could. As he struggled to clear his mind, he focused, taking in other kids. Beds with children atop dirty and torn mattresses filled the large space. The sight of other kids should have relaxed him, a little; but he didn't know them and had no idea where he was.

He fought the urge to yell for help. Not knowing how he had gotten there frightened him more than actually being wherever *there* was. As his eyes darted back and forth, a flash of movement stopped them.

Lifting his head as far as he could, he called softly, “Hello.”

Another boy, in a bed a few feet away, didn't answer. The boy was too busy fighting against wrist restraints.

Tears ran down the other boy's face as thick leather straps anchored his hands to the bed frame. About Mycale's age, the boy sported a black eye and badly bruised arms and legs. His attire was nothing more than an ill-fitting hospital gown. Becoming aware that Mycale looked his way, the boy's hand pulled against the restraint as he pointed.

Mycale's first instinct was to reach towards the boy, but the exigent look on the boy's face urged Mycale to look in the direction in which his shaking hand pointed.

A sharp snap kept Mycale's hands near his waist. Taking in the sight of his own bound hands was only one of the reasons his heart stopped. The unnatural silence of the room and the hospital gown he wore were a few other reasons to have a heart attack.

He yelled, “Let me out of these things. This isn't funny. Let. Me. Out.”

His chest heaved with nervous energy.

Why can't I hear myself?

"Where in the bloody hell is the sound?" he asked no one in particular.

His parents would have disciplined him for having said 'bloody hell', but he was sure this time was justified.

The boy still pointed. Raising his head as far as he could, Mycale's eyes took in what his mind couldn't understand. A woman and a man stood over a girl, two beds away. They unstrapped her as she screamed and desperately fought them.

No sound. She's screaming with no sound.

Speaking to the boy next to him, Mycale asked, "Where are we? Why are we here? Where are they taking her?"

The boy gave no reply, but his haunted eyes held Mycale's attention.

Panicked, Mycale needed answers. He was surrounded by at least twenty beds, all filled with children.

Some of the children were asleep, some were awake, and some were crying and making desperate attempts to free themselves. Unable to hear what he saw, Mycale's terror intensified. This had to be his punishment for some long ago delinquency he'd gotten away with.

Pulling at his bound hands, he noticed his torso was also strapped to the bed. Wiggling and kicking his feet, Mycale yelled at the top of his lungs; but he couldn't hear a thing. The sound vibrated throughout his body; but his voice was lost in space, never reaching his ears. The sound had been turned off, like it was vacuumed from the room.

Exhaustion was the only thing to temper Mycale's fight with the restraints. Fear and terror fought for the number one spot in his mind. He wondered if his mom and dad knew he was missing.

Were they searching for him? Had his dad peeked into his room like he usually did? Was he ever going to see his family again?

His father and brother would tell him to be a *hard man*. Fighting fatigue, he continued trying to free himself.

Mycale didn't realize he'd fallen asleep until he was shaken awake by the same man and woman who had taken the girl. They stood above him, two soundless monsters. Immediately, Mycale fought them with everything he had.

Twisting and turning his body, he yelled and screamed, "Don't touch me. Leave me alone. What do you want with me?"

Silence prevailed. Sound would not break free, and his words were neither heard nor acknowledged.

Being dragged forcibly from the bed, Mycale intensified his fight. He flailed about, like a fish out of water; but the man and woman together were too much for him. The lady held him by his arms while the man held his feet.

Once out of the room, Mycale was struck by the sudden potency of sound. His flailing came to a screeching halt. Sound was back; the beautiful rhythms of life vibrated against his ears.

Calmed by the familiar blanket of sound, his body went limp as the man and the woman carried him towards the unknown.

Stay calm and be a hard man, he reminded himself.

While carried down a dimly lit hall, he scanned his surroundings. The nauseating smell of cleaning products, and the sight of varied areas lined with medical equipment and medical supply cabinets, suggested he was in some type of hospital.

Turning into the only open door, they entered a larger room which housed two smaller rooms. The smaller rooms were nothing more than large rectangular glass cubes. Fearing he was about to be put into one of the cubes, Mycale started to struggle again.

Once inside the cube, the man and the woman released him at the same time, dropping him. Before he had a chance to get up and protest, the woman and the man quickly exited, and a knob-less glass door slid shut.

Locked inside, Mycale slammed his hands against the door and demanded to be let out.

He yelled, "Let me out of here. When my dad finds out what you're doing, he's going to kick your butts."

