Covent Garden Hotel

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Summary

After the events of The Night Manager with Angela Burr and Richard Roper, Jonathan Pine has retreated back into his former quiet life, as the night manager of The Covent Garden Hotel in London. As the lead on the West End, Kristiane is one of his more well-known guests. An unlikely friendship forms between the Broadway singer and the hotelier when a mysterious job offer lands in Kristiane’s hands. Bomb threats have also surfaced targeting theatres in New York City and London, but some of the details become a little too familiar for Jonathan to remain the hidden watcher.

Notes

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Covent Garden
Chapter 1

Covent Garden Hotel, West End, London - May - 0100 Hours

Jonathan Pine’s fingers stilled on the terminal, mid-booking of yet another night of theatre tickets for the half-soused American dignitaries who had just, with loud yawns and boisterous shouts and heavy feet, trod into the lift, toward their rooms, and toward sleep.

Hopefully they’d sleep.

Pine sighed inwardly. He hated the thought of the complaints he’d hear in the morning should these arseholes keep their racket up. Especially the complaints from the so-called star - a Broadway actress - who had taken up temporary residence on the fifth floor.

And the reason for the interruption in Pine’s work, the reason he peered up from the computer screen toward the door, the reason he allowed his features to slip into their usual mask of affable servitude - slight smile, attentive eyes, neutral brow - was that very actress.

“Good evening, Miss Taylor.” He gave a slight bow of the head, respectful, cheerful, but not overly so. Without breaking eye contact with her, he reached down to the counter, retrieved her key card, and hand it across the counter to her. “Your key. I do hope your performance went well this evening.”

“Well enough.” The waft of cheap cologne and cheaper beer from an overly friendly American diplomat chased after her to the front desk. Meeting the polite smile from the hotel night manager with a fake one of her own, Kristiane waved the piece of plastic like a fan before her face. “One day, you’ll trust me with a key of my own. Maybe?”

Another arrogant audience member that considered the star of Carousel his own personal plaything after watching her for two and half hours on stage slapped her ass on his way past the desk to the bar. She jumped and cringed inwardly, biting her tongue. Centering herself and using every acting tip she’d ever been taught, she waved to the would-be producer. “Trent, you’re a doll,” she lied brightly, before adding under her breath, “you piece of shit.”

Turning her attention back to the somewhat stoic Pine, she leaned over the pure oak top of the desk. “Would you ask Carl to see me up to my room please?” She glanced towards the door marked private and tilted her head in that direction. “The audience…” she indicated with a shift of her eyes to the raucous bunch shouting their orders at the bartender, “…rambunctious tonight.”

When she looked back to possibly the last gentleman in London, his eyes slid from following the poor excuse of a man into the bar back to her. His eyes held a thinly veiled look of disgust at the unfortunate display. “I’m sorry, Miss Tay–”

“Kristie,” she corrected with a sly smile, reminding him again that he could be less than formal with her. “This is my new home… maybe you can get used to me.”

Pine allowed himself the slightest of smiles, lowering his eyes in an expression that on a woman would have been almost coquettish. That, Pine counted, was now the fourth time that the American actress, with her shockingly informal manners, had corrected him, almost demanding that he call her by her given name or some variation thereof… Kristiane, Kristie, KT…

And, as per, Pine responded to the correction with a polite tip of his head, and a nod of acknowledgement - but not acquiescence. He lifted the phone from its cradle, pressed a button, and
waited. “Carl,” he said, curtly. “Miss Taylor is in need of an escort to her room, if you would be so kind.” He peered up at the actress, smiling warmly.

“Sorry, Pine, old chap,” came the voice on the other line. “That bastard MacKinnon’s ordered a bottle of champers and he wants it now or what what. I’m on my way now t’ bring it up.”

Pine sighed through his nose. “Very good, thank you, Carl.”

“Give you a chance to get some action then wi’ the pretty lady, mate.”

“Yes. Thank you, Carl,” Pine repeated, sharpening his voice. “That will be all.” Musterimg all of his self control, he hung the phone back up with a deliberate click. “Carl is otherwise engaged, Miss Taylor,” he said evenly, straightening his jacket. “I shall happily see you to your room.” He addressed the associate standing beside him. “Pardon me, Miss Janey,” he said, formally, “would you please mind the front for a moment?”

“Of course, Mister Pine.”

Pine gave a small bow. “Thank you,” he said, and then turned once again to Kristiane. “Please meet me at the corridor,” he gestured with two pointing fingers toward the end of the counter. “And I will be happy to accompany you.”

“Oh, joy,” she teased sarcastically, stepping in the direction of the the main corridor to the bank of elevators. “I’ll be by the… lifts. And try not to look like I’m going to push you down the shaft.”

Miss Janey nodded a good evening toward the actress, obligatory smirking into her computer monitor. Her tone held much of her mirth, “Good night, Miss Taylor.”

The actress hummed the recognizable melody of “If I Loved You” from her current show, an occupational hazard. She waited patiently for her escort, entertaining herself the only way she knew how.

When the man emerged from the Employee Only door, she felt him more than heard him. His commanding presence could’ve made for a killer leading man should he decide to change careers. Maybe she should’ve felt intimidated by him, but oddly she felt safe.

“I’m harmless, you know,” she said in the way of conversation when he gestured before him. He surveyed the lobby and the few feet of corridor behind them before following the ingenue when he gathered that none were following. “I never would’ve believed otherwise.”

