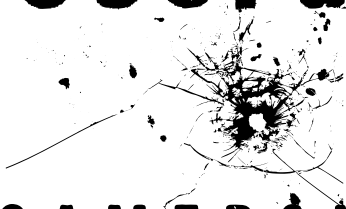




Assassins: Discord

ERICA CAMERON

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Assassins: Discord

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ABOUT **Assassins: Discord**



Kindra's moral compass has never pointed north, but that's what happens when you're raised as an assassin and a thief. At sixteen, she's fantastic with a blade, an expert at slipping through the world unnoticed, and trapped in a life she didn't choose. But nothing in her training prepares her for what happens when her father misses a target.

In the week-long aftermath, Kindra breaks rank for the first time in her life. She steals documents, starts questioning who their client is and why the target needs to die, botches a second hit on her father's target, and is nearly killed. And that's before she's kidnapped by a green-eyed stranger connected to a part of her childhood she'd almost forgotten.

Kindra has to decide who to trust and which side of the battle to fight for. She has to do it fast and she has to be right, because the wrong choice will kill her just when she's finally found something worth living for.

*For Michael and Danielle, who started me
on this particular story,
and for Sarah, who gave my characters a home when
I wasn't sure how to find them one.*

It is not true that good can only follow from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true.

—Max Weber

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Chapter One

0531 : TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 16



For the first time since she was ten, Kindra almost dropped her knife.

Breath catching in her throat, she stared at her hand and willed herself to calm the hell down. Sure, this had been an effing weird week, but what she had to do here today wasn't anything new. She knew the drill. Get in, get done, get out, get gone.

The slip had happened in less than a blink, her fingers sliding on the ribbed handle of the blade. Anyone skilled with knives would've noticed the near-miss. And there was no reason, not in anything Atropos held holy, for Kindra to have almost dropped the knife.

The guy strapped to the chair in front of her wasn't skilled. Even if he had been, Kindra was pretty sure Mr. Bernard Gasper had other things on his mind right now. Like figuring out how to *not* die in the next sixty seconds.

Tightening her grip, Kindra strode forward. The chill crept through her thin gloves, numbing her fingers, but that was the downside of abandoned warehouses in winter—people noticed if you turned on the heat. She ignored the biting air, the smell of old fish, and the annoyingly loud creaks the roof made as the wind battered it. Instead, she concentrated on her assignment. Her target. The one her father had missed.

Kindra refused to acknowledge that tonight, for the first time in her life, her hands were shaking. She refused to even consider the possibility that her father's affliction had hit her.

There was, however, another possible cause that she couldn't discount: Bernard shouldn't be here. It was possible that Kindra's hands were shaking because she *shouldn't* kill him. Because doing this would permanently damn her already bloodstained soul to Hades.

She cataloged the sprinkling of gray in his otherwise dark-brown hair, and the sheen of sweat on his copper skin—sweat, in a room that couldn't be above thirty degrees, because he was still struggling.

Bernard Gasper fought the thin ties binding him to the chair bolted to the floor. The gag kept him mostly quiet, but he battled his bonds so fiercely that they were cutting into his skin. Blood dripped off his wrist and into small puddles on the stained concrete.

Kindra eyed the growing patches of evidence with distaste. Guns had never been her favorite weapon, but there was definitely something to be said for death by sniper rifle: a lot less cleanup for the assassins.

The gag would have to go, because she needed information, but for a moment she stared into his dark eyes. There was terror there, but he also seemed to be pleading for her to listen. To hear him. But he didn't want to *talk*, he wanted to *beg*. For his life and for the protection of his cause.

And because this job had, for the first time in her life, given her a reason to think maybe disobedience would be worth the risk, she was actually contemplating listening.

Oh, bad idea.

Ripping the gag out but holding the knife to his throat—hoping it'd be just enough of a threat to keep him from

screaming—Kindra watched Bernard suck in air and try to speak.

“If I—I tell you what I know, they’ll kill you too,” he wheezed, his voice so raw Kindra could barely make out the words.

“They could *try*.” Kindra pressed her knife harder. *Whoever “they” are.*

Bernard opened his mouth—to argue? To plead? To scream?

The door blew off its hinges. Brutal heat filled the once-freezing warehouse. Debris flew across the room, and Kindra wasn’t quick enough to dodge it. Not all of it. Something heavy slammed into her shoulder, and her head cracked against the cement floor. The air carried a blast of burning clay.

Shit. Was that C-4? The ringing in her ears and the darkness encroaching on the edges of her vision swamped her thoughts. She fought against the dizziness, trying to push it back. It took far longer than she liked to open her eyes.

When her eyes focused, a familiar face hovered above hers. One that shouldn’t have been anywhere near here.

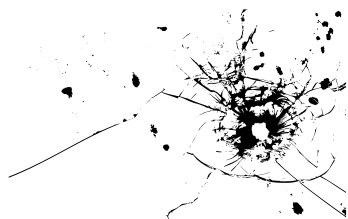
“Baby, we’ve really got to stop meeting like this,” said a girl with dyed-black hair—her brown roots peeking through—and teasing moss-green eyes. A familiar endearment on the wrong tongue, and familiar eyes in the wrong face.

Finally, the aha moment she’d been waiting for but never thought she’d get.

He was in disguise.

It was her last coherent thought before everything went black.

One Week Earlier



Chapter Two

1812 : TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 9



“Can I be the one *not* in the van next time?” Seraphina’s voice sounded even drier than usual over the open comm line.

Kindra shifted on the wooden bench, turned a page of the college-level finance textbook on her lap, and tilted her head as though cracking her neck. Scanning the courtyard between two office towers, she wondered how long the team would stay near Manhattan after the job.

Maybe if everything goes well, they’ll actually let me play tourist this time.

Maybe, but probably not. Downtime wasn’t something the Westons saw much of. There were always places to go and people to kill.

