

“Posts, check in,” Roman ordered. There was a keen sense of satisfaction knowing he never needed to raise his voice over a low rumble to anyone on his crews. His commands were expected, and the trained responses were immediate. The silence of the receiver in his ear ended with the first replies reaching him.

“Section one, clear.”

“Post nine, clear.”

He listened for several seconds until, one by one, all the guards and lookouts cleared through his earpiece.

“Ten-four. All units, code yellow. Out,” was his neutral response.

Roman watched the constantly undulating throng in the large common room of the mansion with a roving gaze. People moved in slow surges of conversation around him. His stride was slow and purposeful as he moved along the wall, his attention riveted on the smallest detail. He was not a guest.

He owned the private security and defense company employed by Mr. Allen Cassel, and he oversaw his personal and business assets. He was one client Roman took personal care of, and had for a few years. Mr. Cassel had worked from being a southern Florida nobody to a billionaire, and Roman was in charge of the evening’s event. The party Mr. Cassel was hosting was for his youngest child, Cindy, who had recently turned eighteen.

There was so much money in the room that if Roman took a deep breath, he could almost smell the ink on the printed bills. Even a single evening gown, like the light green strapless number on the blonde who just paraded by, would probably pay the monthly mortgage on his ranch in Wyoming. Possibly even twice.

He ignored the sultry, hooded stare she shot him from heavily-lashed baby blues as she strolled by. He wasn’t interested, wasn’t looking. He was working.

There was silence in his ear as he continued to pace through the crowd. It was Mr. Cassel’s ‘A’ list of elite and influential people: from the Governor of Florida, to representatives of some of the most renowned businesses in the country, Mr. Cassel had his fingers in a lot of pies. That was only the first reason he was wealthy as sin. A couple more were good old fashioned luck, and of course, careful planning.

Roman knew about most of Mr. Cassel’s business dealings. The Cassel name stretched from continent to continent, and had earned a reputation for quality in rare gems. He had traveled with Mr. Cassel as his bodyguard to South America to research imports, and to Africa to tour diamond mines. He had been working personally for Mr. Cassel for over four years and a certain level of trust had developed between them. Roman had saved Mr. Cassel’s life twice already, once during one of those mining excursions, which also happened to be scheduled at the same time as a revolutionary uprising. There’s a lot to be said for a life when it’s saved, Roman thought. Mr. Cassel’s gratitude had been very charitable.

Even though Roman worked the same as anyone in his company, he wasn’t completely dependent on the generosity of his most affluent account, but it didn’t hurt any, either. His own private bodyguard and security defense company was in high demand up and down the east coast, but he didn’t want to lose his own edge.

He worked by the same standards as his next manager. Roman never wanted to forget how hard it was on this side of the fence. He never wanted to be the one to send a man on an assignment he couldn't handle.

Thirty minutes later, he'd walked half the front room's perimeter and did another ground check. He never said a word to the guests, never made eye contact. He flatly ignored the blatant yearning in a few feminine eyes. The flow of champagne and the constant hum of conversation mixed and blended with the orchestral music of the evening. It was second nature to tune it all out, to remain focused.

As he faced one of the carpeted halls into the interior of the house, his gaze locked on a tall woman walking from the other end of the room. She had dark hair swept back in a casual wave and was wearing a subdued yellow gown. She nodded and smiled to a few others as she traveled along, her gaze skimming over his as their eyes met, then flickered on passed him in disinterest. He saw no date, no escort, and no ring either. He didn't recognize her, but that wasn't unusual. He didn't know many of the guests by face or by name, but he was responsible for everyone's welfare as well as the contents of the home while they were in attendance. He dismissed the tall woman as nothing more than a passing interest, and continued on his course.

Roman's attention carried across the crowd again. There were handshakes, laughter, smiles. Deals being made, and people being convinced. Parties like this were never merely for rubbing elbows, catching up with the Joneses, or portfolio discussion. This was where the kernels of corporate takeovers sprouted, where liaisons started. Morals were left at the door, and for many, the entire evening would be a lie beyond the charade of social camaraderie.

