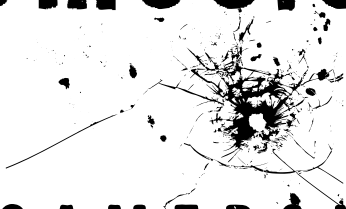




Assassins: Nemesis

ERICA CAMERON

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Assassins: Nemesis

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ABOUT **Assassins: Nemesis**



Being orphaned and almost kidnapped in the space of a week sent Blake Marks into hiding. For months, Blake tries to help the Calvers—a family of vigilante bodyguards—investigate the people behind the hit on Blake's father, Isaac, but then the safe house is compromised. Just as hired thugs storm the house to grab Blake, Daelan Calver dives into the fight, getting them both out alive.

Hiding isn't an option anymore, but hit squads, under-the-table deals, and international espionage? Blake has no idea how to handle any of it, not even with Daelan's family there to play teachers. The one thing Blake knows for sure is that there are only two options: keep up with the Calvers or get out of their way.

But even with the Calvers' help and the glimmer of a possible future with Daelan giving Blake hope, chances of survival keep shrinking. The man who ordered the hit on Isaac may be dead, but his partner is viciously cold-blooded, and her plans could change the course of history. Blake wants to finish what Isaac started, but it's looking like someone is going to die before this is over. And that someone might be Blake.

*For Kat and Cait.
You know what you did.*

It is not tolerable, it is not possible, that from so much death, so much sacrifice and ruin, so much heroism, a greater and better humanity shall not emerge.

—Charles de Gaulle

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WEDNESDAY, JULY 13 — 0500 INDIA TIME ZONE

Etobih-lin, Sea of Japan



The vicious squall battered the Sea of Japan, roiling the waves and sending high winds screaming across the water. Those waves crashed against the shores of the small, isolated island sitting between Japan and the Korean Peninsula. Wind bent trees and displaced rocks on the island's tall mountains.

Inside the Lyohwa Labs research facility on the northwestern edge of Etobih-lin, none of that could be heard. Especially not on sublevel two.

Lab six was a large, windowless room with a door that couldn't be opened from the inside. Cameras in the corners were positioned to monitor everything, with no blind spots, but at this early hour of the morning, there didn't seem to be much to watch. Only one woman—wearing a white, full-body, level A hazmat suit—was at work.

Hands braced on a backlit glass table, she stared through her faceplate at the rack of glass vials in front of her, furrows across her forehead. The vials seemed to glow with the light from the table, and the intensely green liquid was vibrant in the otherwise stark white and stainless steel room. Though her gaze jumped between the vials and the tools laid out in front of her, she ignored the alerts popping up on the wall-mounted screen to her left and the beeps of the various machines, all of them labeled LyoLabs.

“They’ll kill you if this works.” The words were quiet, but the distortion of her breathing apparatus gave them an ominous rasp. “Whatever. At least you won’t be here anymore, right?”

However cavalier the words seemed, her hands shook when she straightened and tried to lift a vial out of the rack with a pair of tongs. She took a deep breath, the sound made mechanical by her respirator. Her hands steadied. After lifting it clear of the rack, she turned and placed it in another on the epoxy resin workspace behind her.

Slowly, carefully, she extracted a small amount of the green liquid with a pipette and placed three drops into the brown mixture simmering in a beaker over a lit Bunsen burner. The color shifted as the bright drops swirled and dissolved into the bubbling liquid. From a vacuum-sealed jar on the table, she measured out 0.03 milligrams of an extremely fine powder. When she added it to the beaker, lines of dark blue spread through the mixture like ink, but when she stirred it with a thin glass rod, the solution cleared.

“Almost there.”

Another alert buzzed through the computer’s speakers. The tone was lower—a grating sound meant to draw attention—but she didn’t spare the screen more than a cursory glance.

The door behind her opened; the hiss of the airtight seal releasing would’ve made that obvious even if the door’s handle hadn’t clicked as it lowered and announced company.

A leanly muscled, olive-skinned guy wearing a LyoLabs security uniform walked into the room, a Colt handgun in his hand. He kept it pointed at the floor.

“I don’t care how impatient you are,” she said without turning around. “There is no possible way for me to make

these machines work any faster. Either shoot me, or let me get back to my work.”

“Adila?”

“Who else?” she muttered. “It’s not like you assholes let me have assistants anymore.”

He stopped at the wall display that had been flashing a red alert box. When he saw what was written there in bold black-and-white Korean letters, he cursed. When he crossed the room, his footsteps were heavy and quick. “Adila, we have to go. Now.”

“Go. Stay. Come. Work. I’m not a goddamn dog!” She slammed her hand down. The stirring rod clenched in her fist shattered when it hit the countertop. Releasing the broken pieces, she turned. “If you want me to figure this out, leave me alone and let me— Who are you?”

Though the gun-wielding newcomer was dressed as a guard, he looked like he might be twenty at the oldest. He seemed too young to be working there, but his dark eyes searched the room with purpose, and he held his Colt like someone with decades of experience shooting it.

“I’m your ticket out of here if you follow me,” he said. “But the offer won’t be worth anything in about four and a half minutes.”

Adila hesitated only a moment. In a burst of motion, she grabbed a flash drive and jammed it into one of the computers, activating a command to back up the data.

“Time is running out,” the guy warned. “Is that info worth our lives?”

“It’s worth a hell of a lot more than that.” Adila dumped the clear liquid from the bubbling beaker into the sink, then filled the beaker with a solution from a large bottle next to the sink, and poured the rest of the bottle’s contents and all

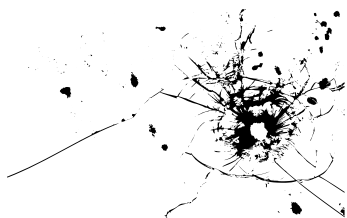
of the green-filled vials down the drain. When the computer flashed *Backup Complete*, she ejected the flash drive and pressed it into her rescuer's hand.

After executing a command to format the computer and wipe the drive clean, Adila followed the stranger out of the lab, slowly stripping the hazmat suit as she walked, dropping the pieces behind her.

As the suit fell away, the body underneath it became visible—and the scars that body wore. Old, healed burns from pinky finger to elbow up the side of her left arm. A misshapen bump on her nose that might've been a badly treated break. Thin lines were almost hidden in the natural creases of her neck, but they were too pale against her tan skin to disappear completely.

"*Annyeong*, fuckers," she said as the door shut behind them.

Three Weeks Earlier



Chapter One

THURSDAY, JUNE 23 – 1515 ROMEO TIME ZONE



Who's afraid of the Bigger Badder Wolf? Wolfess. Whatever. The taunting words fell flat even in Blake's head.

She ground the heels of her hands into her eyes when the words on the tablet began to blur. The way her eyes burned wasn't just from staring at the computer screen; pretending it was wouldn't make it true. Her chest ached and her eyes watered. Brain throbbing with exhaustion, she folded her arms on the kitchen table and let her head drop.

No matter how hard Blake pulled bravado around herself like armor plating, she *was* afraid. She'd been scared of Garret Hadley and Lillian French even before she knew their names, had had nightmares about them when all she knew was that they were the target of her father's latest—last—investigation. That fear had only gotten worse, grown claws and fangs and a spiked tail, since she gained actual information about the people her father had been tracking down.

The same people who'd had him killed.

But fear hadn't stopped her mother from becoming one of the best helicopter pilots in the Army, and it hadn't stopped her father from investigating killers, corporations, and thieves for the FBI.

It sure as hell wouldn't stop Blake from helping the people trying to take down her father's murderer.

Garret Hadley was already dead, but Lillian French wasn't. Back in February, she'd tried to either kill or kidnap Blake—no one was sure which had been the ultimate goal. Still, the incident probably meant that Lillian or someone working for her thought Blake had information. About their goals, about their organization, about where her father might have hidden information, or about something else entirely.

"That's why I need to read through everything," Blake had argued earlier in the week. Her two guards and her co-protectee, Bernard, had eyed her with sympathy. Or skepticism. Both expressions had only made her fight harder. "Look, we already know that I don't remember anything important, but that doesn't mean I don't actually know anything! Maybe there's a detail in those files that will jog a memory, okay? At least let me *try*."

They'd given in and loaded her tablet with all—or at least a lot—of the files they had on Garret Hadley, Lillian French, and Redwell. A week later the only change was that her nightmares were full of new faces, vivid details, and so much more blood. She'd read through it all, and she hadn't slept more than a few hours a night for the last two days.