“Concentrate, or you’ll be kept on surveillance for a solid year,” Odira said.

Not like Sera would ever lose focus on a mission. The girl was more clearheaded in a crisis than any of them. Even at fifteen.

“I can bitch and work at the same time, Mother,” Seraphina shot back. “Multitasking is a wonderful thing.”

Kindra tried not to react to the conversation playing through the tiny comm in her ear, not even to roll her eyes

at her sister's complaints. Instead, she cataloged the eleven people in the courtyard—two tourists poring over a map, one nanny with two toddler charges, five men in suits using a trash can as an ashtray, and one girl shooting pictures of the courtyard's statues with an old-fashioned Nikon, the patch on her camera bag declaring in neon-green letters, *Nerd? I prefer intellectual badass*. None of them registered as a threat.

Odira grunted. "I'm not joking, Sera. If—"

"ETA three minutes," Amett cut in.

I should've stolen an art book instead, Kindra thought when she tried to read a paragraph of the text-filled pages spread across her lap. Finance was boring even when she was only pretending to study it. Letting her eyes wander, she watched the two toddlers chase each other in circles and shriek with laughter. Then Amett mumbled something over the comm, pulling her attention back to the mission.

"Repeat?" Odira requested.

"Nothing." He cleared his throat, and Kindra heard the shifting of cloth, probably as he settled into position. She glanced up at the office building across the street.

No. Stop. Her part of the job was down here. Watching for cops. For danger. For anything that might interfere with the successful completion of the job.

She looked away before her eyes locked on the cracked-open window on the fifth floor or spotted the glint of her father's customized L115A3 AWM sniper rifle. Despite visual obstruction from the trees, the shot was basically seventy feet of open space. Not exactly a challenge for her father.

The client didn't want silent or secret or subtle. They wanted untraceable, but loud and public. That was fine.

The Westons could do showmanship just as well as they could do invisible, but . . .

Her eyes found the kids again. Good. The nanny was leading them out of the courtyard. Orders from the client for a clean hit should keep the collateral damage at zero, but accidents happened. It'd be better if they were gone before the strike.

"ETA two minutes," Odira said.

Odira had hooked in to the internal security system of Gasper Exports last week and had been using it to track Bernard Gasper's daily schedule. To the minute. Now it was helping Sera choreograph his death.

"No change inside." Seraphina moved heavily enough that the squeak of her chair came through the comm. "He's taking the information—papers; still no flash drive seen—out of the safe. The packet is in the inside pocket of his overcoat. Multiple pages."

Oh, thank Atropos, he's taking it all with him. Kindra had *not* wanted to sneak into the building to steal his physical backups of the files he'd received several days ago.

"Stall him ten paces west of the trash can on the east side of the square. We'll go for phase two after retrieval," Odira said. "In and out. I don't want you within fifty feet of him when the bullet hits."

Sera cleared her throat. "Keys and wallet are in his right coat pocket. Sixty seconds and counting. He's following his normal route. Looks stressed. Won't be for much longer though."

She laughed. No one joined her, but no one told her to stop, either.

"He's in the elevator. Alone. Aaaaand . . ." A few quick snaps and clicks, and then Sera laughed again. "Ha! Nope! No elevator for you, bitches. Express service for Mr. Gasper."

“You messed with the elevator?” Odira’s tone barely changed, but Kindra had practically made an art out of deciphering her moods. There was definitely a threat running through her words now. “Unnecessary, Seraphina. If the tamper is found, I’m feeding you to Atropos.”

And that would be different from every other day how exactly? Kindra kept her grumbling to herself.

Sera wasn’t so circumspect. “Leave the Fates out of this. They’ve got better things to do. We don’t want him exiting the building with a crowd, do we? Besides, no one finds my hacks.”

“Don’t get cocky.” *Like your brother was*, Odira left unspoken.

There was a moment of silence, a breath everyone should’ve taken but didn’t.

“Ten seconds to exit.” Sera sounded smooth and clipped now. Professional.

This was always the interesting part for Kindra: getting close enough to the targets to look into their eyes and try to guess what they’d done that was heinous enough to end up on someone’s hit list. Closets weren’t big enough to hold the skeletons lurking in the eyes of any mark Kindra had ever targeted; each of them had needed catacombs.

Standing, she adjusted her scarf to cover the bottom half of her face. The recent snow had melted, but it was still effing cold. It didn’t hurt that the bright-red scarf distracted people from her actual features.

Holding the book open in front of her, Kindra pretended to read as she crossed the courtyard, but her attention was on her surroundings. Bernard exited the building when she was halfway across. He stopped at the top of the stairs to glance at his watch. His yellow tie was crooked, he was frowning,

and it might have been her imagination, but his hair seemed grayer than it had a few days ago. He looked harried; when he tried to smile at someone he passed, the lines around his mouth appeared noticeably deeper. For a moment, Kindra wondered why.

She shook the moment off fast. Sera was right. It wouldn't matter for long.

Closing in, Kindra gauged the distance between the marker her mother had given her and Bernard's path. Adjusting her pace, Kindra timed it exactly right and—

Slam.

Her shoulder collided with Bernard's so hard he started to lose balance.

Thud.

Her heavy finance book dropped to the ground.

"Oh, hell! I'm so sorry!" Kindra draped a heavy Brooklyn accent over her words and made her eyes wide as she reached out to steady Bernard. He didn't seem to notice her hand dip inside his coat and lift the packet of papers out. "You okay?"

He smiled and nodded. "No harm done. We're in one piece." Bending down, he picked up the finance book. He never even flinched as Kindra lifted his key ring from his pocket, muffling the clinking metal against his leather wallet, and dropped them into the pocket of her coat. His smile was a little more relaxed when he straightened. "How are you doing in this class? I had to take it twice before I passed."