West Palm Beach was the upper crust of the world to many of the guests. Roman, however, was unaffected by the jewelry, the expensive designer gowns and tailored suits, or the money spent for the subtler vanity of personal looks. Houses like Mr. Cassel's could be as large as ten to fifteen thousand square feet and several floors, with the requisite staff and servants to keep it pristine and running smoothly. It took money, a lot of it, to keep it that way.

There was the detailed and artistic gardening of the palm trees and bougainvillea on the manicured lawns and garden. The buffed Italian marble and refined chrome and brass gleamed with care, and the rich leathers and silken fabrics of the inside more than hinted at class and money. West Palm Beach was a fairytale land to those who could only dream of the amount of money it took to keep it going for one day. Yet, all of that money meant nothing to Roman. He didn't work longer than normal hours because he needed to. He worked, ran a company, and supervised with an iron fist, because he could.

He supported over two thousand hard working people with his company. The men and women who worked for him had families, children, and mortgages. He used his training, his knowledge and skills, to keep those men and women and their families, and himself, financially sound. Not everyone was blessed with wealth and riches, himself included. But he didn't hate the people who were. They paid his employees.

When his sweeping vision rolled over the sea of heads once more, he unintentionally landed right on the tall brunette. She had to be six foot tall in

heels, he mused to himself, watching how she seemed to glide a touch taller than the rest of the crowd. His eyes narrowed a fraction at a time as he continued to watch her easy striding walk. There was a simple beauty about her. She still appeared to be alone. Her smiles were warm and easy as she slipped by men and women, without real hesitation or intent to converse. She looked like she belonged there as she gracefully moved among the guests and serving people, without being draped in money and jewels. Yet there was something that just didn't feel right about her presence. His stomach started to burn. She was trouble. He knew it as well as he knew his own brother's face.

Eight minutes later, she proved him right. He watched her with surprise as she slipped down a dimly lit hallway with a stealthy backward glance at the crowd, which almost completely devoured her in the press of bodies. A hallway that had been partially blocked from the front of the home with a tall, flowing plant. He knew it led straight to the main center of the house.

"Ground to post three, I have a stray," he said even as he stalked in the direction she had disappeared.

"Ten-four. On my way."

Roman wasn't worried about leaving his own post as he took off after his prey. Steven knew what to do to keep an eye on the commons and keep his own post watched, a cordoned-off upper floor staircase that was definitely off-limits to traveling curiosity.

His path was slow and hindered with the mass of party attending guests. As he squeezed by elbows and gathered couples, it felt to him that everyone was out to impede his progress.

After several agonizing and slow moving moments, he reached the hall entrance and peered down its length. When he did, she wasn't there, which only added to his frustration. The hall bordered on dark with the wall sconces turned down to discourage interest. Rich carpet tones blended with the artistic paintings were hung in precise balanced locations along the wall. He cursed under his breath, knowing the guest restrooms for the evening were not down here. She had no reason to be going in this direction. No good reason, he allowed.

The hallway continued into one of the open living rooms of the mansion. There weren't many places for her to hide in the hallway. The possibilities were nearly endless once she reached the other end. The burn in his stomach grew.

He uncurled his fist, knuckles popping loudly as he left the low rumbled sounds of the party behind him. He glared at the empty length of the hallway. This was not a night for petty burglary. Not on his watch. His steps were slow, his breathing even, as a hint of a scent hit him. He bared his teeth, his frustration building. It wasn't a scent of perfume, or flowered water. It was the scent of a woman. The pure scent of feminine allure. It drove him forward.

He followed it, her particular scented trail the only thing he had to work with in the dimness surrounding him. He paused for a brief second at an oak door, his entire body tensed, anticipating, but he knew she wasn't in that particular office. He kept moving, his eyes scanning the depth of the hallway until he reached the next living space. Again, it was empty. Where the hell did she go? His thick brows pulled together in irritation. Then he heard it. The near silent snick of a door closing.

He scanned the room in all directions, trying to place the faint sound. Three more hallways spread from this room along with a wide sweeping staircase. He trusted his instincts again. Taking a deep breath and finding the essence of her scent on his senses, he turned without hesitation toward the hallway farthest to his right, his body preparing for the coming confrontation. He was getting closer. And angrier. She had headed straight for the private offices of the rest of the family. His lips pulled up into a snarl when her trailing feminine allure stopped at Monica's office door, Mr. Cassel's daughter-in-law.