Going through it *again* was only making things worse.

She was doing it anyway. Nightmares weren't anything new. Not after watching the video of her mom's helicopter being bombed out of the sky six years ago. And definitely not after seeing the pictures of the bloody car wreck that had taken her dad four months ago.

War and sabotage. It all ended the same way, with bloodshed and grieving families left behind to pick up the pieces.

Lifting her head, she pressed the button to wake up the tablet screen and read.

It wasn't long after Lillian French's arrival that Redwell began cooperating more closely with the technology development teams of various armed forces, working with those divisions to research and then develop new tech, weapons, and systems instead of only manufacturing existing designs. It appears that she was instrumental in several of these early agreements and contracts, and so her progression from lackey to official military liaison for Redwell's military work was quick and nearly unobstructed.

The chair across from her scraped against the tile floor. "How far in are you?"

"Finished. Second run now." Blake put the tablet down and rubbed her eyes. "I just got to the part where she joins Redwell."

"Hmm." With the tips of his fingers, Bernard shifted his large black coffee mug a quarter turn. "The nightmares will only get worse if you go through this again."

As much as Blake would've liked to deny that, she knew it wouldn't work. Especially not after she'd just finished thinking the same thing. Plus, it was a small house, and she'd woken up screaming twice this week. "I know, but I can handle nightmares. I've had them before."

"Nightmares of your own past are different. You earned those scars." There was concern in his dark eyes and in the lines of his face. "This isn't yours to carry. You don't need this to dig itself any deeper into your head."

"You think this isn't already in my head?" Blake scoffed. Her eyes still burned and the ache in her chest twinged at what she was about to say, but she could ignore it when faced with Bernard's genuine care and worry. "Garret had my dad killed."

"And Garret is dead." Bernard seemed resigned, like he had no expectation that his words would actually be listened to. "You can't get revenge against a dead man."

"I can make sure the witch he was working with doesn't profit off of whatever plans they had," she said through gritted teeth. "It's what my dad would do if he were here."

Barnard nodded at that, a sad smile on his lips. "I'm pretty sure you're right."

The lump that rose in Blake's throat was smaller than it had been four months ago—or even four weeks ago—but it was still enough to trap everything that she wanted to say.

He'd barely known her dad, but one thing Bernard seemed to understand was how dedicated Special Agent Isaac Marks had been to tracking down the bad guys and building a strong enough case against them to lock them in prison for the rest of their lives. He'd been excellent at his job, but he hadn't been invincible. Garret's hired thugs had proven that.

"I just don't know if Isaac would be proud of you for doing this, or be trying to shoot me for letting you get involved. Probably both," Bernard said with a sigh. Draining the last of his coffee, he got up and put the empty cup in the sink. "Have you seen Scott in the last few minutes?"

Blake shook her head and pulled the tablet closer, touching the button to activate the screen again. "I don't think I've seen him since lunch."

Three months ago, she never would've thought being guarded 24-7 could become so commonplace that she stopped noticing. It helped that Scott and Max, their two bodyguards, were excellent at being unobtrusive. Even when they refused to let Blake and Bernard out of their sight anywhere but in the house. It probably also helped that Blake had spent most of her life around soldiers and paranoid, government official/secret agent types, so these two had become familiar fast.

"I'm going to go find Scott." Bernard patted her shoulder gently as he passed. "We're running low on some bathroom things."

Nodding, Blake bit her lip and kept reading.

Susan Phan was hired by Lillian in 1999, two years after Lillian's promotion to military liaison. After five years working directly under the military liaison, Susan moved laterally into a position in Redwell's security. We now believe this switch was made so that Susan could act as an intermediary between Garret and Lillian, coordinating work on their various shadow ops. She was promoted to director of security for Redwell's corporate office within eighteen months of the initial transfer.

For a few minutes, the only sound was the soft ticking of the clock on the wall and the laughter of the kids a couple houses away. The window in the kitchen was open, the curtains closed. Scott and Max had argued with Blake over that, but she'd won. It wasn't like the glass was bulletproof. If someone dangerous wanted to get into the house, a closed window wasn't going to stop them. The fresh air helped clear Blake's mind, and the noise of life in the neighborhood kept her from feeling like this two-story, three-bedroom cottage was a comfortably appointed prison.

She'd spent a lot of time the last month of their residence in Rhode Island listening to the neighborhood, and paranoia had made her hypervigilant. By sound alone, she knew the neighbors and their habits. She didn't always notice the normal sounds anymore, but she paid a hell of a lot of attention when something fell out of sync with the patterns she'd learned. Something like the fast, pounding footsteps getting closer. Their house was the last lot on a dead-end road, and there was nothing but a thick line of trees behind them. Plus, people didn't go jogging on this street.

She opened her mouth to call for Bernard and Scott.

Someone dove through the open kitchen window.

They *flew* over the sink and easily cleared the countertop, tucking into a ball as gravity brought them down. Hitting the ground rolling, they were on their feet in a graceful flash.

A second later, Blake was on hers. She lifted her arm from the folds of her long, khaki skirt and aimed her mother's beautifully customized, antique Smith & Wesson revolver at their chest.

"Make a move for a weapon, and I'll shoot you," she warned. "Who are you?"

They turned slowly and lifted their hands about a foot away from their body. Average height, medium build, olive skin, and male, as far as Blake could tell. He had hair like hers—black, cut to about an inch long, and curly—and his face was ambiguously young. Blake wasn't sure if he was closer to fourteen or twenty-two.

"Uh, hi." Clearing his throat, he smiled sheepishly. It was a smile that brought out a dimple in his right cheek and made him look a lot younger. "I come in peace?"

"I don't." Somehow he seemed nearly harmless; if Blake hadn't just watched him dive-bomb through a window, she might've believed it. "Who are you?"

He held his hands higher, the gesture somewhere between placation and surrender. "It's okay, Blake." She blinked but didn't lower the weapon. "I'm Daelan Calver. My family sent the team who got you out of Baltimore."

"How do I know you didn't steal that information or . . . something?" She looked to the side, down the hallway. Where the hell were her supposed bodyguards? And Bernard?

"I guess you don't. But I also don't think you're going to do much damage trying to shoot me with an unloaded gun."

“Unloaded?” Her dark eyes locked on his, she pulled the hammer back, and moved her finger to the trigger. “Willing to bet?”

“Blake, no!” Bernard burst in, tearing into the room so fast he had to grab the wall to keep himself upright. His eyes were wide as he took in the showdown. “You all right, Daelan?”

“Yep. ’S all good.” He grinned at Blake, his expression relaxing even more when she released the hammer and slowly lowered the weapon.

“This is really Daelan?” Only now did her voice and her hand start to shake. A lot.

“Yes.” Bernard swallowed and nodded slowly before he eased away from the wall and stretched his arms out to her. “Daelan isn’t going to hurt us. I promise.”

When Bernard rested his hand on her shoulder, Blake let out a long, shuddering breath, then nodded once, the gesture sharp. She placed the weapon into the pocket of her skirt.

“It has *pockets*? That can fit a *gun*?” Daelan looked delighted. “Where’d you get that? My sister would love that skirt.” His expression dissolved into something serious—one that made her revise his age up a few years again—before Blake could respond. He glanced at Bernard. “Where are your guards?”

“Max is sleeping. I thought Scott was checking the perimeter, but . . .” There was fear in Bernard’s eyes. “He wasn’t out there, was he?”

“If he didn’t shoot at me when I parkoured myself through the window, then, no. We can assume he wasn’t.” He stepped left, reaching for Blake’s tablet. “We need to move. Now.”

“Why didn’t you use the door?” Bernard turned toward the front of the house. “And where are Cassidy and Hugo?”

“Mom didn’t come. Dad and Aaron are tailing someone suspicious we saw lurking nearby, and I saw someone in the woods, watching the front, so the door wasn’t a good option. We need to get moving before—”

Glass shattered. A bullet smacked into the wall.

“Get down!” Daelan ducked and rolled, dropping the tablet in favor of a gun as he came up in the protection of the wall dividing the dining room from the living room.

Blake pressed against the cabinets on the other side of the room, revolver back in her hand and eyes wide. The thin material of her skirt and loose white crop tank top was far from Kevlar. Bernard had fallen to the tile floor, hands covering his head like this was a tornado drill.