Since the room was see-through from all angles, he sensed being studied. He beat against the door until his hands became sore. Eventually, he took a seat in the only chair in the room and waited.

The man and the woman watched from behind a desk, their eyes scanning him as if observing a display. Both had notebooks in front of them, hands poised, pens ready to take notes.

Watching the man speak to the woman, Mycale didn't expect to hear anything while trapped inside the large cube; but he heard the man's muffled voice. All of a sudden, the man's voice projected loudly inside the room. Looking around, Mycale spotted a honeycomb-shaped button that must have been a speaker.

The man said, "Mycale, if you show us your ability, we will send you back home."

Mycale didn't understand.

What ability? What exactly was the man asking him to do?

The man continued, "We know you have an ability, Mycale. There is no need to be afraid to show us. We are people who specialize in finding children like you. We are here to identify your ability and then send you back home as quickly as possible.

"If you listen to us, and do what we tell you to do, you can go back home. We have the means to make you forget this entire incident. As a matter-of-fact, one of our unbreakable rules is to ensure you forget any of this ever happened, therefore you can think of this as just a dream. You won't remember any of this, Mycale. We promise."

More confused, Mycale didn't know how to respond. He noticed the man didn't speak with an English accent like he did. Mycale asked the only question on his mind.

"Can I go home? I want to go home. I don't know what you want me to do. Can I go home...please?"

The lady had the nerve to smile.

“You need to show us your ability, Mycale. Your being here means, at some point, you showed the potential for manifesting or having an ability. You may not be aware of it, yet.”

After a moment of waiting, the man asked, “Have you ever done something amazing that you didn’t think possible? Have you ever done anything you saw a superhero do?”

Although only ten, Mycale was smart enough to know he couldn’t do anything he had seen superheroes do.

He told them, “Az if. I can’t do anything like a superhero. That’s stupid.”

The lady addressed him.

“Now, that simply is not true, Mycale. You wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

He desperately wanted to give these people what they wanted so they would let him go home. He stood. His movement captured the attention of the woman and the man, making them sit straighter in their chairs.

Since he’d always done well in his karate classes, he decided to show them some of his best moves. The man and the woman didn’t stop him as he wore himself out, showing them jabs, kicks, and spins.

Eventually, Mycale took his seat, winded and out of breath.

Once he caught his breath, he asked, “Was that good enough? I also know how to fish and hunt and catch insects.”

The two didn’t appear impressed with his display.

The man asked, “Can you fly, or make objects hover in the air, or move faster than a person’s eye can see, or shift your body into animals and objects, or walk through walls? Do you have dreams and visions of things before they happen? Can you move objects with your mind?”

Stunned by the unusual questions, Mycale stared, unblinkingly. They were asking him things he knew to be impossible. Shaking his head, he wasn’t sure how to answer.

Exhausted from the constant mix of unusual questions, all Mycale wanted to do was go home. Instead, he was dragged, kicking and screaming, back to the room with no sound and strapped to the bed. Taking in the scent of urine, and maybe even feces, he closed his eyes and prayed he would wake up in his own bed. Too tired to fight, he quickly fell asleep.

When the woman and man unstrapped him again, he wasn’t sure if he had slept for minutes or hours. Thirsty, his scratchy and dry vocal cords refused to project the words he attempted. Words didn’t matter in this room, anyway; he remained silent despite his attempts. He didn’t fight while being carried back to the glass room; there was no use.

This time, the boy who had been in the bed next to him was seated in the adjacent glass room. The portable rooms were in the same position as their beds and sat like two giant cubes. The other boy’s head constantly swiveled as the man and the woman sat, watching.

Mycale took his seat. Both he and the boy waited, wondering what the man and the woman had planned for them. Jumping about, like a puppet, his legs refused to stay still. Then, someone approached.

Mycale took in the presence of two large men, built like all-star NFL football players. Passing his room, he watched the men enter the boy's room. Seeing the boy cower, as the men stood on either side of him, was a sign they weren't there to be friendly. The boy's body sank inward as he dropped his head low to his chest, too frightened to look up at the men. Watching, Mycale prayed they weren't planning to hurt the boy.

Without warning, the men slapped and punched the boy. The boy's head jerked and snapped with each blow, making Mycale flinch and jump. Hearing the boy's muffled cries, the vibrations penetrated Mycale's body. All attempts the boy made to fight back were futile.

Mycale stood, pounding his glass wall, facing the boy's room. Screaming for them to stop, he hoped to draw the men's attention.

The woman's voice continuously flowed through the speaker, but Mycale ignored her request for him to show his ability. Fearing for the boy's life, he screamed louder and pounded harder.