He paused at the door and listened, his hand poised over the knob for several seconds. He twisted carefully, turning the knob with absolute silence. His heart rate was elevated to a few beats over normal, which was good. He loved the chase, but he refused to be taken in by a potential burglar, female or not.

He swung the door in slowly and was met with an empty room. He stared in stunned disbelief. He knew she'd come in here, he was positive of it. Yet, all he found was a single glowing desktop lamp, a low light illuminating only a few feet of space, empty space. He shut the door when he walked into the office, locking it as a precaution.

Monica Cassel's office was an elegant example of money and taste, a decorator's taste to be sure, but this was lost on him as he walked the room. His lips lifted in an infuriated snarl again. He knew she had come in here! Her scent was still a lingering reminder, and all the proof he needed. Where the hell did she go, he demanded of no one but himself.

The plush pile carpeting quieted his step as he paced the wall cautiously, pulling the chair from behind the desk. He slid it back when he found nothing but space. There was no restroom, not even a small closet for this office. He began to wonder if he had missed the trail completely and was searching fruitlessly.

He felt the brisk draft walking around the end of the desk. Shaking his head once, he had to accept grudgingly he'd been outsmarted. She'd slipped out a ground-floor window, and he had no idea if she'd stolen a thing or not. It was apparent she wasn't there now, and that only added insult to injury. She'd managed to elude him, a next-to-never occurrence in his book. He shut the window, cursing roundly if quietly, wondering how a woman of her stature could have slipped right by everyone, in an evening gown no less. He was not going to enjoy making his report to Mr. Cassel about the activities of the evening.

His hand rested on the locked door and he breathed deep, only once, in anger. His entire body, every muscle he had, locked as her scent overwhelmed him. A heady feminine spice filled his lungs and slammed into the recesses of his skull.

It awakened more than the hunger of the hunt, the scent raked nerve endings, striking his primal instincts as well. Her fragrance was like no other and he felt his lips lift in a silent snarl of recognition, but he ignored it for the obvious. She was still in the room. Somehow, somehow, she was there. Of course! The runaway cabinet. He didn't know where it was, but apparently his quarry did. A low sound vibrated through his chest. An echo of victory. His dark eyes narrowed in anticipation of the outcome, one he was looking forward to more and more now that he knew with a certainty he hadn't been bested. He swallowed his triumphant grin as he opened the door and walked out.

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Delilah released a pent up breath. *Shit, that was too close.* She stepped from behind the cabinet. Thank you Cindy, she thought, with a large amount of gratefulness attached to it. Obviously Frankenstein's son didn't know of it or he'd have looked closer, and the window had been a beautiful decoy. It had distracted her pursuer enough to believe she was gone. That was good enough for her.

She closed the hatch on the cabinet door with a quiet push and moved into the room. No sense in drawing more attention to herself. She had a job to do, and not a limitless amount of time to do it and get out of the house. She pulled a small packet from between her breasts, flipping open the creased envelope lip with a short clipped nail. She had been thrilled when Cindy told her Monica preferred the ornate antique French style of phone; the cover popped off the microphone end with ease. She inserted the bug discreetly, then replaced the cover with a sharp snap. She cringed when it echoed in the office, waiting a breathless second to see if she would be discovered. When it looked like she was still safe, she attached the transmitter link and returned the phone to the desk in its original position.

She did a cursory search of the desk and of the files in the open drawers, optimistically hoping to stumble onto something, but instinctively she knew better. Monica wouldn't do her conniving from here. She was smarter than that. Everything Delilah had already found out about her left no doubt to the woman's character.

Monica was the kind of person Delilah loved to take down a peg. Rich, beautiful, and a self-righteous, self-absorbed pain in the ass. How she could cheat on Brad Cassel left Delilah absolutely confounded. Brad was a sweetheart. A caring, giving man who adored his wife, unfortunately blindly, as she'd discovered in the months she'd been following the unfaithful woman.