"Really? Well, that makes me feel better." Kindra smiled back at him, trying to guess what darkness lurked behind his calm facade. Nothing about the way Bernard reacted to the setup fit within the scope of her usual targets. The last guy she'd tried a version of this pull on had almost shot her.

This guy *couldn't* be so fundamentally different from the rest. "Sometimes it looks like everyone gets it but me."

"It may feel like it, but I promise you're not alone. Everyone else is just really good at pretending." His smile turned into a smirk. "Or they cheat."

Laughing to hide her confusion, Kindra took the book. "I better get going. Sorry again."

"Good luck," Bernard said. "It gets better after graduation."

"Thanks! I'll keep that in mind." She began to move away.

"Hold on a moment!"

Kindra's heart stalled. *Oh shit. Has he already realized his wallet is missing?* Maybe now the threat would darken his eyes.

She could run. Even if Bernard chased her, Amett could make the shot. The problem was the attention. If he died chasing her, people would remember her.

Please don't let it come to that, she prayed to Atropos as she turned and moved back to where Bernard stood, keeping the smile on her face but ready to fight her way out if she needed to. "Yeah?"

Bernard's smile *had* changed, but not in the way she expected—it was softer, not sharper. Taking her textbook and using a pencil trapped between the pages, he lightly wrote two names, one of them his. Under Bernard's name was a phone number. "I've had more than a few female interns tell me how hard it is for them to find people who take them seriously. If you need a finance-related internship, there's a friend I could call. We did our MBAs together eons ago, and he still owes me a favor. Call me when you're ready to get started, and I'll introduce you. I'm positive he'll at least give you an interview."

"Really?" Kindra couldn't keep her eyes from widening. Realizing neither a fight nor a threat was coming was like

missing a step in the dark. It threw her off-balance. It threw her out of *character*.

She scanned his face, looking for the microexpressions that would give the gesture away as a trick or a trap. It seemed honest and without condition, an offer made in the hope that it would help out another human being.

When she accepted the book and pencil back, an unfamiliar and uncomfortable amount of guilt churned in her stomach. She smiled at a man about to die. “Wow, um, thank you.”

She took a breath, swallowing the momentary—and *suicidally insane*—urge to suggest Bernard run like the Erinyes were after him, change his name, and never resurface again. It wouldn’t work. They were being watched and listened to far too closely. Kindra had no chance of sneaking him a message he’d understand in time. Warning him would mean Amett’s rifle scope focusing on a new target, and she wasn’t sacrificing herself to commit some random act of kindness.

“Well, ain’t he a sweetie,” Sera said as Kindra waved and walked toward the crowded sidewalk bordering the uptown edge of the building, moving just a bit faster than might be normal. Even for a native New Yorker.

Yeah. He was. So what did that guy do to deserve this?

She would never know. Closing her eyes, she, for the first time in her life, prayed for the soul of a mark.

May Charon’s guidance come at a price you can pay, your journey across the Acheron be swift, and Hades’s judgment be forgiving.

Odira started the countdown. “Three, two—”

Crack.

A gunshot. A bullet striking stone. A chorus of screams.

Everyone in the courtyard, including Kindra, ran. She ducked her head, covering it with her finance book, and bolted for the street.

“What the— Amett! You fucking *missed?*” Odira screamed loud enough for Kindra to hear over the racket, but it took a second for the words to sink in. Her steps slowed, and she looked back.

Missed? Amett Weston didn’t miss. He’d never missed an actual target. Especially not one as beautifully lined up as this. But it had to be true. The screams of the crowd definitely didn’t have the tenor they usually did when someone’s brains created an impressionist painting on stone.

Another shot cracked through the air. Kindra’s flinch wasn’t an act this time.

Odira kept cursing. The second shot hadn’t found its target either.

Kindra dove into an alcove, pretending to cower as she watched people on the sidewalk flood in both directions. No one seemed sure what had happened or which direction would be safe. Like startled herd animals, they were guided by fear and hope alone.

“Should I try for an up-close?” *Run, Bernard. Run now, because I don’t want to have to be the one who kills you.*

“Damn it!” Sera this time. “He’s back inside. Cops are already on their way.”

“Clear the hell out of there, Kindra. Now!” Odira barked out her orders in the same voice she always used when she was so pissed Kindra could practically see steam rising from her skin. “Before they block you in.”

Kindra joined the crowd rushing away from the madness in the square. The subway station was half a block away. She shoved her finance book into her mostly empty backpack,

sprinted down the stairs, swiped her MetroCard, and pushed through the turnstile. Pulling her hat lower and her scarf higher, she moved to the far end of the platform and waited. The next train was still two minutes out. She sat on the bench to avoid pacing nervously.

What had she seen in the split second she looked back, the split second after the bullet should have hit Bernard Gasper square between the eyes? Nothing. Definitely no blood. The shot had to have either nicked the side of his head or missed him entirely.

He missed. Amett Weston effing missed.



The words were still running through her mind when she dropped onto the subway car's hard plastic seat. Round and round they went, each repetition chasing the next until it too closely resembled the annoying music she'd heard at carnivals. It became a chorus of "He missed?" played to the tune of those screams. Bernard's random act of kindness acted as the bridge.

Kindra closed her eyes and stuffed her hands into the pockets of her coat, reassured—but not much—by the papers, keys, and wallet she felt there. Despite the absolute effing disaster of the last few minutes, she assumed her task was the same as it normally was—copy the stolen documents while "keeping your eyes firmly fucking off information that you do *not* need to know," and return to base.

Grinding her teeth, Kindra adjusted the papers. She'd slipped them in quickly and one hadn't quite fit, the corner catching on the pocket and refusing to move. The only way to fix it was to pull them out entirely and refold them fresh.

In the middle of trying to do just that, her gloved fingers slipped. One page nearly fluttered to the floor. She grabbed it, scanning the passengers quickly to make sure no one was paying attention. Then she made the mistake of glancing down.