“Bernard! Grab that tablet!” Daelan ordered. “Both of you get low and crawl here! *Fast.*”

She bunched up her skirt and scampered across the kitchen floor as quickly as she could manage. Bernard grabbed the tablet and moved right behind her.

“Why the hell didn’t I take a comm?” Daelan muttered as he pulled out an old Nokia and pushed a single button to call someone. “Under fire. Multiple enemies. Civilians intact. Situation dire. Sweep the forest.”

He hung up and stuffed the phone back in his pocket. They all flinched when something clattered into the kitchen. It looked like a matte-green metal canister with a lever stuck to the top.

It couldn’t be . . .

Daelan’s breath gusted out of his chest, the sound pained, and his eyes locked on the device. “Consarn it all to hell!” He sprinted across the kitchen, scooping up the projectile and chucking it out the window. Momentum dropped him back to the floor. “Stay down!”

Boom.

Screams from outside. Light flashed through the window. So bright. Like lightning had struck the yard. And the explosion was loud. So loud. Her ears rang, a constant high-pitched noise overlaying everything else. Noise and light, but no fire. Flash-bang.

Daelan rolled to his feet, a wild-eyed look on his face. The gun he pulled out of his pocket was small, a subcompact, but he held it expertly as he edged toward the window. Blake aimed her gun through the living room at the front door.

Where was Max? There was no way anyone could sleep through this noise. If he hadn't come running, there wasn't much of a chance he was conscious. Or . . . No. Blake's mind shied away from the only other possibility. The only likely possibility.

Daelan fired two rounds. "There are more coming. If you know how to use that thing, Blake, you better get ready to pull the trigger."

Swallowing, Blake nodded. She hoped Daelan saw the motion, because speaking wasn't an option right now. Fear had closed her throat; each breath was a struggle. Her ears still rang, but thankfully that was beginning to recede.

Thirty seconds of undisturbed silence. Daelan was at the window, waiting and watching. Blake's hands trembled. She kept the weapon pointed at the door anyway. Perfect aim wasn't a requirement. She just had to stall whoever came into the house long enough for Daelan to take care of them.

When Bernard shifted next to her, discomfort and fear on his face, Daelan made a noise to catch their attention, then lifted his hand, palm flat and fingertips pointed toward the ceiling. A simple sign for "Whatever you're doing, *stop*." Bernard froze, and the tremor in Blake's hands subsided.

Daelan strode to the door on the opposite side of the kitchen, peering out to the back porch. Blake turned to the front door.

The kitchen shared an open plan with the dining room, but the wall Blake was using as cover separated that space from the main living area. A long mirror in a rustic frame hung along one wall, and curtained windows took up most of the other two. It was only because of the mirror that Blake noticed the shadow moving past the opposite windows.

“Tssst!”

Daelan looked her way instantly. She pointed toward the motion. Nodding, he walked silently in her direction, but didn’t veer off toward the living room. Instead, he eased into the short hallway leading to the master suite.

Holding his finger to his lips, he motioned for them to head for the stairs opposite their hiding place. She was breathing too quickly, and her pulse rushed even faster. As soon as she stood enough to take a step, all of that adrenaline racing through her body sharpened her focus. She grabbed Bernard’s arm and raced toward the stairs. And almost tripped on her skirt. Swallowing a curse, she rucked it out of the way and picked up the pace.

Should she go to the second story? No. That would put them too far away from Daelan. What if someone trying to get in the house climbed up on the eave and through a window upstairs? Scott and Max had warned her that— No. Staying within sight of Daelan was better.

When Bernard would’ve continued past the landing between the floors, she grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop, shaking her head. He looked confused, but then his gaze shifted to Daelan, and he nodded, crouching in the corner of the small space. She pressed her back against the wall, aiming

her gun down the steps. From here she could see up to the second story, but she could also see Daelan. She could watch his back if anyone tried to sneak up behind him.

He glided silently down the hall, stopping just outside the bedroom, his head cocked like he was listening. Then he settled. His shoulders dropped. The arm holding his gun relaxed. His chest expanded enough that the breath was visible from more than ten feet away.

What is he doing?

Daelan dropped to his knees in the open doorway of the master bedroom. He aimed.

Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop.

Four shots. One scream. Two solid thuds, like deadweight hitting a wood floor.

Blake shuddered.

There were bodies in that room now. No longer people, just masses of meat and bone and blood.

Bile rose in her throat. Bad people, she tried to remind herself. They had been coming for her and Bernard. To capture them or to kill them.

Daelan stood and reholstered his gun as he moved down the hall toward Blake and Bernard. There was no sign of what he'd just done in his eyes. Nothing on his face. As he approached, Blake was absolutely positive this wasn't the first time he'd fired a gun and ended a life. She should be grateful that he'd been here to do what she might not have been able to, but . . . it wasn't that simple.

"What do you need to get?" he asked. "It can't be more than we can carry out of here in the next five—" His head snapped to the right and his hand went to the single-strap backpack he had slung across his back. He wasn't reaching for

the easy-access weapon. It had to be out of bullets. Someone was coming.

Daelan ran toward the stairs, ducking so low he was almost bent in half.

A man in jeans and a Kevlar vest burst into the hallway behind him. His face, even at a distance, was familiar. Tan skin, sharp nose, deep-set dark eyes, long face. This was one of the two men who'd tried to kidnap—maybe kill—Blake in February. And now he was barreling toward Daelan with murderous determination on his face.

Shit.

Blake fired.

Daelan dropped to his knees and spun in one motion, a different, larger gun in his hand. He followed up her shot with two more. Hers had struck the thigh. His first bullet ripped into the guy's throat. The second dug itself into the wall when he slumped to the floor. There were several more gunshots from outside.

Oh God. Her hands shook. Her skin chilled. *I shot someone.*

Daelan stood up, the motion full of a surety Blake couldn't hope to match right now. His gun loosely gripped, he crossed to the man and used the toe of his boot to nudge the body spilling red onto the pale-wood floor. When the guy didn't react, Daelan nodded and pulled a phone out of his backpack, a different one than he'd used to report in before. He swiped at the screen for a few seconds before putting the phone away and slipping the gun into the holster peeking out of his pocket.

"So." Daelan looked at Blake, his expression so carefully neutral that she didn't have a hope of reading it. "What say we

pack up and get the hell out of here before the next guys roll up with a rocket launcher?"

Blake closed her eyes and tried not to cry.



Everything blurred after she gave in to the tears. Only a few moments stood out in highly detailed relief.

Daelan peeling Blake's too-tight grip off the revolver, his skin warm and dry against her cool, clammy hand, and his murmured words meaningless but soothing. He smelled like sulfur. Like gunpowder and burned-out matches.

Being introduced to Hugo Calver and Aaron Tanvers, Hugo's stolid stance and Aaron's empathetic smile almost reassuring.

Dazedly helping Bernard grab clothes and gear for them both while the others hurriedly packed the most important tech and possessions in the house.

Getting shuffled into an SUV and racing out of Providence.

A bottle of orange juice being pushed into her hand, the condensation further chilling her skin, and Daelan softly but insistently urging her to drink it instead of stare at it.

More than an hour in the backseat of the SUV with Daelan and Bernard, squished between the two but looking at neither, their warmth just enough to keep her from shivering.

Switching cars and splitting up, Bernard and Hugo, Daelan's father, getting into a dull-gold sedan while Daelan guided Blake into the backseat of a different SUV with Aaron driving.

Through it all, she spoke and breathed and slept a little, but none of it felt real. Most of her mind was back in Providence.

When she closed her eyes, she heard the blast of the flash-bang and the *pops* of the gunshots, felt the recoil of her revolver and the thudding terror of the attack.

And she saw the bloody body.

There had been so much blood. Some of that blood had been spilled because of *her* bullet.

The man who had died was the same one who had tried to kidnap her once already, though. He might've been one of the people involved in her father's car accident.

Both of those facts should have made her feel better. She'd thought they would, had wished for the deaths of everyone who had a hand in the plan to kill her dad. But now one of them *was* dead, and whatever family he had in the world would be left to mourn him. If they ever knew what had happened today at all.

Around her, and now because of her, there had been too much bloodshed and loss in her sixteen years of life. She didn't want to think about it, couldn't face it, so she let herself sink into the recesses of her mind. The chill over her skin helped her become numb.

For a while, it helped her forget.

Chapter Two

THURSDAY, JUNE 23 – 2314 ROMEO TIME ZONE



Apparently, wherever they were going was far enough that they had to stop on the way there.