Even Cindy, his sister who had hired her those many months ago, could see it. Which was why Delilah was there tonight. Cindy believed Monica was up to something dirtier than her usual games, so she'd hired Delilah to get what Brad refused to listen to—proof. And Delilah was good at getting it.

She'd been doing undercover and investigative work for several years. She never got tired of the thrill, getting in and getting out. She'd just finished giving her aid on a case with the DEA, letting her alias have all the notoriety. No one who knew of her, knew her. She'd worked long and hard to keep it that way. Her father had been the type of teacher schools never had, instructing her in the things that weren't written in manuals and definitely weren't considered procedurally correct.

She peeked out the curtains once, deciding it was time to rejoin the party, hopefully for no longer than enough to stride right out the front door. She inched the door open, listening for any activity in that end of the house. Except she found Frankenstein's son leaning against the wall with his arms and legs crossed like he'd merely been waiting for his friend to join him. Or the local party crasher.

"Damn!" It slipped out even as she smoothed her features into an impenetrable mask.

"Come on," he ordered as he grabbed her arm, leading her right back into the room. "What did you take?"

She gave him a blank stare. Silence was definitely a good vow to take in this situation. His hold tightened as her silence lengthened. She fought the impulse to fight free. She would walk away this time.

“Don’t make me repeat it.”

She glared at him in answer.

“I can search you,” he warned, his expression as cold and unyielding as his tone.

His ebony eyes glittered with a banked anger when she shrugged. He tossed her arms out without further warning and patted her down. God, he has huge hands. He curved over her shoulders and slid down her front, pressing beneath her breasts into her ribs. She assumed he was searching for bands or tape, or maybe a paper clip as close as he was getting. Her thigh muscles tightened and she bit off the hissed curse of air when his hands slid dangerously high between her legs. She wanted to scream at him—*it’s an evening gown, not a flight suit!*

He spun her and repeated the intimate lesson on how to cop a feel while pretending to do a patdown.

She gritted her teeth when he took his time around her waist and rear. Men!

“All right, what were you doing in here?” he demanded when he came up empty.

She brandished an indifferent look as she faced him again.

“Look, unless you want to be arrested for trespassing, you better start talking,” he told her.

She lifted a sculpted black brow. Cool. Challenging.

His gaze narrowed at her again and she had to fight to keep her lips still. He wasn’t used to being ignored. Good! Let him stew. She could get out of jail. She didn’t take anything, and it would be hard to make any charges stick with a party going on and at least a hundred and fifty guests parading inside likepeacocks at the zoo.

His gaze intensified as he crossed his arms and stared back at her. Only their breathing broke the quiet stretching between them.

Nothing in his expression changed when he suddenly started speaking again. “Ground, go.”

She listened with a sharp ear. Someone forgot to do his check. What a shame, she silently mocked him. His wide chest rose and fell before her as he continued talking. “Ten-four. I’ve located the stray. Negative, questioning. I’ll report to base when she’s escorted off property. Out.”

He returned her stare, his steely black gaze hardly blinking as he towered over her. In heels she was six-one, and he was looking down at her.

“Not scared at all, are you?” he taunted softly.

She restrained the flip remark that bounced to her tongue. It was too soon to start giving him that much hell.

“You’ll have to talk eventually, when the police book you,” he pointed out. His gaze narrowed again when her only reaction was to sigh, absolutely unconcerned. The tension in his frame relaxed a little, attempting tact since he wasn’t getting anywhere. “All right, let’s do this. I’ll give you full immunity—a get out of jail free card—if you tell me what you were doing in here.”

She stared at him for a full heartbeat, then blinked. Who the hell did he think he was kidding? She almost choked on the bubble of laughter that sprang up. He had to be kidding. Had to be.

“My God, a reaction. So you aren’t made of stone,” he said, a low vibrating tone of voice she knew was supposed to be intimidating. “Look, either way you’re done for the night. Either tell me now, or tell the police in fifteen. I don’t care.”

Something about his voice and the relaxed stance of his posture told her this was her chance. It was as good as any other to get out unscathed.

“I can’t. Confidentiality. And you need to work on your lying.”

His dark eyes widened a fraction as he stared at her. “You can’t?”