She sucked in a breath so fast she almost choked.

Atropos bless.

The details of the black-and-white picture were too grainy to be sure, but the size of the bodies in relation to the car in the foreground, the building behind them with the word “school” written in Spanish, the woman on her knees bent over one of the small, bloody corpses . . .

What she was looking at wasn’t like the Westons’ jobs, isolated deaths that had been scattered across continents and years. It definitely wasn’t the elimination of someone twisted enough—or stupid enough—to get themselves caught up in something that would land them in the Westons’ sight lines.

This was a massacre. *Of children.*

She flipped the page over. On the back were two much clearer, full-color shots. One focused on the woman grieving over a girl whose once-white dress was now mostly red, her dark eyes wide and unseeing. The second showed a woman slumped over the body of a boy whose head hadn’t survived a close-range shot from a high-powered weapon.

Those really are kids. Fucking hell. Kids. Is this Bernard’s work?

It was difficult to fathom the depth of the split personality that would take. Not many people capable of ordering a schoolhouse massacre also fought for feminism in the business world, but she’d seen scarier levels of depravity in her life.

Below the picture that was now shaking in Kindra’s hand were the words *G. H.’s latest scare tactic in E. B caved to*

R. W. (R's E business partner) 2 days later, written in a barely legible scrawl. The *B* might mean Bernard, but that didn't necessarily implicate him in this bloodbath. If anything, it hinted that he caved to someone else *because* of it.

Kindra couldn't find it in her to blame him for that. The collateral damage—the ones who were in the wrong place or related to the wrong people, and the kids who hadn't yet had time to pick a side—*those* were the ones that twinged the last bits of a conscience Odira and Amett hadn't yet beaten out of her.

The train began to slow. Kindra folded the paper with the others, keeping her expression blank as she slid them back into her pocket. As though it weren't important. *Nothing to see here*, she tried to project. *Don't notice me, and I won't have to kill you.*

Odira had found a town house in the West Village for their stay—the owners spent winters in Florida or France or some place with an *F* and left the property to the care of a vacation rental service—but Kindra got off the train one stop early. She needed fresh air. And time. And a copier old enough not to keep records of everything it scanned, which was getting harder and harder to find. Luckily, all of those things were available in the blocks between this subway station and her family's temporary mansion.

She made it all the way to the street before she came within five feet of another human, but she still felt crowded. Nearly claustrophobic.

Staying near the edge of the sidewalk, she locked her hands in her jeans's pockets and away from the blade hidden in the right pocket of her coat. Keeping her hands away from her knife wouldn't stop her from reacting, but it would add one more step between instinct and bloodshed.

She kept her chin just low enough to seem as though she were watching the ground pass beneath her feet, not carefully tracking her surroundings. Within ten minutes, she'd passed twenty-five people and cataloged them in her periphery. She'd walked seven blocks, passing four buildings that could've served as short-term hideouts if she'd been on the run from the cops, and a restaurant that she was pretty sure existed solely to launder money. She noticed it all with the small corner of her mind that was always *on*, always active, but now it was almost drowned out by the merry-go-round:

Amett missed.

Is that school of dead kids why we're after Bernard?

Atropos bless it, Amett missed.

Taking a shaky breath, she tried to clear her mind as she turned toward the local library, jogging up the steps of the ornate building. It was a bastion of brick and ivory-colored stonework from a much older era, and she focused on the detailed carvings around the front door and forced the muscles in her face to relax until she could pull up something that felt like a convincing smile. Warm air hit her when she stepped through the doors, the sudden change in temperature making her shiver. The woman behind the desk in the lobby smiled in welcome.

Kindra clasped her hands in front of her face. "*Please* tell me you guys have a copier."

"Kind of." The librarian grimaced. "It's ancient, but we can usually get it to work."

"I'll take my chances." Kindra pulled the finance text out of her backpack. "I've been to three places I thought had copiers, and I'm running out of time to get this book back to my friend."

Chattering away, the librarian led Kindra to a slightly battered Xerox machine. Kindra picked a page of the finance book at random, placed it on the glass, crossed her fingers, and pretended to hold her breath. When the librarian pressed Copy, it took a minute for the machine to decide whether it wanted to work. Finally, the whole thing shuddered, and a thin beam of light began scanning the page.

The librarian grinned. "Must be your lucky day."

"Must be." Kindra forced a laugh. A few more pleasantries, and she was alone.

Moving the book to peer through the glass, Kindra spotted the mirrors installed only in pre-hard-drive copiers, but better safe than in serious shit. She popped the side panel open, looking for the serial number and manufacturing date. *Yes*. The model just missed the cutoff for the installation of hard drives.

After she closed the panel and straightened, she hesitated before pressing any of the worn buttons on the keypad. A green *1* was already lit up on the screen. It would only take a moment to switch that number, to add a second set to the copies she was about to make—and keep it for herself. A backup plan in case this job went any further south than it already had.

You might not even look at it. They can be destroyed later if you don't want to know, but you'll never get another chance to make a copy if you don't take it now.

The logic didn't do anything to soothe the nervous tension vibrating under her skin like electricity through a metal fence as she slipped the first page of the documents under the textbook and hit the faded 2. It shuddered and slowly spit out two copies.

Most of the twenty-three, double-sided pages she refused to glance at—the memory of that picture still too fresh—but one word on one page caught her eye.

Redwell.

Atropos bless it.

She didn't read the rest of the page, but she thought about the scrawled words under the picture. "*G. H.'s latest scare tactic in E.*" G. H. could be the client, and E? Considering the Spanish signs in the picture and non-European architecture and flora, it had most likely been taken in South America. Probably Echemorro, the tiny nation on the northwestern coast of the continent, or its neighbor Ecuador. Kindra couldn't begin to guess the location if it was referring to a city instead of a country. But the last part? "*B caved to R. W. (R's E business partner) 2 days later.*" R for Redwell? B might refer to Bernard, but she couldn't be sure. R. W. meant nothing with so little to work with.