After simple—but surprisingly effective—disguises were in place on everyone, Daelan and Hugo checked them into a motel outside Oneonta, New York, while Blake stayed in the car with Aaron. Once they had room keys, Blake followed them into the motel, trying to ignore the blur that reading glasses made of the world, the itch of the long black wig Daelan had helped pin on in the car, and the too-tight fit of the SUNY Oneonta sweatshirt Aaron had bought at a gas station just outside of town.

Room assignments happened seamlessly: Daelan and Hugo ushered Blake into one while Aaron and Bernard claimed the second. Hugo, who looked very much like Daelan, only with lighter eyes and hair cut down until it was like a shadow over his head, sat on the bed closest to the door with a laptop open on his thighs, and a cell phone held between his shoulder and his ear. It wasn't much of a conversation; he wasn't saying a word.

Without the noise of the engine and the murmur of Daelan and Aaron's quiet conversation as a distraction, Blake didn't know what to do. Sleep would mean nightmares, but

what else was there? Sitting on the bed and staring at the beige wall didn't sound appealing either.

"You doing all right?" Daelan gently asked as he handed over a hastily packed backpack of clothes.

Nod. Smile. Pretend everything is fine. It wasn't clear if Daelan believed it. Which was okay; Blake didn't quite believe it either.

"Go ahead and shower now if you want. We'll eat and then, hopefully, you can get some sleep." His lips parted like he was considering saying something else, but he shook his head. "Let me know if you need anything, okay?"

It was as good a plan as any, and as a bonus, someone else had come up with it. Blake nodded again—because words wouldn't come—took the backpack, and retreated into the bathroom. A shower wouldn't fix anything, but that didn't mean it wouldn't help.

Blake began to feel a little less shaky and a lot more human after vigorously scrubbing the day off skin, hair, and teeth. Digging through the backpack, Blake tried to find something that felt right. The flowy skirt had been nice this morning, but when the world started to implode, there had definitely been an internal longing for jeans and sneakers instead of sandals and an overflow of cotton.

It wasn't just the clothes, though. "She" no longer felt right. Blake needed to become someone else, to adjust internal and external expectations, and "he" felt better. Stronger. Which was stupid and played straight into the gender expectations Blake had spent years shedding like costumes—or trying to—but the world was made up of *or*, not *and*. People treated Blake differently based on what they assumed was between his legs. He fought that binary most of the time, but some days . . . Whatever. Sometimes it couldn't be helped.

Running a hand over the options, Blake gripped a baggy pair of men's jeans and a medium-gray shirt that would hang loose on his toned frame. In the skirt and the crop tank top he'd been wearing before, his small breasts and the curve of his waist were highlighted. Outfits like this accentuated his height and the breadth of his shoulders. His short hair—much easier to manage than the shoulder-length cut he'd had last year—easily blended in either direction. Sports bra and boxers went underneath it all.

Although none of the clothes would be any better at stopping bullets than the skirt had been, he still felt better dressed in the solid layers. It was like armor, and he needed that today.

Hugo was gone when Blake left the bathroom ten minutes later, and Daelan stood in the center of the room, talking on his cell phone.

"That should be fine. Just remember she's also allergic to nuts," Daelan said.

"He." It was an unthinking correction, out of his mouth before his filter could stop it. He cringed. His friends and his family had gotten used to his shifting pronouns, but strangers? The reactions could be . . . unpleasant. He held his breath, stomach sinking, and waited to see which way the pendulum would swing this time.

Daelan blinked, nodded once, and kept talking. A little of the tension in Blake's chest eased.

"Check the ingredients, okay? We can't risk having to take him to a hospital because of an allergic reaction." He hung up the phone and looked at Blake. "Do you use 'he' all the time, then?"

He raised an eyebrow at Daelan. "Do I *look* like a girl right now?"

“Because of the clothes? My sister wears stuff like that all the time. Hell, I’ve worn more than a few skirts. Clothes don’t necessarily mean much.” He shrugged. “You don’t have to explain if you don’t want to. I’m just curious. Whatever pronoun you use is fine; just let me know so I don’t get it wrong again.”

“You haven’t.”

Another blink. “Uhh, you just told me to call—”

Blake exhaled heavily. Maybe it would be better to get the full explanations out of the way. “If you know about my allergies, then you must have my medical records.”

Daelan’s expression turned guarded, almost like he was bracing for a tirade. “Yeah, we do.”

“Then you know I’m intersex.”

“Yes, but that’s . . .” His lips pursed and his nose wrinkled. “Yes, I did make pronoun assumptions earlier because of the skirt—which I still think my sister would love—but that’s because when I looked it up, there wasn’t a pronoun for intersex.”

“Trust me, I know.”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m sure you do,” he said, ducking his head and looking a bit sheepish. “But you don’t . . . Don’t you mind people switching pronouns on you all the time?”

Blake shook his head. “No. It’s easier to let them make assumptions. I don’t really feel like either gender—or some days I feel like both—so I don’t mind the switch. My friends go with whatever I’m presenting as that day.” He picked at a loose thread hanging off the pocket of his jeans, unable to meet Daelan’s eyes. “I used to text my dad every morning to let him know if it was a ‘he’ day or a ‘she’ day.”

Daelan cleared his throat. “What about ‘they’ or something off the binary?”

The last time someone asked that question, it had been a psychology guest lecturer at Blake's boarding school. That asshole used the question as a precursor to a twenty-minute tirade on the harm Blake was doing to the progress and equality of nonbinary people everywhere by not adopting a more fitting, permanent, alternative pronoun. Blake probably would've punched the guy if Blake's friends hadn't dragged him out of the classroom. That sort of pointless righteousness wasn't what he saw in Daelan's face, so he took a long breath and took a chance.

"My life is complicated enough without becoming a walking lesson in the grammar of alternative pronouns. I'm not hiding who I am, but I don't want to debate the world day after day." Blake looked up. "I might change my mind eventually. Not now, though. Partially because once that conversation starts, all the rest of my labels get involved and things get even more convoluted."

Instead of confused, Daelan looked intrigued. "How many labels do you have?"

Smirking, Blake shrugged. "A few."

Not long after Blake's birth, the doctors had informed Isaac and Kim-Ly Marks that their infant was intersex. It took a few weeks, though, for those same doctors to grudgingly admit that neither surgery nor heavy hormone replacement was vital to Blake's health.

After that, his parents had taught themselves—and later Blake—about living outside the binary. He'd been raised not as male or female, but as Blake. Even the name they'd chosen was intentionally unisex and inherently contradictory. "Blake" meant light *and* dark, and it was used for both male and female children.

Growing up, Blake had always been both and neither.

From early conversations about gender, it hadn't been a leap for his mom and dad to teach him about the sexuality spectrum, the romantic spectrum, the expectations of society, and how all of that would inevitably shape how Blake saw himself no matter how hard he tried to ignore it.

His labels had changed daily as a kid, something his parents had encouraged, but they'd been surprisingly stable since he was thirteen. Three years and, so far, his exhaustive personal description still felt as accurate as the English language could get. It took a while to say, though.

"Like?" Daelan's gaze was intently focused on Blake's face, not a single trace of disgust or judgment in his expression.

Most of the time people asked because they saw Blake as the jackpot of the "look how tolerant I am because I'm friends with a (fill in the blank)" game. That didn't seem to be why Daelan wanted to know. "You really want all of them?"

"Yeah. If there are that many, I definitely want all of them."

Blake rolled his eyes. "Fine. I'm mixed race, multiethnic, allergic to more things than I want to name, intersex because of partial androgen insensitivity syndrome, expressively gender-fluid but mentally agender, and panromantic graysexual. There are more, but those are the most important ones."

"Well, I'm mixed race, multiethnic, only allergic to certain painkillers, expressively male but gender indifferent, and sapiosexual with a strong competence kink." Daelan slid his hands into his pockets and leaned against the wall, his smile small but warm. "It's nice to finally meet you, Blake."

"*Nice to finally meet you.*" *Finally.* Everything Blake had been trying to ignore about today—about the past several months—came rushing back with that word.

Daelan and his family had been protecting Blake from a distance for months prior to this meeting, and watching

Isaac Marks's investigation into Garret Hadley and Redwell, Inc. for longer than that. Blake hadn't met the Calvers before today, but even though none of them had been there the day two fake FBI agents couldn't finish Blake's emergency code phrase, the Calvers were why Bernard, Max, and Scott *had* been in time to save his life.