"Stop it. He's only a boy. Stop hitting him, please!"

The lady's voice never stopped.

"Mycale, show us your ability or they will continue to beat Ivan."

Hearing the boy's name made the incident more personal.

He yelled towards the speaker, "I don't know what you want me to do. I don't have any abilities. Please, make them stop. We didn't do anything."

Ivan's beating commenced as the woman's voice became nails on a chalkboard. Mycale pounded the wall harder, suddenly making it shatter. Glass peppered his arms and he instinctively protected his head.

Stunned, Mycale stood frozen for a moment, before pushing his legs to move forward.

The man and the woman stood behind their desk, speechless. They were either surprised or impressed.

Mycale didn't care. He didn't have time to think about what he'd done because his actions hadn't stopped Ivan's beating. Running over to Ivan's room, he slammed his fist against the outside of Ivan's wall.

"Leave him alone, you monsters."

The men continued to pommel Ivan, raining down punches that intensified Mycale's anger.

His pounding shattered the second glass wall. He was so upset, he didn't care about breaking the glass or how he'd done it. As he ran towards the boy, he was jerked back and slammed to the floor. The floor met the side of his face with a hard thump, sending shooting pain to his brain and throughout his body.

Immediately, his aching head was pinned under the man's boot. As the groove of the boot pressed into his cheek, Mycale struggled to see if Ivan was okay.

Unfortunately, Mycale found that his nightmare was just beginning. After showing the man and woman he could break glass walls with his hands, they still denied his request to go home.

He wondered, *what more do they want to see?*

After another round in the soundless room, Mycale and Ivan switched places. Mycale didn't know if it was a day later or hours later.

Back at the cubes, the walls he'd shattered were replaced.

While being punched and kicked, with no remorse, Mycale caught a glimpse of Ivan screaming for them to stop. His own desperate pleas, and Ivan's muffled screams, were ignored. The strikes were hard and frequent, each lick boomed through his body as he fought to protect his head and face. He'd given up his attempt to fight back when the force of one of the blows toppled him from the chair. Mycale rolled his body into a tight ball, each kick and punch a pain-filled nightmare.

At some point during the relentless beating, Mycale became filled with so much rage and hate he could no longer distinguish pain from anger. He was aware of the man and the woman watching, and of Ivan, who had never stopped yelling on his behalf.

Mycale was beaten until his body physically stopped functioning. Reduced to a series of exhausting gasps, he no longer pleaded for mercy. A strong surge, an invisible force, took his breath despite the crush of the harsh blows. Seemingly losing focus, for only a moment, he came awake to the men holding something under his nose. As soon as he regained consciousness, his pain-packed nightmare resumed.

Countless beatings pushed Mycale beyond any limits he recognized.

Why hadn't he paid more attention to his parent's lessons on how to pray?

Attempting to pray for himself, and for the rest of the kids, he hoped his desperate words were somehow heard. It seemed like the mission of his captors were to kill them all, but he wasn't ready to die.

He begged, "Please God. Don't let these people kill us. We are only kids. We don't know what they want."

Starved, thirsty, battered, and beaten, Mycale started to believe this was the last place he would ever see.

A pair of children disappeared, not returning to their beds, with each appearance of the man and the woman. At first, there were four empty beds, then ten stared back at him. Either the children were dead or they had shown the man and the woman something impressive enough to be sent back home.

Back at the cubes, this was his third time teamed with Ivan. This time, the men used electric prods, like the ones farmers used on livestock. Mycale knew he would later experience the same painful sting of the prods. Ivan lost consciousness twice, but it didn't stop his abuse.

Rage and anger seemed to be his only friends. A toxic cocktail of emotions making Mycale, of all things, extremely hot. Touching the glass, he realized he had literally become hot enough to melt the wall. Pushing against the wall, his hand sank into the glass.

At first, only his hands and face were hot, then his entire body. Since the man and the woman refused to set him free, Mycale embraced the rush of rage and anger as it coursed through his body. His hands emitted a light glow that scared and excited him at the same time. Since he possessed nothing as strong as his anger and rage, he was convinced the intangible emotions had been converted into heat. He wondered if anger was the key to giving the man and the woman what they wanted.

They finally noticed what he was doing to the glass. It seemed like his actions impressed the man and the woman enough to stop Ivan's beating. His distraction was a short-lived one.

Focusing, Mycale saw Ivan one moment and in the next he was gone. Ivan vanished.