Aha! There was a masked humor in that professional set of his lips, she saw it. This one wasn’t all business after all. “These Saturday crowds,” she waved her hand over her shoulder, “They’re getting more touchy-feely, and confident,” mimicking the slap that she’d been on the receiving end of against her denim-covered hip.

“The show is closing soon, yes?” The pair stepped onto the elevator, and he reached around her to push the button for the fifth floor.

“Yeah, next week… one more week…” she sighed dramatically, leaning into the ornately covered wall. “I love and hate this part of it. I’ll miss this family, but I’m ready for the next role. Can’t come soon enough, with those assholes treating me as if they own me until then.”

An unobtrusive sound announced the arrival to the fifth floor, and the doors opened to the plush carpet. Pine took the lead, watching for any uninvited fans as Carl had done for the past four
Saturdays. “I liked your performance in this one.”

Smooth. Surprising and smooth. “Mr. Pine, you surprise me! You don’t seem the one for musicals.”

“Oh, I’m not, but the lead has been staying in my hotel. Recommending a performance I’d experienced for myself to guests… I’m a professional, Miss Taylor.”

She nodded. “I never would’ve believed otherwise,” parroting his words as they arrived at her door.

Pine turned his head away slightly, hiding the small, wry smile that cut his otherwise placid face. He allowed himself a tiny, quiet breath of a chuckle before turning back to the actress, his mask set firmly back into place.

He liked her, liked this brash, bold, unreserved, and very, very American woman. He’d not admit it, but yes, he found her… well, entertaining.

He held out his hand. “Your key, please.”

Kristiane brandished said key card, and with a dramatic flourish, set it upon his palm. “Voila,” she sang.

Pine nodded. “Thank you. Stay here, please.” He swiped the card into the slot, and the light flashed from red to green. “Allow me to go in first. I will tell you when to come in.”

“What, afraid someone might come into the hotel and sneak in to my room? Don’t you trust your security?” Her tone was teasing, light, but there was an edge to it.

Pine froze, mid push of the door. He turned to her. “Of course I trust my own security,” he said, plainly. “It is not those who may come into the hotel off the street I am concerned with; it is our own guests.”

“I thought this place was a five-star hotel, Michelin rated restaurant, best of the best on Travelocity, and all that,” she countered. “At seven hundred pounds per night, you’d think you’d get a better clientele.”

“Wealth does not always equate with morals, Miss Taylor,” he declared, averting his eyes. “Quite the opposite, actually.” He pushed the door the rest of the way open, flipped the light on, and quickly scanned the suite in his typical, tactical pattern. Finding it empty, he crossed back to the door, opened it the rest of the way and gestured. “Come in, Miss Taylor,” he said, and then queried: “Shall I turn your bed down for you?”

“Yes, thanks.” Kristiane flicked her wrist at the bed in dismissive acceptance, as his statement wormed its way into her head. Her expression drooped from good-humored mockery to pensive. Quietly, almost inwardly, she mused, “Morals…”

The hotelier moved to his post at the head of the queen bed. There was grace in the task he’d performed hundreds, if not thousands of times before. He took pride in doing his duty, but there was more to it than that, an elegance, a style. He turned down the sheets for the guest not because he offered, but because he found dignity in doing so. Anticipating her needs, Pine filled the kettle and set the water to boil after he finished arranging her bed. Pine knew she often asked Carl to brew her a cup of tea with honey and lemon, following a day of two performances.

And she’d performed, not only on stage tonight, but for those blokes in the hotel lobby with their slurred speech and anxious hands.
Distractedly, Kristiane hummed another ‘thank you’ as she flopped down into a chair under obscenely large window above the charming shops and British pubs along the main street. “Are you familiar with Oscar Wilde, Mr. Pine?”

The question caught him unawares, his mind tracing back over their brief conversation to pick up the trail that she was on. Nonplussed, he replied, “Not personally, but naturally, I’m familiar with his writing.”

“He once said: ‘Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.’ Well, that– I’ve-I’ve kinda built my career on doing that, being everyone else… and sometimes… sometimes…” she trailed off lost in her thoughts.

Drawing closer to her, he said, “You may pretend to be others for a short time, but you seem very much yourself here.”

Her gaze focused on him as he stood a small distance from her. “I wonder…” she said airily. She’d gone uncharacteristically quiet and subdued in those few minutes.

“May I be of some assistance to you?” He almost preferred the brash New Yorker with more voice than brains, but this was a new side to her. One he hadn’t seen before. He liked the confident, carefree entertainer, but he hadn’t been introduced to the intellectual side, the one who could quote Oscar Wilde.

Her eyes cleared of some inner musing before she waved him into the chair across from her, a request he didn’t fulfill. “Do you ever feel like you shouldn’t do something because it’s not quite how things go? Or should go?”

Pine stood rigid as days of his military career rolled through his head like an old silent movie, broken, grainy, jumpy images of some of the actions that didn’t jive with his belief as a patriot. Far from appropriate tea conversation with the actress, he addressed the elusive question vaguely, “I think we’ve all been in that situation, Miss Taylor. I’m sure you’ll make the right decision for you, whatever it might be.”

She pressed her lips together and nodded just once. With some effort, she rose to her feet and smiled a wide faux smile, like the one he saw earlier with the handsy jerk in the lobby. “I’m sure I will. Thanks,” she dismissed as pleasantly as she could.

Pine inclined his head. “My pleasure, Miss Taylor,” he said. “Please do not hesitate to ask should you need anything else.” He smiled his usual, placid smile, but that time, for some reason… he allowed the smile to reach his eyes.