Taking a slow breath, Blake tried to smile back. "You too, Daelan." But the Pandora's box of thoughts had been opened, and now Blake couldn't shove them away fast enough to focus on anything but, "Why today? How did you guys know to come get us?"

"We got a message." The smile on Daelan's lips fell flat, his open, pleasant expression becoming almost eerily unreadable.

"That seems like it should be a good thing? At least, considering..." Considering what could have—*would* have—happened if they hadn't arrived when they did.

Daelan winced, the shift of expression so fast Blake almost missed it. "No, it's not—" Growling something that didn't sound like English, he rubbed his hand over his face. "The problem is that the message came from an anonymous source."

"And that's bad?" Anonymity seemed like it'd be a common thing in the world of freelance bodyguards/assassins/whatever the hell the Calvers were.

"The fact that not even my *mom* can trace the trail all the way back to a source that makes sense? Yeah. Very bad." Daelan exhaled slowly, pulling out the desk chair and sitting down. "You haven't met Mom yet, but she's a techno wizard. If *she* can't track an electronic message, then something is definitely dodgy in Denmark. It means there's someone out there who doesn't want us to know who they are—but who knows exactly who *we* are—and they seem to have access

to information that could be a lot of use to us. Or could destroy us.”

“Oh.” Blake sat on one of the double beds, hoping it hid the way his knees had buckled. “Yeah, that sounds potentially bad.”

“Sorry. I’m being a little overdramatic about this, but I don’t like not knowing things.”

“No one knows everything.”

One side of Daelan’s mouth curled up. “Maybe not, but I can sure as hell try.”

Someone knocked on the door.

At the first knock, Daelan was on his feet, smoothly pulling a gun out of a holster that he apparently had hidden at the small of his back. Blake’s revolver was on the nightstand five feet away.

Two more slow knocks.

Daelan’s head cocked toward the door. Blake rolled into the space between the beds and crawled for his gun.

One more slow knock. Two quick.

Thunk.

The door unlocked. Daelan lowered the weapon but didn’t put it away, not until Hugo, Aaron, and Bernard entered the room. Hugo and Bernard walked in with damp hair, like they’d just showered. Aaron carried three plastic bags with *THANK YOU* printed repeatedly down the side. Surrounding the men was an odd combination of smells: soap and Thai food.

Daelan’s gun disappeared from sight quickly, but it took a couple minutes of deep, even breaths—each one infusing his brain with more mouthwatering scents as Aaron and Hugo unpacked dinner—before Blake relinquished the revolver and stopped shaking. It was too soon after Providence for

another spike of terror and adrenaline like that. He'd run out quickly. Maybe. If that was even possible.

Can you become immune to adrenaline?

"Yes, in a way. I've seen a theory about people developing adrenaline resistance because of consistently heavy stress, but I don't buy it. I think, unless you have some sort of genetic predisposition for it, the possibility of that happening naturally is way beyond long-shot odds," Daelan said as he unpacked dinner. "Though there was one study a few years ago that involved injecting adrenaline directly into the brains of mice. They couldn't seem to feel fear after that."

Blake blinked. "What?"

"Adrenaline immunity." Daelan looked up, squinting a little. "You just asked about it."

"I said that out loud?"

"Did you not mean to?" Daelan seemed more confused, not less.

"No." Blake covered his face, digging his fingers into his hair. "I should just go to bed."

"Food first," Hugo said. "A blood-sugar crash will only make the loopiness worse."

Blake rubbed his hands down his face and made himself open his eyes. "And this is life for you guys? This is what you do *every day*?"

Despite both of his parents having dangerous jobs, Blake had never gotten caught in that before, had never seen firsthand the kind of situations they put themselves in. Now, he couldn't comprehend the reality of it. How did anyone ever get used to this kind of fear? Not the nebulous, distant kind he'd been living with the last few months, but the solid, very real dread that death might be waiting on the other side of every door.

“Only recently,” Daelan said, that inscrutable blankness back on his face. Hugo glanced at his son as he placed a container of red curried chicken over rice on the bed near Blake.

“It’s not like you don’t know how to handle yourself. I heard you did well today.” Aaron smiled with his lips, but the rest of his expression looked hesitant, like he wasn’t sure Blake would take the compliment well. Unsure or not, he kept talking. “Where’d you learn to shoot?”

“My mother was an Army pilot and my father was a federal agent. They took me to the gun range as soon as I was big enough not to get knocked over by the recoil.” He’d been fond of the memory once, but now that feeling was tempered by loss and time. And the much more vivid image of blood on pale-wood floors.

“That’s right. I forgot your mom was military.” Wistful regret crept across Aaron’s face. “I was a Marine for almost a decade.”

“Oh, stop it, Moaning Myrtle,” Daelan sniped. “You’re still a Marine. I checked your status, like, three days ago.”

Aaron’s full lips rolled between his teeth and his right eye twitched. “We both know that ain’t gonna last.”

“And I told you I have strings to pull, but I can’t do anything until this whole mess is resolved.” Hugo said this like the argument was old and the statement practically rote.

Blake knew a little bit of Aaron’s story from Bernard. He was a Marine sergeant but had gone AWOL back in January, risking a solid career to hunt down the people who’d convincingly staged his sister Jenna’s suicide. It was the stuff Shakespearean dramas and blockbuster thrillers were made of, and it pained Blake to see that kind of devotion punished.

"I can . . ." All four men looked at Blake, and all of them waited for him to find the words. "I mean, if this goes well and I'm somehow alive at the end of it, the special agent in charge of the Baltimore branch of the FBI is my honorary uncle, so I might have some strings too. If you need them."

Aaron seemed shocked. Bernard and Hugo looked pleased. Daelan, for some reason, looked a little pissed. *Maybe I shouldn't have said anything?* But Blake couldn't leave it there, so he steeled himself and tried to explain.

"You all saved my life today. For the *second* time." He ran his hand over his short curls. They'd be overly fluffy without some kind of product taming them, but he couldn't be assed to care right now. "If we make it through this in one piece, making sure you don't get court-martialed is the least I can do."

"Well, I—" Aaron coughed, his golden-brown skin flushing darker on his cheeks and the tips of his ears. "Um, I might take both of you up on that. Thank you."

The rest of the meal passed smoothly as the conversation moved to easier topics—mostly the rest of the Calvers waiting back at what they all kept calling "the Citadel"—and soon Aaron was collecting the empty to-go containers and tossing them in the trash, and Blake was aiming for the bathroom. Brushing his teeth to avoid waking up with Thai-flavored morning breath sounded like a good idea.

Before he could step into the bathroom, Daelan touched his elbow with just enough pressure to hold him in place. Daelan's eyes, when Blake met them, were intense.

"You're not going to die, Blake. We won't let you." Oh. Was that why Daelan had looked mad? "So don't talk like it's the most likely outcome."

The words were confident and his expression determined, but Blake couldn't truly *believe* him. Not after losing both of his parents to the kind of violence he suddenly found himself in the eye of. Not after fake federal agents had tried to abduct him from his school. Not after his supposed safe house had been attacked.

One of the only things Blake knew for certain was that life guaranteed nothing.

Smiling ruefully at Daelan's inexplicable optimism, Blake patted the guy's shoulder. "I know you'll try. And I'll try not to make your job any harder than it already is."

If they were being honest, that was all anyone could ask.

FRIDAY, JUNE 24 – 1644 HOTEL TIME ZONE

Ongma Potseu, Gomin



Narrow, evenly spaced windows lined one wall of the room, but didn't allow in much light. Fluorescents set into the ceiling provided the rest of the illumination for the two men and one woman sitting at the long conference table.

The woman stood, smoothing the front of her forest-green suit jacket. It hugged her full curves, the color vibrant against her black blouse and the black pencil skirt clinging to her thighs. Her green eyeshadow was equally bright against her mahogany skin.

"*Gomapseumnida*." From the table, she picked up a wooden box with the golden emblem of Patek Philippe stamped on the top and held it between her hands. She offered it to one of the men across the table. "You've been a great help. I think we may be able to wrap this phase of research up soon and move on to more lucrative projects."

"*Cheonmaneyo*, Lillian." The man stood and took the box with both hands, bowing. He placed it on the table and then picked up a similarly sized box, this one gleaming metal, marked with the logo of LyoLabs, and locked. He offered it to her in the same manner, held between both hands and extended. "We wish you much success in your endeavors."

Inclining her head, she took the box. “A month or two more should do it, gentlemen, but rest assured that I will keep you informed if the timeline changes in any way.”