Ivan's sudden disappearance drew everyone's attention. The man and the woman, along with the large men, searched, calling out angrily for the boy. While everyone was busy searching for Ivan, Mycale slipped through the jagged hole he'd melted into the glass cube.

Once free, he ran down the only other hallway towards what he hoped was an exit. The only thing on his mind was getting out of that place and finding help for the rest of the children. As he pushed against the large metal door marked 'exit', he was jerked backwards by strong hands and tossed over a sturdy shoulder.

He didn't fight while being carried back to the soundless room, but the sight of the dirty bed affixed with restraints drove him to kick and yell again. Luckily, he gave a good enough kick to make one of the men cover his eye. Pain was evident on the man's face, but Mycale's small victory was short-lived.

The force of his body connecting with the hard mattress took his breath. A blow to his midsection sent his stomach contents flying into the air. Weak and winded, he was unable to block—or move away from—another fist traveling towards his head. As soon as his brain registered pain, his world went black.

Mycale was at number nine for the repeated cycles of torture he had endured. He had been spat on, urinated on, nearly drowned, electrocuted, splashed with acid, deprived of sleep, and starved of food and water. Trapped in an endless cycle of abuse and pain, he began to reject the notion that this world was real.

Was it possible he had died and landed in hell?

His grandparents always preached about hell; but he never believed their stories, until now.

Countless beatings and muffled screams tore at his heart and provided a grim reminder that he wasn't dreaming. He was convinced his captors had found a way to turn off sound as an additional form of punishment. He was unable to see outside his soundless prison, so he couldn't say if he'd been in that place a week or a month. Since there was no way to measure time, it

didn't exist in this place. There were only two sickening constants: the increasing number of empty beds and an endless supply of abuse.

Partnered with a girl this time, Mycale caught snatches of her crying helplessly as he was dunked and held, face down, in a tub of water. His lungs burned, ignited by an invisible fire. Swallowing the metallic flavor of his own blood, each breath turned into acid as it rushed down his raw throat.

Coughing uncontrollably as water squirted from his nose and mouth, Mycale fought to get oxygen into his lungs. The men were determined to suffocate him, one way or another. A fist flew into his chest, causing him to lose the breath he'd been struggling so hard to catch.

Having no control, Mycale's hand was forcibly slapped hard atop a hard wooden desk that had been added to the cube. The slap of his hand sent peppering aches of pain up his already bruised wrist. As one man firmly held his hand down, the other placed a circular cutting device around the joint of his left pointer finger.

Mycale pleaded, "Please don't. I promise I will show you my ability."

Listening to the men tell him they were about to peel the skin from each of his fingers, Mycale's nerves flew into a chaotic frenzy. His hand shook uncontrollably, which sent the instrument slicing against his finger. With a scratchy and sore throat, he could hardly scream when the man squeezed the instrument around his finger and tightened the grip.

Since his voice and strength had been beaten from his body, tears were all Mycale had left to beg with; but he refused to let them fall. He lost skin from two of his fingers before the torture stopped.

Fearing something was broken, he could hardly stand upright. The men left his cube, consulted with the man and the woman behind the desk, and walked into the girl's cube. Mycale didn't know the girl's name; but he often spotted her in the soundless room, struggling four beds away from him.

Although his abuse was harsh, he was more afraid of watching the girl's torture. He found watching the other kids suffer was far worse than his own agony, as he had learned how to use rage and anger to cushion his pain. It was a secret he was sure the man and the woman didn't know, or they would have tried other tactics on him. He watched the girl back into a corner and fold her body into a tight ball, as the men made their approach.

The girl was slammed, face down, on a table facing him. At the sight of the men unbuttoning their pants and taking off the girl's gown, Mycale screamed, like a child gone mad. The men deliberately looked at him as they pulled at the girl's gown. Shaking his head, tears slid down his cheeks for the very first time. He pushed his voice box to the max, but only cracked words and hoarse cries made it from his mouth.

"No. Sack it la'. You can't do that. Please!"

The men controlled the girl's body as she lay helpless. With only her eyes, she begged Mycale for help she knew he could not give.

Although Mycale didn't fully understand sex, his father and mother had given him the birds-and-the-bees talk. He knew enough to know the men were about to do the worse thing an adult could do to a child. Turning away from the horrific scene in front of him, he slumped to the floor and hid his face behind his trembling hands and knees.

Seeing what the men were about to do to the girl broke him so severely, he couldn't control his raging thoughts. He slapped at his head, fighting himself to ward off the images he saw.

He spoke softly, to himself, "Az if. They blaggin' me 'ead. It's not real. It can't be real."