Something unknown, something intangible poked at the back of his mind. Her words, possibly. Her tone, probably. The change in her demeanor, most likely. Her question, definitely. Whatever it was, he carried it with him to the door of the suite, felt it tingle as he pulled the door open, heard it scream as he stepped through the threshold.

He stopped then, hand still on the doorknob. He peered over his shoulder before turning on the spot, lifting his head, and considering the woman before him. “Miss Taylor,” he said, softly, stepping back into the room.

“Yes?” She looked up, somewhat startled. Yet, she once again plastered the Broadway grin across her face. It was, Pine noted, her mask. Like he had his, she had hers, and like he’d used his to hide from her, she did the same.
Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t be so… forthright,” he said, “but if there is anything you wish…,” he swallowed and chuckled in a self-deprecating manner, lowering his eyes beneath his long lashes. “I mean to say, if you should need the ear of someone, say, on the outside to speak with… a friend, perhaps,” he inhaled sharply, puffing up his chest, and lifted his eyes back to meet her, rather confused, gaze, “I should be happy to oblige you in that.”

Before she could reply, before she could utter a word, Pine gave a curt nod, turned on his heel, and once again, pulled the door open. “Good night, Miss Taylor,” he said, and then added, “Kristiane.”
He’d said her name. Pine allowed and invited a less formal approach to their exchange, and that wore down her defenses. And he also said the one thing she needed so desperately, and something she’d been longing for, a friend. A friend.

The term haunted her, Pine’s word choice haunted her. It had been so long since she had one, a true friend. Someone who wasn’t caught up in what she did or which role she portrayed. She hadn’t found a true friend since her stay in London began four months ago. All of her friends, those she considered her family, were back in New York City, performing and spending time with each other, drinking and laughing together. Without her.

Then there was Terry… Actually, the lack of her best friend in the entire world, her anchor, her soul mate, her right arm. Terry had hooked up with a dance troupe out of New York six months ago, and began touring Europe with his boyfriend, Christian, the lead dancer. Yeah, she thought the name thing had been irony and fate having a laugh at her. She lost touch with him somewhere in Vienna back in March, and hadn’t heard from him since. She knew he was fine, as his Facebook was packed with pictures and selfies of him and Christian in all corners of the globe.

Kristiane accepted the role of Julie Jordan in Carousel in London for the experience of performing on the West End. As much as she loved the score and performing, it wasn’t the dream come true she thought it would be. It was a job and nothing more than that. She didn’t connect. She wasn’t invested in this production. She loved performing and singing, and that was her lifeline, but she couldn’t exactly claim to be living the dream.
She felt lonely, singular, without her friends, her family. She didn’t have anyone. Pine offered something she craved. Could he be the Angel of Music whispering in her ear to sing? To voice her fears and suspicions to?

The hotel door that he’d closed upon his exit down stage captured her focus. She stared after him for inordinate amount of time, considering, weighing up what to do. Maybe… perhaps he could be the impartial ear… for what she feared, what she’d buried in denial for weeks.

As these things happen, when she wanted to run into him by happenstance, Pine wasn’t around. Sunday had been his day off, like her. She occupied her thoughts by spending time shopping, wiling away the hours, hoping to catch him when she walked by the front desk. Monday arrived and passed without so much as a hiccup, and she didn’t see her Angel of Music. Tuesday went much the same, and she shelved the idea of talking to him, doubting that it was worth the effort. This was all in her head, the stress, and the questions.

She convinced herself that she was paranoid. Until her mobile phone rang at 6:23pm on Wednesday. “Kristiane, it’s Spencer, stage manager for Nilton Productions.”

“Hi… uh… Spencer, you said? I’ve been expecting Dylan Childs to call me.” She hadn’t yet met anyone in person attached to her next production with Nilton. “Uh… I’m… uh, this isn’t the best time.”

“Won’t keep you, hun. Wanted to lock you down for rehearsal.”

“Can you email me the schedule? I’ve got–”

“No can do, hun. Our server crashed this week, new system, and all that goes with it. Listen, hun, the studio space is in Southwark, I’ll text you the exact address. We’re set up for 10am, next Monday. Don’t call us, we’ll call you to confirm. But mark it down, next Monday, 10am.” Then the line went dead. She checked the number for the incoming call, it had been marked private.

Taking advantage of her mobile in her hand, she dialed the number for the only place she could truly call home. “Thank you for choosing The Covent Garden Hotel. Jonathan Pine, the night manager, here, how may I help?”

“Um… Mr. Pine, this is…” she trailed off losing some of her momentum when one of her coworkers passed her dressing room.

“Miss Taylor.” A pause. “Kristiane”

Breathing in deeply, she stared blankly at her reflection in the mirror, contemplating. She felt a certain level of commitment now that he recognized her voice. “Mr. Pine. I need a favor. Please.”

“Of course, naturally. How can I help you?” His voice dropped some of the methodical professionalism, and he made it sound just a little less formal.

“I– this isn’t– may I meet with you tonight? Alone? I don’t– not over the phone.”

“Are you quite alright, Kristiane?”

“Can we meet privately please?”

“Of course. I’ll put Carl up front. Will my office do?”

She nodded with her entire body. “Yes, thanks. Can you pull all my financial information since the
start of my stay? And the deposit information for the next part of my stay? Something’s… not right.”

“Whatever it is, we’ll sort it together. I will have my office free tonight for you. You should be in at your usual time, yes?”

Covent Garden Hotel - 0100 hours

“Miss Taylor to see you, Mr. Pine.”