The thought almost made her laugh. Little? Normally, Kindra didn't even know who they were working for. Comparatively, she was overloaded with details now.

"The more you know, the more danger you're in," her brother used to tell her. "Amett and Odira keep secrets because it makes us a little bit safer."

It was a nice lie, one she and Ryce had believed because they'd needed to, but it was definitely a lie. If safety had been what Odira was after, she never would've forced her children into this life.

Two weeks ago, though, Kindra had been in the room when Odira got a call. Her mother's side of the conversation had been terse, one-word answers, but when it ended, she'd looked at Kindra with something very close to regret in her eyes.

"Tell Amett that Redwell called," was all she'd said.

Person? Company? City? Code name? Kindra hadn't been sure. Still wasn't. Whoever or whatever they were, apparently there were a lot of dead kids tied to that name.

And that's who we're working for? Shit.

Another line added to the chorus of the damned merry-go-round of unwelcome thoughts spinning on high speed inside Kindra's head, but she knew what happened when she prodded Odira for information. There was a scar on her thigh from a night she'd asked too many questions.

If she wanted to know anything, she'd have to figure it out herself.

It took time, more than she had to spare, but Kindra managed to copy all the pages and separate them into two stacks before the librarian came back to check on her. "What do I owe you?" When the librarian gave Kindra a number, she quickly passed her twenty dollars, waved, and ran out. "Keep the change! Thanks!"

On the sidewalk, she slowed her pace to carefully fold the extra copies and slip them into a hidden pocket of her bag. In fifteen minutes, Kindra would be late for the rendezvous. From here, without running, it would take her almost exactly that long to reach the base where Odira would be waiting to claim everything Kindra had stolen. Expecting her to hand it all over and then forget.

She wasn't sure she could this time.

Redwell. Dead kids. Amett missed. Redwell. Dead kids. Effing missed?

The thoughts kept whirling, but the revolutions didn't bring any new revelations.

What's the stronger sign of the apocalypse: working for a client who kills kids, or Amett missing his target? Maybe this is what they meant when they said ignorance is bliss?

But she'd always been lacking information, and she'd *never* felt anything close to bliss. Now all she had was guilt, or something like it.

But then she'd never had a mark offer to get her an internship either.

Three doors away from their rented town house, Kindra realized she hadn't paid attention to anyone she'd passed since the library. She could only vaguely picture their faces or what they'd been wearing. The buildings had melded into one long strip of brick and stone and glass. She'd been a walking target with a pocketful of papers that might incriminate a powerful client, and a wallet belonging to a man who shouldn't have survived an assassination attempt.

"Shit." She climbed the stairs, shaking her head and yanking herself by force out of her spinning thoughts.

"Afternoon, Mackenzie!" The neighbor stood at the top of her own steps, holding the leash of her ridiculously coiffed Standard Poodle. "How was your day, dear?"

"Just lovely, thank you," Kindra said with a smile and a perfectly cultured English accent. In the eyes of the neighbors and the rental agency that managed this property, she was the eldest daughter of an English family on extended holiday.

"Stay warm, dear," the old woman said as her dog politely tugged her toward an inviting tree.

Kindra nodded and unlocked the wrought iron gate and the glass-paneled door. Both were fancy as hell, but neither was all that great at keeping people out. Not the ones who knew what they were doing, anyway. If the Westons had decided to break in and claim the place instead of faking paperwork with the agency, it wouldn't have been difficult. The security system was overpriced and useless. The owners had to be gullible as hell.

As she shut the front door, Kindra caught the familiar scent of Seraphina's bidis. She padded through the elegantly dressed rooms toward the back of the house and then leaned against the frame of the open back door. "I still say you shouldn't smoke those."

"And I still say that if I don't have at least one bad habit, I'll go crazy . . . *er* than I already am." A shaft of sunlight caught Seraphina's hair, turning the dyed highlights blonder than usual and bringing out the flecks of amber in her otherwise dark eyes. Sera smirked and blew a perfect smoke ring into the air. "Drugs make people stupid, alcohol is a waste of time, and sex is overrated. Leave me my stupid bidis. You're the only one who nags me to quit."

Anymore.

The word went unsaid, but she knew both of them heard it. Kindra was the only one who mentioned the bidis *anymore*. Their brother, Ryce, had never approved of the habit either, especially since Sera had picked it up at age ten. But he'd been dead for four years.

And his name has been verboten ever since.

"Upstairs," Odira called down. "Sera, put that thing out."

Though she looked longingly at the half-smoked bidi, Sera put it out and placed it in her pocket. No chance of accidentally leaving one behind for DNA evidence that way.

"Is this going to be as bad as I think it's going to be?"

Kindra glanced at her sister, more surprised by the thoughtful tone of her voice than by the words. "Yeah. It's probably that bad. Maybe worse."

"He *missed*," she whispered as they got closer to the third-floor office that had been turned into a surveillance suite.

Nodding but hiding her own confusion, Kindra kept pace with Sera on the last few hardwood stairs and filed into the room after her.

Amett wasn't there.

"Did you kill him?" Sera asked.

Kindra held her breath, waiting for the answer; the same question had popped into her head.

"No." Odira adjusted a setting on the additional security system they'd installed inside the house and shook her head. "I might still, though."

Kindra wanted to read sarcasm into that, but there was too strong a chance that Odira was being completely serious. "Where is he?"

"With Doc J."

In New York City area, if the Westons were bleeding, unconscious, or dying, they went to see Doc J. They didn't know his real name, and he didn't know theirs. Patients met him in an old building, in a scrupulously clean apartment, and he did what he could. For a price.

"Amett was hurt?" How had that happened? *When* had it happened?