“Ms. French, a word?”

Lillian looked toward the door to the conference room and smiled. “Ah. Right on time. Gentlemen, you remember my associate, Susan Phan?” The men nodded and exchanged greetings with the newcomer in Korean, but otherwise kept most of their focus on Lillian. Smiling at Susan, she said, “I’ll be out in a moment.”

Susan nodded and backed out, closing the door behind her.

“*Annyeonghi gyeseyo*,” Lillian said, bowing her head to the men across the table.

Carrying the silver box, Lillian French strode from the room, the heels of her green shoes *clacking* against the floorboards. Susan waited just outside and fell into step beside her with ease. Neither woman spoke as they left the blocky office building.

They slid into the black Mercedes sedan waiting for them in the circular drop-off, and as the car pulled away from the curb, Lillian eyed her companion expectantly.

“It’s been all but confirmed. We’re ninety-five percent sure that Gasper and the Marks kid got out alive. Possibly injured but . . .” Susan shook her head. “It’s not like they’re going to go to a hospital and use their real names.”

“No, of course not.” Lillian frowned, perturbation in the lines between her eyebrows. “And we’re getting this intel how?”

“John got out—injured, but alive. According to his report, the strike team took out the exterior guard. They were about to take the occupants when backup moved in out of nowhere. Everything went to hell in minutes. Javier Martinez is dead.”

“And Nuura?”

“Wasn’t with them on the op. She was working on a project with Amett and Odira for phase three.”

“You do not want to know what it cost me to get that location.” Lillian’s dark eyes hardened. “And now you’re telling me it didn’t work? And that *another* of our team is gone?” Then her expression turned speculative. “What kind of backup?”

“John spotted a car. From his description of the driver, I’m pretty sure it was Hugo Calver and his people.”

“That shouldn’t have happened. There is no possible way he should’ve known about that hit.” Her wide mouth thinned into a tight line. “Your first priority as of now is to figure out what went wrong. Take Charles with you, and let me know what other resources you need, because I expect answers yesterday.”

Susan nodded, pulling out her phone and opening a new email.

Lillian sighed and looked out the window at sunlight glancing off the water of the harbor and the blue sky scattered with small wisps of white clouds. “And here I thought it would actually be a *good* day.”

Chapter Three

FRIDAY, JUNE 24 – 1435 ROMEO TIME ZONE



A sharp turn jolted Blake out of a doze. He gasped and sat up. Unfamiliar streets and signs gave him no way to place himself. “Where are we?”

“Detroit,” Aaron said. Looking at him in the late-afternoon light slanting through the windshield, Blake was struck by something like *déjà vu*. The more time he spent around Aaron, the more Blake felt like the Marine reminded him of someone.

“Why Detroit?”

Daelan turned in his seat, sitting sideways to look back at Blake. “The place we have here is as secure as a suburban house that isn’t behind a twenty-foot wall can get. We’re also close to the Canadian border, which may or may not be useful. Depends on the situation.”

“At least it’s summer,” Blake said. “I don’t feel like braving a Canadian winter anytime soon.”

Aaron shuddered. “Hell, no. Between growing up in Florida and spending most of the last eight years in the desert, I think I’ve completely lost the ability to survive in the snow.”

“What kind of Marine would admit defeat just ‘cause of a little frozen water?” Daelan teased.

“A little frozen water,’ he says,” Aaron muttered as he turned onto a gated, well-manicured, tree-lined residential

street. Blake saw Hugo and Bernard's car turn in right behind them. "You spend a night in minus forty and then tell me a little frozen water ain't nothing to worry about."

Daelan laughed.

After about a block, Aaron turned again, bringing them to *another* gate. Blake shook his head. "Wow. You guys weren't kidding when you said this place was suburbia-secure."

"And did I mention it's on an island?" Daelan asked, grinning as they drove over a short bridge. "Cause it's on an island."

If a strip of land only wide enough for a two-lane road with houses on either side could be called an island, then yes, Blake supposed it technically was. Halfway down the dead-end street, Aaron slowed to turn left across the divider into the driveway of one of the larger houses on the block.

Most of the island was flat, but this house sat up on a hill that was almost certainly manmade. The house itself was a two-story, Spanish mission-style building, and it looked old, a relic from the first half of the twentieth century, maybe. Ornate carvings around the front door, imitation gas-lamp sconces attached to the exterior walls, and a narrow balcony over the garage gave it a distinctly old-world, and old-money, feel.

"It's even cooler on the inside." Daelan grabbed his bag and Blake's, nodding toward the front door. "C'mon."

Blake wanted to protest that he could carry his own damn bag, but Daelan was already moving up the paved path. The thick, dark wood door opened before Daelan reached it. A tall, muscle-bound guy with rosy skin and short, dark-blond hair stood in the doorway. His pale eyes passed over Daelan and Blake quickly, then settled on someone behind them, a wide smile taking over his face.

"You're late, asshole," the guy said. His voice was pleasantly deep, and Blake couldn't help smiling at the honest relief in his face. But he wasn't talking to Blake. He was looking at Aaron.

"Traffic. Construction. Alien invasion," Aaron said. "Pick your favorite."

"Aliens." The guy swallowed a laugh as he stepped aside to let Blake and Daelan into the house. "The answer is always aliens."

"I'll keep that in mind." The words were murmured, the tone different enough to draw Blake's attention back. Aaron had stopped in front of the guy. There was almost a foot of air between their bodies—not even their hands were touching—but Blake had seen people in the middle of a make-out session seem less intimate than these two.

Then Aaron walked into the house and the moment ended, the shift so sudden and complete that Blake wasn't sure he'd read it right in the first place.

"That's Corporal Geomar Ashley James, retired," Daelan said, walking backward and giving the man a somewhat mocking salute. "He can kill you from a mile away."

"Geo. Just Geo." The guy shook his head, amused annoyance on his expressive face. The faint Southern drawl to his words made him seem even friendlier. "Why do you insist on using my whole name, ijit? And medical discharge ain't retirement. And quit telling people I just met that I can kill them!"

"Please. You love it." Daelan laughed and pointed at Blake. "Geo, this is Blake Marks, and that's Bernard Gasper. Civilians, come say hello to the rest of your honor guard."

The room they walked through looked like it might have been a porch at some point before it had been enclosed. It stretched the width of the house, with Spanish tile on the

floor and wide windows letting in lots of light. It was empty except for a couple of wooden rocking chairs. Through an arch directly opposite the front door, Blake saw several people moving in the next room. Stepping in, he blinked at the strange scene.

This room was longer than the first, so long that it made the space seem narrower than it was, and the architecture lent credence to his guess that this place was old. Between the exposed beams on the high ceiling were elaborately painted panels, and the stone fireplace on the far left wall was covered with intricate carvings. In the center of the space, completely ignoring the old-world style of the rest of the house, was a tech command center that reminded Blake of the one in the FBI's Baltimore building. New and old squished into one room.

"Hello, family." Daelan's voice rang off the walls. Dropping the bags to the side of the door, he threw his arms open wide. "I have returned victorious! Try to contain your applause."

"Damn it. Can I *please* throw him in the river?" a girl asked, her tone way too dry for the threat to be taken seriously. She had thick black hair that hung straight past her shoulders, and green eyes that were crinkled with amusement. "I mean, look. It's *right there*!"

Laughing, Daelan nodded toward her. "That's Dru Calver: elder sister, expert wielder of sarcasm, and collector of strays."

"I feel like I should be insulted by that," the girl standing next to Dru said. Her tan skin was darker than Dru's but paler than Daelan's. What set her apart from the rest of the people in the house was the way she stood. There was a wary tension in her body, and she seemed to watch everything. Blake had seen similar watchfulness when his dad came back

from long undercover missions. It was the stance of someone who'd learned not to trust *anything*. Or anyone.

"Possibly," Daelan admitted. Then he smirked and nodded at her. "Kindra Weston: ex-bogeyman, most recent stray, and currently Dru's girlfriend."

"Ex-bogeyman?" Blake asked, but wasn't sure he wanted to know.

Kindra's dark eyes met his, no clear emotion on her face. "My parents and my sister are working for the people trying to kill you."

"What?" Blake took a step back. Bernard hadn't told him *that*. Why would the Calvers have her working with them if that was the case?

Kindra shrugged. "If it makes you feel any better, they tried to kill me too."

"That . . ." Her parents had tried to kill her? "No. That doesn't make me feel better." Blake didn't want to meet the person who would be comforted by that news.