Jonathan lifted his eyes to the soft-spoken yet burly man. He pulled his fingers away from his keyboard, mid-sentence in a reply to a five star review on Trip Advisor. “Thank you, Carl,” he said. “Please, bring her back, show her in, thank you.”

Three minutes later, the door opened again, wider this time. Once again, Carl’s round head poked through before the rest of his bulky body followed. Carl stepped to the side, and with a gesture, ushered Kristiane in. “Miss Kristiane Taylor,” Carl announced.

Pine stood, and after straightening his suit and brushing down his tie, held out his hand and stepped around his desk. “Miss Taylor,” he beamed. “Do come in, please.”

“Thank you,” Kristiane replied, placing her hand in his.

Pine noticed straight away the strength of her handshake. Pine was no wilting flower, but if this woman had squeezed him any harder she’d have broken a phalanx or two. Yet, Pine smiled warmly at her, and covered her hand with his other one, pressing against her skin in a reassuring pulse.

“Please, sit down,” he said, releasing her hand. He pointed to one of two overlarge wing chairs that sat beside a narrow, small fireplace. “May I offer you a drink? Tea?”

“Do you have any Scotch? Maybe even some… something like tequila?” Kristiane perched herself at the edge of the chair, her hands firmly in her lap, fingers twisting one upon the other. “Something with a lot of bite to it and preferably a lot of alcohol?”

Pine’s eyebrows shot up, eyes wide and blinking in surprise. “I… I do,” he stammered. “I’ve a bottle of fifteen year old Bowmore single malt, if that will suffice.”

Kristiane nodded quickly, her breath coming out in a ragged huff through her nose.

Pine gave her a small, reassuring smile before turning to his sideboard. He took up a crystal glass, placed ice in it, and then decanted a perfect two fingers of amber liquid. He lifted the water pitcher, leaving it to hover over the glass. “Water?”

She didn’t respond, but sat, once again fidgeting with her fingers.

“Water, Kristiane?”

“Huh?” She looked up, startled. “Oh, no. I’d like it neat, please.”

Pine hid an astonished flare of the eyes. He set the pitcher back down and placed her drink on a tray. This, he carried back to the sitting area, presenting the aged Scotch to her with a slight bow. “Your drink, Miss Taylor.”

“Thank you,” she replied, her voice again, rather vacant, rather distant.

Very much not like her.
Pine sighed. “Okay,” he said quickly, all semblance of formality, of servitude, of professionalism vanishing. He practically threw the tray aside onto his desk, and sat on the chair opposite Kristiane. He leaned forward, elbows upon his knees, and with both hands, quickly loosened his tie. “Talk, Kristiane,” he said, bluntly. “What the devil’s going on, and what can I do to help you?”

The uncharacteristically nervous actress swallowed half her drink in one long pull. Gulping down hard past the burn, Kristiane took comfort in feeling something other than anxious, even if it was tinged with pain. It was a relief beyond the dread of the unknown. “There’s more, right?”

Pine dipped his head in a nod as he half-perched, half-leaned in his chair. As confident and calm as he appeared to be, there was an underlying, latent sense of ready about him too. He didn’t smile at her joke, his focus entirely on what brought this woman to his office, and why she adamantly wanted discretion about this meeting.

“I’m sure that I’m not the first performer that you’ve had in your hotel,” she began, crossing one leg over the other. Her dangling foot bounced as her voice wavered.

Pine nodded in agreement.

“So you’re probably familiar with the American and British equities. They negotiate swaps and exchanges, even straight up agreements to allow performers to jump the pond…”

Pine blinked. He’d met and entertained his share of pooled talent from all over the globe. Kelsey Grammar, the American, stayed in room 633 for a spell of a week, while he appeared as a special guest in a play on the West End. Hugo Weaving, a high profile Australian actor, had been a guest in the Covent Garden Hotel for six months some years ago. Blankly, he prompted, “Go on.”

Downing the other half of her drink, Kristiane dropped the empty glass on the desktop with a loud clunk. “I’m here because of one of those agreements. My American agent– I don’t have one here– landed it for me. I expressed an interest in going up for this show, because London … and here I am!” She held her arms up in show, bent at the elbow, palms to the ceiling, minus the pep in her voice.

She continued, “I got a phone call a few weeks ago from a man named Dylan Childs–”

“Do you know him?”

She shook her head, her shaking hand from nerves or the alcohol it was difficult to know, came to rest at the base of her throat. “He was with one production company or another. Carousel posted its closing notice and the next day, this man was on my phone offering a new role.” She took a pregnant pause, and then exclaimed, “A new musical.” And yet another qualifier came to her, “A new opportunity.”

Handing her another perfectly poured two fingers nightcap, he urged her on with a small wave of his hand, giving her the floor.

“I don’t need to tell you, Mr. Pine,” she got to her feet to pace, the alcohol having little effect. Her feet tried to reconcile all the thoughts that came to her head in the tiny expanse of his office. “An actress and singer is nothing without a show… well, an audience really. I told the man I was interested. I like performing. I’d like to create a role here. That’s the dream! I like playing Julie, but so many actresses have done it before me. I want to do something new and fresh, unexplored.

“This man, this Dylan Childs gave it to me. When I said that I was interested, he took it to mean that I’d do it. Like for sure.”
The night manager led the pacing woman by her shoulders back into the seat before she wore a hole in the office carpeting. “This Childs didn’t ask for your manager or your agent? Any representation?”