Hearing the girl's muffled cries tore a hole in his heart. Exhausted, beaten, and broken, Mycale couldn't stomach the thought of what was about to happen. If the plan was to drive him mad, it succeeded.

Continuing to slap himself about the head and face, Mycale let the same spark of rage that help him melt the glass spill over his body. He hardly knew what rage was, but he knew he hated these people. He wanted to hurt them, even kill them. The sight of the girl about to be raped became his undoing.

Standing, he pushed at the interior of his wall, angrily. He was sure he was the only one aware of the heat radiating from his body. One more angry push at the glass made it shatter, as if he had caused an explosion. Glass rained down on him, but he didn't give it a second thought.

The shock of Mycale's display made the man and the woman dive behind their desk. His action stopped the men's assault on the girl. Mycale walked through what was left of his cube and pushed at the outside of the girl's cube. This time, a large portion of the glass melted away as if it were plastic.

The men ran towards Mycale; but every time they reached for him, they jumped away as if being burned by fire. Mycale backed the men into a corner.

Holding them there, he yelled back to the girl, "Run! Find a way out and get help."

The man and the woman were either gone from behind the desk or still hiding. Turning, Mycale exited the cube and noticed various parts of the room had caught fire. It was probably why the man and the woman remained hidden.

Mycale didn't care about the big men chasing him. The building had started to burn and his only concern was helping the other children. Just inside the doorway, Mycale quickly stared around the soundless room. The men could have caught him, but they stopped at the door's entrance. After taking a moment to stare at him, both men threw up their hands and ran the other way.

Looking down, Mycale realized that he held what turned the men around. Staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed, his hands emitted blue and orange flames. Amazingly, he wasn't burned. This was the ability his captors were forcing him to show. The man and the woman had been right all along. He had an ability.

Every eye in the room landed on him, but Mycale didn't have time to explain. Using his hands, he burned away restraints and pointed the kids towards the exit. The fire grew as each of the freed children ran out the door.

By the time Mycale set the last boy free, the sound returned and the atmosphere was alive with billowing smoke and dancing flames. Although his once flaming hands were now out, he was reluctant to touch the boy's skin. He instructed the boy to hold firmly to the tail of his gown as he led the way from the room. Before exiting, Mycale's eyes brushed over Ivan's empty bed.

As he and the boy neared the final door to freedom, he glanced back—periodically—to see if they were being chased by bad guys—or fire. He pushed and banged against the door, repeatedly. Once opened, the fresh cool air breathed new life into his body. The bright sunshine was a welcomed treasure.

The other boy fell as tears streamed down his face. Mycale didn't know if he cried because he was in pain or because he was finally free. Helping the boy up, they ran through a dirty, deserted alley. Seeing the other children waiting and waving from afar kept them moving. The street was at least three blocks away; far enough that they would all be safe from the fire.

Only when they reached the other kids did Mycale look back at the building. Smoke and fire wafted from one side, probably the area where they had been bedded down. Nestled among old abandoned warehouses, the building they had exited was at least five levels high with most of the windows missing from the higher levels.

It took a moment for the cold winds of December to register, but the chill was nothing compared to what they had all suffered. Guilt filled Mycale as he grew certain that he'd caused the fire. He wondered where their captors had gone. Scanning their surroundings, he hoped the man and the woman or the big guys didn't show up and recapture them.

Hearing fire engines in the distance let him know they were probably going to be safe.

A stray memory flashed through Mycale's brain. He thought of Ivan.

What if he is still in the building, hiding?

Turning, he started towards the building as the others attempted to stop him.

As he ran, he shouted over his shoulder, "Ivan may still be in there. I have to help him."

Running back to the building was scary, but the idea of Ivan being inside was more frightening. Mycale entered the building as smoke flowed past his face, like lingering harpies with desperate and deadly intent.

He reminded himself, "Be a hard man."

Coughing into the back of his hand, he walked further into the now dark building on shaky legs. Creaking and groaning sounds kept him on edge as every brush of the wall made him jump or spin fast. He shouted Ivan's name repeatedly, hoping and praying the boy would answer.

"Ivan! Ivan! Can you hear me? You don't have to hide anymore."

When he entered the soundless room, it was so filled with fire he immediately stumbled back. A crashing sound sent him running back down the dark hall. Swallowing his fear, a horrific sight seized his body. Something had fallen into the second hall, blocking the only exit. Fiery debris continued to fall from the ceiling.

End of Sparks Excerpt

AUTHOR THANK-YOU

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