Another shrug, this one dismissive. Dru reached out to touch Kindra's elbow, but didn't say anything.

Daelan's smile looked a bit more forced, but he continued his introductions like nothing awkward had happened, gesturing to Aaron. "Kindra and Sergeant Aaron Christopher Tanvers over there were the most recent additions until Aaron kindly let us borrow his boyfriend." Daelan winked at Geo.

"Borrow," Geo scoffed. "Bastard was trying to save his own ass. I would've killed him if he stayed disappeared much longer."

"My dad, Hugo, you've met," Daelan said, indicating the man though Blake already knew who he was. "He runs logistics, and he's the reason we don't work ourselves stupid most jobs."

Hugo rolled his eyes, but smirked.

“And, of course, that brings us to Cassidy Calver, unconventional mother figure and resident mastermind.” As much as Daelan took after Hugo in looks, it seemed Dru had inherited a lot from Cassidy. She had brown hair and hazel eyes, and the golden undertones to her skin could be either a gift of the summer sun or a natural occurrence. Daelan threw his arm around Cassidy’s shoulders and pressed a smacking kiss to her cheek. “Team leader. Techno-wizard. Mentor to the next generation of genius.”

“Flatterer.” Color flushed Cassidy’s cheeks, though, and she seemed pleased.

“All of you but Geo know Bernard, obviously, but this is Blake Marks, who’s calm under pressure and surprisingly handy with a firearm.”

Kindra looked intrigued, but Cassidy and Hugo seemed chagrined.

Cassidy sighed. “I’m sorry that happened, Blake. We’re still trying to figure out how the site got leaked. You were supposed to be safe there until we sorted out the rest of this mess with Lillian.” She ran her hand over Hugo’s closely cut hair, worry on her face. “You made it here clean, right?”

Hugo nodded, but Aaron was the one who answered. “We would’ve noticed a tail over a trip that long. Unless they were doing it from the air, I highly doubt anyone was following.”

The word started a chain reaction of thoughts in Blake’s head. He gasped. “Oh! That’s who—Michael Ealy!” Everyone turned toward Blake, their expressions a mix of surprise, amusement, and confusion—or, in Aaron’s case, embarrassment. “Oh hell. Sorry, but you just . . .”

Kindra smirked at Dru. “I told you it wasn’t just me.”

"I don't look *that* much like him," Aaron muttered. Dru laughed.

"You kinda do, babe." Geo grinned when his boyfriend glared.

"Well, except for the scar and the eye color—and I think you're taller than him," Blake said. "Other than that, though? You guys could be brothers."

Geo rubbed Aaron's shoulder, still grinning. "I don't know why the comparison bothers you so much. The man is *fine*. He's no you, but he's *damn* fine."

"Get off me, ingrate." Laughing, Aaron elbowed Geo in the chest.

Cassidy smiled indulgently at them. Blake got the impression that she'd emotionally adopted all of them, even if Dru and Daelan were her only biological babies. Despite the strange makeup, this group felt like a family, one that Blake was on the outside of in so many ways. The civilian to their black-ops team. The newcomer to their established dynamic. It was overwhelming, and Blake had no idea how to start settling into something like this.

Uncertain, he hung back, concentrating on keeping his weight balanced instead of allowing himself to overthink and blurt out ridiculous nonsense. There must've been something in his face that clued Daelan in, because he looked sympathetic when he caught Blake's eye.

"The bedrooms are upstairs," Daelan said, tilting in that direction. Nodding, Blake picked up his bag and followed Daelan toward the stairs. "The bed situation ended up working out better than we expected. You and I will have to share a room with Bernard because the couples all ended up in their own—not that it matters most nights, since everyone is sleeping in shifts to maintain surveillance."

Surveillance on what? Blake wanted to ask. He didn't. Yet. Getting settled first seemed like the better idea. And maybe being in a house with seven bodyguards instead of two would be enough reassurance to help Blake get more than a couple hours of restful sleep.

Blake touched the carving at the bottom of the staircase, running the pads of his fingers over the curved beak of what he thought was an eagle. The climb wound up a narrow space, three small landings connecting the steps that brought them to the second floor of the house. Daelan walked to the end of the hall and nudged open one of the doors.

"We'll be bunking in here," he said.

There were two double beds surrounded by unadorned blue-gray walls. "Only two?"

"Like I said, most of the time we'll be sleeping in shifts, so if these two are full, another one somewhere else will definitely be open." Daelan shrugged. "Plus, I don't mind sleeping on the floor. I've slept worse places. It should work out all right."

Blake nodded and walked around the room. Opposite the beds was a French door that looked like it led to the narrow balcony he'd spotted over the garage, but otherwise the room was sparse and the walls empty. It wasn't as though the house in Providence had been any better—and neither room was anything close to Blake's bedroom back in Baltimore—but it had been home for the past three months. Blake had had his own room and had gotten used to . . . well, all of it. Looking at the impersonal space made his breath hitch. His hands clenched with the effort to keep from hugging himself defensively. This room, on top of everything else that had happened the past few days, was just the wrong side of too much.

“Welcome to the Citadel, Blake.” As though sensing that Blake was reaching the end of the fraying rope he’d been hanging on to since the fire, Daelan smiled and left, quietly closing the door.

Dropping his bag next to one of the beds, Blake toed off his sneakers and sat with his back against the headboard, his knees tucked close to his chest, and his eyes trained on what little he could see of the quiet street through the glass of the balcony door.

What the hell am I supposed to do now?



Blake should still have been sleeping, but that wasn’t going to happen. Physically, he felt like he’d just gotten over a flu: achy and shaky. Mentally, he couldn’t slow his thoughts down enough. Sheer exhaustion would drag him into unconsciousness eventually, but for now he was sitting in the dining room, watching through the sliding glass door as the sun rose over the canal that extended from the Detroit River.

He’d been sitting here for over an hour already, and both Cassidy and Kindra had passed by to refill their coffee mugs. Their presence was more than enough to prove what Daelan had mentioned yesterday: that *someone* in the house was always awake. It was surprisingly nice not being the only one on a screwed-up sleep schedule. They hadn’t said more than hello to Blake, but knowing they were just a hallway and a room away kept his early-morning vigil from feeling unbearably lonely.

It got even less lonely when Daelan joined him, sitting down at the table and offering a cup of peppermint tea, but

not pressing Blake to talk. They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes before Blake broke it with a question that had been buzzing quietly in the back of his mind. “Why do these windows look warped?”

“Because after we got the message that they’d found you, Geo, Kindra, and Dru reinforced all the glass with two layers of polycarbonate to make them something close to bulletproof. Bullet resistant, at least. As long as no one’s shooting a .50 cal. The warped smokiness in that window means the adhesive must not have dried right.” Daelan shook his head when Blake glanced quickly between the window and his face. “Nah, don’t worry. It won’t make it any weaker.”

“Why didn’t Max and Scott do this in Providence?” Would it have been enough to save them?

Daelan’s nose twitched like he was suppressing a grimace. “It’s not cheap, and they were legitimately renting that house. That kind of ‘improvement’ is hard to explain if the landlord drops by for a visit.”

The word *legitimately* caught Blake’s attention. “Are you guys not renting this one, then?”

“Nah. I mean, sometimes we squat, but this place we bought.”

“You . . .” Blake looked around, eyes wide. “You guys *bought* this place? How long do you plan on staying here?”

“We’ve already been here longer than we probably should,” Daelan admitted. “A full month anywhere is practically forever for us. We’ve had this house for a long while—for us, anyway. They bought it sometime after the economic crash because the owner declared bankruptcy. Got it for nothing, furnished it with consignment stuff, and held it for when we need a place to hole up.”

That thought process was practically alien. “I cannot fathom buying a house just because one day it *might* be useful.”

Daelan laughed. “From what I can tell, it’s not exactly most people’s SOP.”

“S-O— Oh. Standard operating procedure?” Blake tried to smile. “Yeah. Not even close.”

“I know. This is what I grew up with, though. Almost. Mostly.”

He didn’t sound like he was aiming for pity or even sympathy; it was a simple description of his past, vague and unadorned. But he’d said *almost*, which made Blake wonder what might’ve come before this. He opened his mouth to ask; Daelan moved on.