The innocent, vulnerable look she gave him reminded him of a lost child. Her big blue eyes were rounded in some kind of horror that she’d worked up, struggled with this on her own. “There’s no contract, no agreement, no script! I’m supposed to report to rehearsal in ten days, but I’ve got nothing—”

“How many times has he been in contact with you?”

“A few, and he always treats me like I’m doing this! I mentioned my equity agreement, and he said he would take care of it. I said that I’d need to discuss my pay and my housing… you know, actual specifics– this is my career!”

As she became a little more hysterical, Pine remained calm. What he felt on the other hand was anything but, probably akin to how she sounded, but he needed more to go on before he moved into action. “May I see your mobile?” He held his hand out to accept it, giving her no room to deny him.

Startled, Kristiane fished the device from her pocket and dropped into his palm, eager to be rid of it. “They’re all private numbers.” A helpless, resigned tone. “They–”

He stopped scrolling through her phone to meet her eyes. “They?”

“There’s another one. He called tonight. Spencer, the stage manager. Apparently.”

“You’ve talked to two different men about this. Can you think of anything else to tell me?”

“Only Dylan Childs and this Spencer, and Nilton Production Company.”

Pine pocketed her mobile in the breast pocket of his blazer and alighted to his feet. He circled to the other side of the desk and scribbled these names on the small Covent Garden Hotel notepad, with the logo on the bottom. “I checked your financials as you asked. Playful Productions has been paying your expenses through the end of this week when Carousel closes. But you’re booked in for another month…”

“That’s what I want to know!” She wailed. “Who’s paying that bill?”

Pine lowered himself into his desk chair, reached between his legs and pulled it forward, not taking his eyes off the computer screen. He shifted the mouse left and right, his gaze flicking back and forth over the information that came up. He clicked on the button “account number,” giving a short, “hm” at the number that materialised in the box.

“CH93 0076 2011 6238 5295 7,” he read, narrowing his eyes. “It’s a private bank account, direct withdrawals on a…,” he clicked on another box, “on a weekly basis. CH…,” he mused, as the format of the account was familiar to him. Very, very familiar. Personally familiar.

“CH. That’s the first two digits of a Swiss IBAN.” He peered up at Kristiane, who was now hovering over his shoulder, her hand resting on the back of his chair. “You don’t happen to do your banking in Switzerland, do you?”

“Switz – what?” Kristiane bent lower, her eyes intent on the screen, her face close, almost uncomfortably close to Pine’s. So close that he could feel her breath on his face, smell the tuberose notes of her perfume. “No,” she barked, straightening back up. “I don’t… I don’t even know how to work my way around an American bank account let alone a Swiss one!”
“Well,” Pine said, mousing over and clicking the ‘x’ in the corner of the screen. “It seems someone you know does.” He stood, lifting her mobile phone from his pocket. “Tell me your PIN,” he said, “for your phone. How do I unlock it?”

“2-4-6-0-1,” she said, absently.

Pine chuckled. “Figures,” he said. “You ought to consider a new one… that’s the first one I’d have tried, and I’ve only known you a few weeks.” He gave her a wry smile, trying, and failing to give her a modicum of comfort. He thumbed in the access code, and, working quickly, found the incoming phone calls.

“How, you’re right,” he said. “All these are blocked numbers. Damn.” He thought for a long moment, his gaze distant, before snapping back, lifting his eyes quickly to Kristiane. “Any of these phone calls… have any of them come to your room, I mean… on the landline?”

“No… well, you’d know better– The hotel tracks all incoming calls, right? I turned that thing off when I checked in.” She explained when Pine gave her another silent perusal. “I don’t keep ‘normal hours.’” She airquoted as she stepped back around the desk towards the fireplace, reeling from the enormity of giving voice to this thing that had been hanging over her head.

The printer hummed to life and spit out a copy of account information that kept the actress in his hotel. Pine set the printout aside with the notepad with the names on it. He’d investigate and research all avenues those led without the worried woman treading lines in his office. He shoved the chair out with his hamstring muscles and poured her another drink, surely three would calm her.

“Come to think of it, these people have only ever called me outside ‘normal hours.’ Never nine to five,” she endearingly sang the phrase a la Dolly Parton. “… like business people. It’s always been while I’m at the theatre, before curtain, while I’m warming up.”

Pine handed her the drink and gestured to the chair again, urging her to sit, to relax. He sat opposite from her when she followed his non-verbal direction. “They know your schedule. Do you, forgive me, have any enemies? Upset anyone? Anyone who would want to hurt you?” He couldn’t imagine it himself, she was as harmless as she claimed to be. He saw a loud and ambitious American– but outwardly vicious, no, not by any stretch.

She gasped. “I hope not! I made a career in pleasing people!”

“I have to ask. I’m only ruling it out as a possibility.” It was a test, to introduce some of the people in her life into his. His instinct demanded that everything was still a possibility.

“Am I some kind of Swiss mail order bride?”

“It doesn’t appear that way. Switzerland has paid your way to stay in London.”

The empty glass made its way from her hand to his desk again. Kristiane leaned back in the wing backed chair, her petite frame disappearing in its space. “What am I gonna have to do to earn my board? Here?” Her hand flew up into air, circling about her head, to the hotel at large. Before he could respond, she sighed and pushed to her feet - again! “May I have the key for Sky Masterson’s room please?”

Pine frowned. **What the hell? Was she one of these American women who couldn’t hold her drink? Started babbling like an idiot in her cups? Didn’t peg her for it. Maybe I’m wrong. Shit, he thought, would she be coming on to me next? Jesus.** “Sky – what? What does Sky Masterson have to do with anything?”
Kristiane seemed to deflate in her annoyance. Her hands fell, shoulders dropped in equal proportion to the distance her eyes rolled to the ceiling. “Sky Masterson!” she repeated. “You know who that is. You have to know.”