"If he wasn't, he will be," Odira muttered. "Sit down."

We're doing the review without him? Kindra barely kept the question in her head. The only times that had ever happened were when someone was literally on the verge of death.

They always did this: reviewed any tapes or audio recordings they had of the hit, even when the job went off almost exactly to plan. For Odira, "*almost* exactly to plan" wasn't good enough.

Today they didn't have "almost" to fall back on.

With a few quick clicks, Odira pulled up their surveillance feeds from the courtyard. The official cameras had all been

adjusted slightly, making their angles wrong to catch sight of Kindra or what happened to Bernard, but Odira had installed an extra camera last week, one hooked straight into the Westons' system. A better and safer way for them to watch not only the job, but the investigation that followed.

Seemingly unconcerned with Amett's absence, Sera flopped into the second chair at the desk. Kindra placed her bag on the floor and then leaned against the wall nearby, her hands in the pockets of her coat.

According to the time stamp in the corner of the video, the image was current.

Uniformed patrol officers and besuited detectives crawled all over the square, interviewing the smoking businessmen, but there was no bloodstain. No body bag.

Because he missed.

Odira pressed a button and the video reversed. People walked backward, and then they ran backward. The cops reversed down the street, lights flashing. Crowds fled, reversing in both directions, no one sure which way safety lay. Then the courtyard was quiet and calm and moving on the right temporal track.

Kindra saw herself and the photographer. She watched herself cross the square and run into Bernard, could even pick out the moments she lifted the packet of papers from his coat and the wallet and keys from his pocket. Not because they showed up on camera—which would have been a failure of epic proportions—but because she remembered the whole encounter with brutal clarity.

"You did well enough," Odira said as Kindra saw herself stroll off camera. Practically gushing praise from Odira. "It would have been perfect if someone *else* had held up his end."

Kindra nodded, but her eyes were on the photographer. The girl wasn't taking pictures anymore. In fact, she seemed to be watching Kindra walk away. *Interesting.*

Bernard called her back and wrote the message in her textbook. There it was, the damnably honest surprise on Kindra's face when he explained what the number was for. An act of kindness from a man who didn't know he'd been marked to die.

But apparently Atropos disagreed with that plan.

The bullet hit the stone statue behind Bernard. He fell. The photographer flinched, but she didn't start screaming. And when she ran, it wasn't away from the courtyard.

She ran *toward* Bernard.

The photographer grabbed Bernard's arm and yanked him to his feet with capable efficiency. The second bullet struck the ground six inches off her shoulder. She ran to the building, dragging Bernard along.

"I hate Good Samaritans." Sera had watched the same thing as Kindra, but apparently had seen something completely different. The photographer didn't look like a Good Samaritan. She looked like a bodyguard, shielding Bernard's body with her own as they ran. Or maybe Kindra was the one interpreting it wrong. But then Sera rewound the footage and squinted at the screen. "Or maybe not. Are we sure she isn't someone we need to be worried about?"

"Not sure, no, but we'll keep her as a low priority. If she's a Good Samaritan, she doesn't matter. If she's working security for him, we'll find her again. The important thing right now is fixing the fact that our primary target is still alive." Odira's last two words were pushed through gritted teeth.

Kindra locked down her muscles to hide the shiver of fear that went through her, concentrating on the looped footage.

She watched the photographer run toward Bernard again. Maybe the girl really was one of those strange people who, when bullets started flying, saw only the people who needed help to get out of the way.

"Why didn't he take a third shot?" Kindra asked. There had been enough time for him to pull the trigger again before the photographer reached Bernard.

"He said he couldn't without missing again." Odira jammed her finger on the space bar. The picture froze just as the cops began to arrive.

For a moment, the entire room was silent. Even Sera held back her normal commentary.

Odira lifted one hand and traced the short, not-quite-invisible scar behind her right ear, a nervous habit that she rarely let herself give in to. "The client was already impatient before today. After this screwup, we're going to have a hell of a time keeping them from bringing in another team."

Another team? That was so brainless—and dangerous, and expensive—it was practically unheard of.

"Even if they do, it'll take anyone else a while to get as integrated as we already are," Sera said. "It'd be imbecilic to try to pull us back."

"What have I always told you about people who let stress and fear make their choices for them?" Odira crossed her arms.

"They end up dead," Kindra supplied. It was an outcome that was a lot more likely with a second team in the mix.

Unless they were working together from the start, two teams on one job meant exponentially more chances for something to go wrong. Or that the team who *didn't* get the job done would retaliate by reporting everything to

the cops, the Feds, and anyone else in a position to fuck up everyone's lives.

"Exactly. Because they're making *stupid* choices." A muscle in Odira's jaw twitched—never a good sign. "That's where our client is because of what happened today. Stressed and afraid."

Our client. G.H. or Redwell? Kindra's hands clenched inside the pockets of her coat, one closing around Bernard's papers and Odira's copies. She didn't look at the backpack by her feet, refused to acknowledge the copies hidden there.

It always played out the same. Odira would demand the stolen documents and the copies, and they would disappear into the system of files her parents had hidden in safe-deposit boxes all over the country—the world, maybe. The originals would go to whomever had ordered their retrieval.

Curiosity about the jobs and the targets and the *why* of it all had been almost entirely beaten out of Kindra, but in that moment, the need to know ate at her like rust in iron, slowly disintegrating her control. What had a man like Bernard, the kind of man who was willing to use a long-owed favor from an old college friend to help out a stranger, done to warrant making a public spectacle of his death?

Odira tapped her right index finger on her left biceps a few times and then nodded. "We have to move forward from here. For now, we're doing it without Amett."

"Are we leaving him behind?" Sera asked.

Kindra tensed. Sera didn't sound like she cared either way; she asked more like she wanted to make sure she was in the loop.