She nodded. “But I wasn’t stealing. I’ll leave now.” She started to walk around him but his hand shot out and captured her again.

“What were you doing in here?” he growled low.

She gave him an icy stare. “Don’t back out on your word. I told you, and now I’m leaving.”

“Sorry, honey. That’s not gonna fly,” he told her with a silken threat right underneath the timbre of his voice. “All you told me was what you claim you weren’t doing. That’s not good enough.”

She counted to three and then took a deep breath, silently sorry she was going to have to sack the poor guy. Even as the apology filtered through her thoughts, she twisted and jerked his balance off, centering hers to throw him over her shoulder. He landed with a smacking thud, followed by a deep, gusted groan.

“I said, yes I am,” she told him, sauntering out of the room, calmly closing the door on his shocked expression. She had no idea if she would even make it out the front door. Surprisingly, even though she felt eyes on her, no one blocked her escape. She sighed, a heavy grateful breath for nerves of steel as she left the valet lot where her Mercedes Roadster was parked.

She’d walked out, right out of his hands. Mission accomplished. She hoped in the next few days it

was worth it. Regardless of how little she’d let him bother her, Frankenstein’s son was a handful. She

drove with the image of him flat on his back, his dark eyes stunned wide and sent him another apology.

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Roman lay in a furious rage, his palms opening and closing as he fought for gulps of air, his lungs burning. She’d flipped him! The damn woman had flipped him! He closed his eyes, his chest hurting with his air supply depleted. His ass and back were feeling it too. He sucked in lungfuls as the absurdity of the encounter finally hit him, and then he started to laugh. She’d tossed him!

He managed to issue one order without sounding like he’d just run the Miami Marathon. “Ground to area five. Get the license plates of the Amazon in yellow.”

“Sir?”

“Just do it,” he repeated as he levered himself to his feet again.

He couldn’t remember the last time someone had bested him, and he knew a woman never had. He brushed himself off, his hands falling around the edge of his 9mm. She’d been a cool customer, and except for the initial surprise of finding

him right outside the door, she'd showed very little reaction. An ice maiden. Cold and emotionless.

He checked over the room again as he continued to replay their meeting, and wondered how she'd known about the cabinet when it was a family secret. He accepted he had given her the opportunity to get out and that was his mistake, but he was not going to regret his pat-down. The woman had a body. Solid, firm without being over done. Very shapely. And if the slit in the back of her skirt confirmed what he'd found during his pat-down, she had legs to kill.

After securing the room, he strode back down the hall to rejoin the party when he was frozen in midstride by the clamoring of his own senses. He inhaled once, finding her lingering feminine scent and felt the reaction he'd been too focused before to acknowledge.

Her heat, her essence filled his head, hammers slamming into his skull, demanding he pay attention. His fingers curled deeply, his blunt nails scraping against his palms as he recalled exactly how she had felt beneath his touch. Sculpted curves, a firm shape, long legs, soft skin. Hair as dark as a raven's wing and azure blue eyes. Unflinching cool blue eyes. He felt his blood begin to heat, to hum with a need he hadn't expected, nor the urgency that rose with it. He forcefully fought it off before he had real problems.

He muttered as he shook his head in denial. That ice maiden was in no way his type. And whatever she had been up to in Monica's office, he was positive it was no good. Yet even as the sultry scent of her tickled his senses and roamed unchecked through his system, he remembered the way she'd stood before him, unafraid and challenging, and he had to wonder who the woman was who didn't quake in fear before Roman Aiza.

Men stronger than she had cowered, not that he lorded the fact over anyone, but he knew he could instill fear with a calculated, cold stare or a soft snarl. Yet the ice maiden hadn't even shivered. She'd met him head on. She was an enigma, a feminine puzzle who was gathering momentum with every unanswered question.

He forced his stride to carry him on again. No matter what or who she was, after finding himself staring at the ceiling as those legs of hers carried her away, she had still been in an office that wasn't hers, and he had absolutely no answer as to why.

He ground his teeth together in frustration as he focused on that. It helped to clear his head as very little could.

"Area five to Ground."

"Ground, go."

"Amazon tracked, sir."

"Ten-four. Later," he answered the unspoken question. "Out."