Pine’s eyes narrowed. “Guys and Dolls?!” he asked incredulously. “Do you mean you want to use the music room?”

“You have seen it!”

“Yeah,” Pine countered. “Parts of it. Only half paid attention to it though. The other half of me had an ear out for gunfire and explosions outside.”

“Explosions?”

He pressed his lips together, wishing he could slap himself. Shut your fucking mouth, Pine. “USO came through Sadr City… Iraq,” he said, terse. “Your boys invited us over for a bit of diversion… some bunch of actors doing bits and bobs from American musicals. That song about luck… was one of the bits.”

“Oh.”

He gave a mirthless chuckle. “Yeah. Oh.” He paused a moment, then, tempted to talk further, to say more, to share more of his past with this rather pretty, odd-speaking, strange-tempered American bird; not sure at all from where the temptation came, but it was there.

She reminded him, in an off-kilter way, of Jed. The thought of Jed made him think of Sophie.

A thought he immediately shook off.

He turned abruptly, reached over his desk and pulled the drawer open, fishing out the ancient key to the hotel’s old music hall. “I take it,” he said, turning back to face her, “you want to go sing for a while. Get your mind off… things, while I see to them?” He cocked his head. “Is that what you want?”

He held the key out to her, flat on the palm of his hand. “Take it,” he said. “Use it whenever you like. Consider it yours.”

Every girl’s dream, she thought to herself, her very own music room. Naturally it wasn’t every girl’s dream, but all the girl’s that Kristiane surrounded herself with. And it was her dream. A room to find her equilibrium, her harmony, her sound, to find herself.

Before she took the key to her music room, she bounced into a curtsy, an imitation, a long way off mimic of the curtain call curtsy she did every night. The instinct drove her down into the dip, the instinct to thank him for even listening to her problem. Somehow similar to that of a receptive audience clapping for her, Pine acknowledged what she needed. More than acknowledged, encouraged… even if he didn’t understand it himself.

Kristiane stood at her full height before him, capping her flighty voice. Her eyes softened and landed on his, her face elevated and canted just slightly. “You know…” She paused for effect, to search just the right phrase to get them speaking the same language again. “I appreciate theatre, not just because I’m a performer, I’m also an excellent audience member too.”

His taut expression brought on by the memory of scorched flesh and rivers of blood, and the constant reminder that humans were fallible, breakable and fragile beings. Scarier than that, day in and day out, he feared his own mortality. His eyebrows loosened from their knot as he followed her intuitive
To qualify it further, she said, “I can listen. A… friend perhaps?”

Quite the mimic, she threw his words back at him, like a volley, but softer, in her own way. A reciprocation. Kristiane hadn’t come to him to save her, she came to him for help when she was in over her head. Another pair of eyes, another pair of ears, and another viewpoint. It was up to him to accept her friendship in return.

She stepped backwards with one foot and then the other, dividing and cutting the quiet of their talk. “I do know what you must think of me.” The singer took a breath and sang her next thought: “But the one thing I’ve learned Is oftentimes first impressions Are worth a second glance”* 

“From one of your musicals?”

She rolled her eyes again at the cringe buried deep in his words. “Let me say this one more thing…”

Like he could stop her if he wanted to…

“’To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.’

“Oscar Wilde. I know that one, Miss Taylor. I am versed in English Literature.”

“I don’t want that, for me, so I sing! That’s my… celebration? of whoever I am. It’s not for you, I can scale it back.” She winked at her own pun, smiling for him, the alcohol finally breaking through her nerves about the predicament she was in. “What’s yours? Being surly all the time?” A sour scowl crossed her face in an imitation of him, turned on her heel and left.
He sighed, watching after her, his eyes fixed upon the now shut door to his office. His office which felt suddenly empty, vacant, as if he were a mere ghost in the room, her presence - the entire life of it. Gone.

He’d thought about her words, about her… sentiments, and he sighed again. He’d offered her friendship and reneged on the deal. He’d offered her solace, and at the first indication of her taking it, yanked it back.

Par for the god damn course.

He inhaled sharply, the decision made. He quickly undid his tie and tossed it uncharacteristically upon his desk. He shimmied out of his jacket, hanging it upon the hook on the back of his door. He shucked his crisp, white shirt as well and slid his single, wooden hanger through it, clicking the metal hook onto the rack in the small closet.

In their place, he chose a pair of jeans, and a dark blue, long sleeved shirt. One with three buttons beneath a soft collar. A woman had once told him it brought out the blue in his eyes; eyes that, according to her - what was her name? - could soothe even the most savage of beasts. She’d said his eyes were like music; and he believed her.

It was the only thing she’d said that he believed.

He pushed open the door of his office, and threw a curt “I’m taking the rest of the night off,” to Carl.

To which Carl responded with a sharp, questioning, “What the…? You never take time off, Johnny!”

“I am now.”

“What’s wrong with you, are you sick or something?”

“Or something.”

And with that, he strode out from behind the counter, fetched two beers from behind the bar, and made a bee-line straight for the music room.
He heard her before he saw her. Heard the occasional ‘ping’ of a note on the piano, heard her voice as it wavered from pitch to pitch. When she began a song, it formed as if by magic from her mouth… no, not just from her mouth, but from her soul.

The words, though. They cut sharply through him from the very first line of the song. Oh, God, those words.