We wouldn't, right? We wouldn't just leave him behind because of one mistake . . . It was unthinkable. Kindra didn't *want* to believe it. They weren't just a team, they were family. Weren't they? Dysfunctional, yes, but still family.

But for a moment, Odira really looked like she was considering it. Like she wished she *could* just leave him behind as easily as an empty magazine. “No, but until we figure out what the hell happened, he won’t be in the field.”

Kindra relaxed a little. No one was being abandoned. She’d already lost Ryce to a stupid mistake. She couldn’t handle it if what was left of her family fractured further. But when she looked at the expressions on Odira’s and Sera’s faces . . .

They really don’t care one way or the other, do they?

She almost snorted at herself for the sentimentality. She knew well that Odira didn’t waste her time on things that weren’t useful.

They don’t care about Amett any more than they do about Bernard.

“Kindra, you’re going to have to take point on this one,” Odira said. “Sera will stay on tech, and I’ll keep running logistics until we know whether or not Amett can take over. We don’t have time to wait. The longer we delay, the tighter Bernard’s security is going to get and the harder this job is going to be.”

“What’s the new plan?” Kindra asked.

“Capture, kill, and dispose,” Odira said.

Sera pushed her hair back and looked up to the ceiling. “And I’m going to be stuck in the van for the fun part again.”

“You’ll be exactly where we need you to be, and you’ll shut up about it,” Odira snapped. “We’ve got enough to deal with already. Don’t make it worse.”

Though she opened her mouth, for once whatever Sera had been planning to say didn’t leave her lips. Shrugging, she grabbed a knife off the side table and began idly flipping it over the back of her left hand.

“Where are Bernard’s personal effects?” Odira demanded once she seemed certain Sera’s mouth was going to stay shut. Kindra pulled out the thick stack of paper, the wallet, and the keys. And forcefully ignored the existence of the second set of copies in her backpack as she turned it all over.

After tossing the wallet and keys onto the desk, Odira flipped through her copies and the originals, her eyes skimming the contents but her face revealing none of her thoughts. Kindra relaxed against the wall. There was nothing in those pages to give Odira a single hint about what Kindra had done. Nodding once, Odira folded the documents, slid them into her back pocket, and raised her eyes to meet Kindra’s.

Oh hell. What did I do?

“Why are you wearing that?” There was a dangerous undertone to Odira’s question.

Kindra glanced down, barely suppressing a cringe. The bright-red scarf she should’ve hidden in her bag as soon as she was out of camera-sight in the subway station was still around her neck. *Shit*. She had to force herself to face Odira again. “I . . . forgot.”

Odira never took her eyes off Kindra’s as her hand swung up and connected with the side of Kindra’s head. The force sent Kindra staggering sideways a step, but it wasn’t as bad as last time. No black spots and no blur. Then again, last time Odira had been holding a small stone statue they’d just discovered was a fake and thus not worth a tenth of what they’d been told it would fetch.

“We do not *forget*.” Odira’s brown eyes were flinty, and her jaw was clenched. “You won’t like it if I ever have to tell you that again, Kindra.”

I don't like it now. She was effing tired of being punished for bullshit reasons, and she was *sick* of working without ever seeing the whole picture—who was pulling the strings and why. It had been the status quo for years, but she couldn't not dig for answers. Not this time. Not on this job. Not when she would be taking her father's place and trying one more time to end Bernard Gasper's life.

Most of the time she could make herself not care. It was always her life or the target's, and she saw nothing in any of them worth mourning, let alone worth dying for. But Bernard had been kind and generous in a moment when neither was necessary and in a situation where most people wouldn't have been. He'd offered a potentially life-changing leg up to a stranger, and that earned him at least a breath of a chance in Kindra's eyes.

If Kindra was going to take this one out, add him to the list she'd been growing for years, then she was going to make sure his was a life worth taking. Or a life worth dying for.

1846 : TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 9

Jacksonville, Florida



Sunlight streamed in through floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating the spacious office on the top floor of Redwell's corporate headquarters. The eighty-eight-inch flat-screen TV mounted to the wall had been on since early that morning, four news channels displaying simultaneously with captions running across all four windows. Each time the man behind the massive mahogany desk looked up, he scanned the stories on the screen before returning to the documents splayed across his desk and the spreadsheet open on his computer.

This time, something on the screen caught his attention and held it. A smile grew on his face, adding creases to slightly age-weathered skin, as he picked up the remote, selected one of the four stations, and unmuted the TV.

"... but only two shots were heard, and no eyewitnesses or security personnel seem to have spotted the shooter or the weapon." The reporter, a grim-faced woman with bronze skin and dark, narrow eyes, gestured behind her. On the bottom of the screen, the headline read *Anna Maria Cortez reporting live: Shots fired in the middle of Manhattan*. "The scene itself is still in chaos, as you can see, and a sweep of the surrounding buildings is currently underway."

Dropping the remote to his desk, the man watching exhaled slowly, the sound almost like relief, and ran a hand over thinning, light-brown hair liberally streaked with gray.

“What came to light is that this may not have been a random shooting at all. Witness statements lead us to believe there may have been a target of this seemingly random act of violence.”

A picture popped up in the corner of the screen. It showed a man with copper skin, gray-sprinkled dark hair, a broad smile, and wide, dark eyes. A man the caption named Bernard Gasper.

The smile on the watcher’s face dimmed a little, and his eyes narrowed, his focus on the screen seeming to sharpen.

“This man, Bernard Gasper, the current CEO of Gasper Exports, Inc., is reported to have been standing directly in the projected path of the bullets,” Anna said. “Though the shots appear to have missed, Gasper himself has not been seen since the incident, and we have learned that attempts to contact him by members of his staff as well as investigators—”

The man hit the power button on the remote, and the TV went black.