“I like this place better than a lot of the houses we end up using. It’s got character.” He rubbed his hand on the carved windowsill. “Back in the 1920s, this island was basically a Who’s Who of Detroit social royalty. The family who built this place ran illegal hooch down from Canada and hosted massive parties here. I tried to get everyone to code name the place ‘Gatsby.’” He tilted his head and pursed his lips, but it couldn’t hide the laughter in his eyes. “I was overruled.”

“As you should’ve been,” Blake said. “There’s nothing safe about Gatsby.”

“It’d be fitting, then, in a way,” Daelan said quietly. He took a sip of tea, his gaze lingering on the faintly cloudy glass. “It’s not like any of us are very safe either.”

“Safe to be around or safe from harm?” The question popped past Blake’s filter—he blamed a lack of sleep.

Luckily, Daelan smirked. “Either. Both, some days.” Then he put down his mug and rested his elbows on the table, sighing. “You asked me before if Thursday is what my life is like. It’s really not. *This* is more what my life is like.” He gestured

to the peaceful kitchen and to the living room/surveillance suite, from where the murmur of conversation could be heard. “The moments of chaos are scattered between long bouts of waiting and training and research and surveillance and whatever else needs to be done.”

“Boring until suddenly.” Blake nodded, placing his mug on the table and absently spinning it clockwise, trying to ignore the details—the memories—of what “suddenly” usually entailed and how bloody it could get. “That was what my parents’ jobs were like too.”

“Makes sense. What we do is kind of similar to what your dad was trying to do. We just ignore a lot of the more bothersome rules and regs he was bound to uphold.”

“Those rules are there for a reason.” Blake’s voice went harder, harsher than he’d intended.

“Absolutely,” Daelan agreed without a hint of sarcasm or condescension. “There are times, though, when they get in the way more than they help. And that’s where we come in, to pick up where people like your father have to stop.”

Blake stayed silent for a beat. “Like Lillian French.”

“Yes. She’s kept herself hidden so well, there’s nothing to pin on her, legally speaking. If we left it to the government, she’d be running her empire from a nonextradition country for the rest of her plush, happy life.” He shrugged one shoulder and took another sip of tea. “*Maybe* someone from the CIA would step in and do something about her, but even that’s a long shot. It’d only happen if she caused exactly the wrong kind of trouble for the US.”

“Which she’s probably smart enough not to do,” Blake said.

Daelan lifted his mug in a mock toast. “Precisely.”

“And so you guys have made yourselves judge, jury, and executioner?” The question had felt somewhat severe in Blake’s head, but it came out full of curiosity instead.

“Sometimes.” There was absolutely no remorse on his face, no regret, but Blake wasn’t sure if that was because he couldn’t see it or because it truly wasn’t there. “When we have to.”

“And you’re going to do this for the rest of your life?” To Blake, it was unimaginable, being so isolated from what everyone else considered the real world. It was chilling to see in someone so young, or at all, if he were being honest. But—perhaps scarier because of what it said about Blake—it was also comforting. With what he had already seen of Daelan in action, he absolutely believed that Daelan would protect him with his life. Or by taking someone else’s.

“Probably. As long as I can, anyway. I’m good at it.”

Blake was pretty positive that wasn’t an empty boast.

Daelan took another sip of tea. “What about you? Were you going to follow one of your parents’ careers? It seems like you’ve got the right kind of moral compass to sign up to serve and protect in one way or another.”

“Are you really asking me what I want to be when I grow up?”

“Absolutely,” Daelan said, grinning. He did that a lot, more than Blake had expected when he imagined what Daelan Calver was like.

“I don’t know.” Though Blake forced the corners of his mouth up, the expression didn’t feel genuine. “I thought I wanted to once, but now I highly doubt I’ll do anything in law enforcement.”

“Why not?” There was a surprising amount of confusion on his face. But he’d obviously been groomed to join a family business. Blake’s parents had done some of that too, but not to

the same extent. And definitely not without letting him know at every crossroad that Blake could choose whatever path made him happiest. It didn't seem like there had been a lot of crossroads with open paths for Daelan. Maybe he assumed there hadn't been for Blake, either.

"Because I'm pretty sure I want a family of some sort one day, and I..." Blake picked at a splotch of paint on table. "I've been the one left at home, wondering if people I loved were going to make it back alive. And then one day they didn't. I don't want to do that to someone else."

Plus, Blake wasn't sure if he could ever make the decision to take someone's life. Shooting almost blindly when bullets and bombs were already flying should have been the easiest test to pass, but Blake had barely been able to pull the trigger. How could a partner, squad, or—worse—civilians rely on someone too moral to protect them? Too black-and-white to even listen without some judgment to his own parents' stories about their jobs?

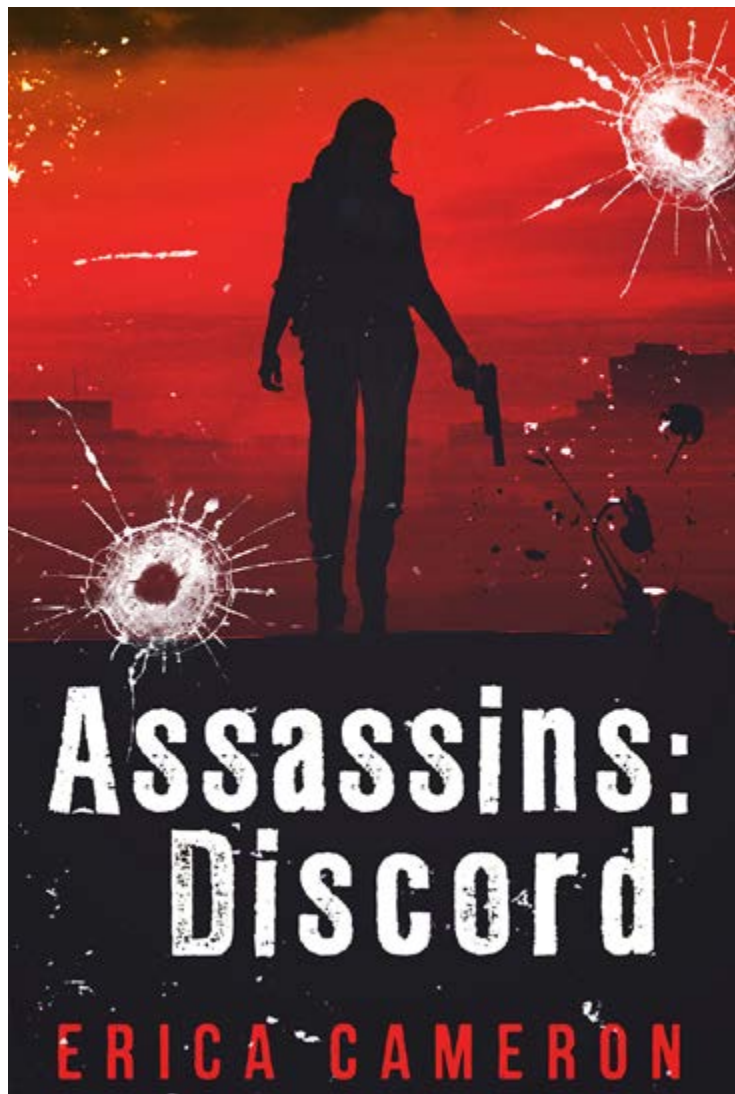
When Daelan spoke, his words were quiet. "That's more than fair." He cleared his throat. "What do you want to do instead? I mean, after this is over and it's safe for you to go home."

Blake almost cringed. "I have to figure out where home is first."

Although he still had Uncle Altair and Aunt Fayza, it wasn't like he had any biological family left to go home to. Not any that lived in the States.

That realization, that thought, scared him more than all the gunfights in the world.

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To anyone who reads this, hello and thank you! To anyone who goes the extra step and leaves a review, or convinces a friend to buy it too, or reaches out in an email to let me know you enjoyed it, super extra thank you! It's those things that support and sustain an author's career.

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ABOUT the Author



Erica is many things but most notably the following: writer, reader, editor, dance fan, choreographer, singer, lover of musical theater, movie obsessed, sucker for romance, Florida resident, and quasi-recluse. She loves the beach but hates the heat, has equal passion for the art of Salvador Dalí and Venetian Carnival masks, has a penchant for unique jewelry and sun/moon décor pieces, and a desire to travel the entire world on a cruise ship. Or a private yacht. You know, whatever works.

In addition to the Assassins series, she is also the coauthor of the Laguna Tides novels as well as the author of The Dream War Saga and the upcoming Ryogan Chronicles. You can learn more about her books at ByEricaCameron.com.

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