“I don’t expect my love affairs to last for long… never fooled myself, that my dreams would come true. Being used to trouble, I anticipate it. But all the same, I hate it… wouldn’t you? So… what happens now?”

It felt as if she were singing his thoughts - those snake-like, writhing, smothering and suffocating ruminations that kept him up at night… every night. The loneliness and despair that was always set free in the dark after being kept caged up beneath his ribs, hidden in the light. Those things called emotions that he’d kept bottled up lest they tear him apart with their bloodied claws.

“What’s yours… being surly all the time?” Her words floated in his memory as her song floated in the air. And once again, with her music, she described his life. Described it to a T.

“Call in three months time and I’ll be fine I know. Well… maybe not that fine, but I’ll survive anyhow. I won’t recall the names and places of this sad occasion. But that’s no consolation - here and now.”


No, there was no consolation. No consolation indeed. There never was - for he did recall the names and faces of every single sad occasion. And… like the ghost he was, they haunted him.

“You need to stop merely existing and live, Pine, old boy,” he muttered to himself. “Starting now.”

Another suitcase in another hall. Where am I going to?

Don’t ask… anymore.

And so, when she stopped singing, he pushed away from the wall, took two steps into the room, set the bottles down upon one of the small tables… and applauded.

“Brava!”

Kristiane’s late night serenades to herself, for herself, by herself were never planned, the songs never predetermined, nor how much time she’d spend. One song, five songs, it was whatever was in her heart to do, so she did it. Weeks could go by and she wouldn’t need the space, but then she could also spend long hours clunking away at the old Steinway, rehearsing, practicing, warming up.

This Steinway begged for the best of lounge and nightclub acts to lay across it in red sequined dresses crooning the next best version of ‘The Man Who Got Away’ in their best Judy Garland impression or impersonation. Kristiane would give it a try one day… someday, but first the dress. She’d mastered some of Garland’s song book for those dreary rainy days when she felt down.

Why she chose Another Suitcase in Another Hall, she felt it in her bones. Her life resembled the lost,
unidentified feeling of moving from place to place without a destination, without a purpose. Her ambition had been straight and true from when she was eight years old, and she followed it. Singing and acting found her and she’d stuck with it. Her Broadway debut at twenty-three years old after spending a year on a national tour. She’d paid her dues, working summer stock theatres and children’s theatre.

Living out of suitcases, crashing on friends’ couches, praying the next audition would lead to a yes instead of a no when the majority of the time it was an emphatic no. She’d done it all to get where she was, in London. But someone was messing with her course and it made her question: So what happens now? Where am I going to?

The presence of one night manager entered doing her song, but he hadn’t made a sound to alert her or announce his appearance. She felt him. He had his own charisma, his own confidence, and she took notice without losing her place in centering herself.

Applause and a very masculine, “Brava!”

She allowed herself a grin, a happy smile to grace her face as she swung sideways on the old leather piano bench. Bowing her head, she made out his darkened silhouette cut through the darkened space, sidestepping the abandoned tables and chairs. He stood at the edge of the stage, revealing his more relaxed look.

Gracefully she got to her feet and stepped downstage to face her company, who still stood a few inches taller even with her slightly elevated by the platform. “Off duty then?” she nodded at the new ensemble, trying to decide which she preferred.

“Thought I might take a bit of advice from… a friend…”

She crossed her arms under her breasts. “And what was that?” A test, to see if he’d pass.

“To live. Have a beer with me. Are you off duty?” he shoved his chin towards the piano to indicate her singing.

Tsking, Kristiane stepped past him and floated toward where he’d left the beers at a table in the middle of the room. “Am I ever on duty, Mr. Pine?”

He beat her to the table to offer a chair and slide it under her when she sat. The polite host hadn’t taken the night off completely, he was still a gentleman.

“Thought you washed your hands of me.” She clinked the neck of her beer bottle with his, showing him that there were no hard feelings between them. She accepted him at face value, it was easier than throwing a diva sized temper tantrum.

“Same.” He slouched back in his chair, indulging in a long cool sip of beer. His eyes swept the breadth of the music room, landing back on the piano. “I’ve been conditioned. I compartmentalize. As night manager, I am the invisible entity that’s supposed to make your stay pleasant. When things go to shit, it’s my doing. When things go right, I had nothing to do with it.”

“I don’t think that way.”

“I saw a bit of that in you, the catering behavior, with… those men that follow you. Why do you tolerate it?”

“I have to. It’s my job. It’s not all the time, only with people who forget that manners exist and I’m not an exhibit at a petting zoo. So I guess, I am on duty sometimes.”
He digested this, though he didn’t agree with it. Bodyguards were available for hire to avoid such things.

Before he could present that idea, she tipped her half empty beer in his direction. “This.” Her eyes raked down his chest and his parted legs in his relaxed state. “I like this costume,” adopting a perfect London accent, giggling into her bottle.

He lifted his arms and peered down at himself, laughing as he did so. “Costume, eh?” He looked back up at her. “I suppose it is. I’ve more Savile Row suits in my wardrobe than High Street clothes. Don’t get an allotment, you know. Have to spend where I can. Top priority’s to keep the uniform up to standards.”

*You fucking liar. You could afford closets of clothes, and then some.*

“I see. But… whose standards?” She took a long pull of the beer, yet eyed him warily.

“Mine,” he said, curtly. He mimicked her, drinking deep and turning his head ever so slightly, his iris tucked into the corner of his eye.

“I figured as much,” she chuckled. “But looking at you now, you don’t seem so… so….”