“Fuck.” His hands clenched on top of his desk, but for a few moments after, he neither moved nor spoke. Forcibly deep, even breaths were the only sound in the room. Then he held one longer than the others, closed his eyes, and exhaled slowly. When his eyes opened, he sat up and pulled an out-of-date cell phone from his pocket, dialing a number from memory.

“You disappoint me, Odira,” he said a few seconds later. “I thought what I had was worth more to you than what you showed me today. Fix it. Quickly.”

Hitting End on the call, the man gripped the phone tight in one hand and rubbed the other over his face.

"Fuck." Grunting, he adjusted his hold on the phone so he could dial again. "Matthew had better be right about you."

He lifted the phone to his ear and waited. "A mutual acquaintance gave me your number. I might have a job for you. Call this number back in the next six hours and we'll talk."

He hung up, slid the phone into his pocket, and returned to the work spread across his desk. "Surrounded by fucking incompetence, I swear to God."

Chapter Three

1312 : WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 10



Movement caught Kindra's eye. Just crossing into sight of the cameras Odira had installed on their street was her father, no sling or bandage in sight. Each step looked heavy, but he held his head high, like he refused to break under whatever invisible weight he carried.

What in Tartarus is happening here?

Amett Weston did not *miss* a shot for no reason. His visit to Doc J had made her assume something was physically wrong, but apparently not. He moved without limp or hitch, his stride even and steady, if a little slower than usual. The sight of Amett whole and unharmed should've been a relief, but worry only dug its claws in deeper.

Clearing her throat, Kindra pushed a button on the comm. "He's on approach."

"The prodigal returns!" Sera was a block away, on a street where the higher number of businesses meant their service van blended in a little better. She and Odira had been updating some of the software, but that project was instantly put on hold. Family business took precedence over the Family Business in this instance.

No longer wanting to watch Amett's plodding advance, Kindra shifted her attention to the screen showing the

courtyard of Bernard's office building. It swarmed with people, but not cops and investigators. Now, tourists shuffled through the space, eyes wide as they took pictures and stared at the wounded stone statue—the bullet had shattered the thing's foot instead of Bernard's head.

Kindra pushed out of the chair, casting one last glance at the screens. Someone caught her eye.

A guy eased his way through the fringe of the tourist crowd, moving with careful casualness. His attention seemed to be focused on the crime scene to his left, but when someone shifted too close to him on his right, the guy dodged without hesitation. That kind of awareness wasn't instinct—that was training. And his ball cap and hooded jacket kept most of his features concealed from the cameras, even Odira's hidden one.

New security for the building? Or Redwell's second team scoping the place already?

No time to think about it now. Amett had almost arrived. Kindra made a note of the time stamp and the question on their log sheet, then headed downstairs.

Odira and Sera met Amett at the door. Their procession inside was nearly silent. The Westons knew how to move quietly, and they all must have felt the need for stillness just then. When the door shut behind them, most of the sounds of the city were gone. They stood in a loose circle, watching each other. What Amett said next could change everything. Kindra didn't want to hear it, but she knew they couldn't delay it forever, either.

"What did Doc say?" Odira went straight for the bull's-eye, as usual.

Amett glanced up at his wife, his soft brown eyes meeting her dark ones for less than a second before he looked away. "There're two options, and he isn't sure which one it is."

"Two options for what?" Sera asked.

"Why I can't stop this." Amett removed his hand from his pocket and held it out.

His hand was trembling.

Seraphina went still, her eyes just a touch too wide.

This didn't compute. Amett Weston didn't have weaknesses. He was in complete control of his body and, thus, his world. He accepted nothing less from himself or his family. This? It wasn't possible. But that didn't make it go away.

"Bottom line?" He was staring at his hand like it had betrayed him. "It's Parkinson's or essential tremor. Out of the two, we're supposed to start praying for the tremor."

"Atropos bless it." Odira's voice was hoarse, but Kindra couldn't get a read on what emotion danced in the muscles lining her sharp jaw. Anger? Distress? Possibly some combination of the two. "How long?"

Amett hid his hand in his pocket again. "It's been about a month. I thought it was getting better, but yesterday . . . I couldn't get it to stop."

Odira closed her eyes, and froze statue-still. It seemed as though she was on the verge of cracking and losing her infamous control.

"Is there treatment?" Odira's face still betrayed no emotion that Kindra could decipher, but . . . she had to feel something, didn't she?

"I have a contact for a prescription, but it's not one hundred percent. Especially since there's no way to be sure which condition he's trying to treat. I . . ." His broad shoulders rose, his back curved, and, for the first time, his head fell just a little. "I can't guarantee aim or accuracy anymore."

Odira's expression pinched, and Kindra heard muttering that sounded like a string of inventive curses. It only lasted

three seconds before Odira's control was back in place, efficiently snapping together like a Paratus-16 rifle.

"Fine. New plan." Odira took a long breath and let it out slowly. "Amett is going to take over logistics on all operations from here on out. Sera still has tech. Kindra and I will switch on the wet work as needed."

Kindra saw a chance, a small one, and took it. "I probably shouldn't be the one if we're going for an up-close. He's seen me."

"He's seen a version of you," Odira said, dismissing the concern and Kindra's possible escape route from this job.

It was true, though. If there was a god, Greek or otherwise, hovering somewhere above earth, he'd built Kindra's entire family with an eye to blending in anywhere. With the right clothes, hair, and makeup, all of them had the features to be from a hundred different places. Whether they needed to be part of the Spanish aristocracy, hide in the slums of Singapore, infiltrate Saudi Arabian royalty, or stroll unnoticed through South Florida, the Westons had it covered. Middle-of-the-road skin tone and facial features, plus a collection of well-crafted wigs, made it easy for them to highlight parts of themselves and hide others. Easy for them to be anyone from anywhere.

It was all true, but this time, with copies of papers she shouldn't have hidden in her borrowed bedroom, and too many dangerous thoughts still running like a broken carnival ride in her head, that truth didn't make Kindra feel any better.