He grinned, closed-lipped, yet furrowed his brow. “So… what? I don’t seem so… what?”


“Hoity… toity?” His eyebrow quirked. “What?”

“You know what I mean,” she flapped her hand. “Snotty.”

“Snotty?” his grin broadened, teeth showing white in the dim light.

She rolled her eyes, her head bobbling. “Okay. Snooty.”

“Snooty?” he chuckled. “Reserved, quiet, perhaps, but I am far from snooty. I don’t deserve to be snooty. I’ve nothing to be snooty about.”

“Oh, come on,” she teased. “From the looks of you, I’d bet you’re all upper-classy and all. You just… scream… I don’t know… boarding school or whatever that is. Harrow? Eton? And then like… Oxford? *Top marks, toodle pip* and all that *rot rot*.” She’d coated her words with a comical, plummy, posh London accent, lifting her nose in the air, her pinky erect as she held her beer bottle like a china teacup. “Jiggery-pokery, good on you, mate, and Bob’s your uncle.”

And that… that made him out and out, no-holds-barred, grab the stomach and wheeze… laugh. For the first time in a long time… a very, very long time, he laughed.

And she laughed with him. And it felt bloody good.

“No, oh God, no,” he licked his lips and bit down on his lower one, desperate to keep his laughter – *oh, God, laughter* – at bay. “Nothing of the sort, not at all. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

Mentally, Kristiane patted herself on the back, her conscious screaming joyfully, *Bloody good show, what?* The entertainer, alive and well that put her on stage night after night, show after show, year after year, felt that whoosh of relief inside at making someone laugh. The balloon of accomplishment inflated inside her belly until she nearly floated in the air with it.
Truth be told, she lived and performed to make an audience feel something, that cathartic release of tears or laughter was the single best reward. And she got that whoop of laughter from a man that she’d seen as stone. Not quite stone but proper and brusque, cool-almost-cold demeanor, refined. Removing the suit, the uniform, brought out a different Pine. Refreshing.

She spun the neck of her beer bottle between her thumb and forefinger, staring at how the lights concentrated towards the stage played in the glass and refracted dully against her palm. Then she looked at him, her laughter dying with his. “Thank you… for this,” the bottle swung between them. “For this,” her free arm made a sweeping motion over her head and in front of her. “And for this.” Her finger danced in the space separating them. “It’s been… awhile…” Her gaze followed some invisible performance on stage. “To unwind and not have to worry.”

There was more to it than that. He gave her as much lead as she’d given him, and didn’t grill her on the core meaning. He wanted to thank her too, as she’d given him the unexpected night off- And he was actually enjoying himself. “It has been that—awhile.”

Avoiding the storm cloud that threatened to rain on their parade, she bounced up and turned in her seat, tucking her leg under her, to face him. “I’ve got it! I wanna play a game with you.”

One eyebrow shot up dubiously, but he swallowed the rest of his beer and knocked the empty on the table with a solid slap of sound. “What kind of game would that be?” His body slanted towards hers, similar to her movement but not entirely dedicated. 

She finished her drink and set the bottle next to his on the table. “A story for a story. I’ll tell you one of mine, and you tell me one of yours.” She wasn’t ready to face her truth and go back to facing her problem. Just a few more minutes of carefree frivolity.

“It is your game, ladies first.”

Wiggling into the chair, the leg she sat on moved to the front, and appeared hooked under her other knee. That leg dangled, her pointed toes sweeping the floor. A low melodic hum emanated from her as she thought back through her anecdotes and memories for something interesting to share.

“I did this children’s theatre tour for Once Upon a Mattress. I was Fred—ugh Winifred, the princess, the lead,” she clarified quickly, remembering that this man wouldn’t understand. “Basically, I got to sing my own personal anthem, ‘Despite the impression I give/ I confess that I’m living a lie/ Because I’m actually terribly timid/And horribly shy,’ ” she sang in a grandiose voice, laughing at the end. “It was the princess and the pea story with singing.”

He smirked and bobbed his head.

“It was this teeny tour, with very little budget, and we performed in elementary and middle schools throughout the states. But not even, big cities… These small schools about thirty miles outside major cities. I’m talking… Attapulgus, Georgia, Ashkum, Illinois, and Oak Grove, Texas. We had no business being there as loud New Yorkers around impressionable minors.”

He smirked and bobbed his head.

“We traveled around in Winnebagos, of all modes of transportation— Winnebagos! ” She shook her head at the outrage. “Six women in one and six men in the other. God… we logged in more hours driving than performing. Never ever again. There was no time to do laundry wherever we stopped, if we could even find a laundromat. So we bought disposable clothes.”
“I never considered clothes disposable.”

“When you’re touring Podunk, Iowa, almost anything is.”

“Is that a real place?”

“It felt like it! But there was something incredibly touching that I took away from that nine months of my life… really, really special. I was a mentor for seven year olds, eight, nine… ten year olds! I was their princess, and they used to approach me with their little hands shaking, and a pen and paper, asking for my autograph.”

She sighed. “As Dickens said, ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times…”’

He reached one long arm forward and fingered the lip of his empty beer bottle, tipping it slightly toward him, wobbling it to and fro as he thought. “Worst of times,” he murmured, more to himself than to her.

“What?” she perked, her eyebrows lifted.

“Oh, nothing,” he said, shaking his head. He sat forward, resting his elbows upon the table. “First you quote Wilde, then you quote Dickens,” the corner of his mouth pulled back, amusement written upon his face. “Do you never have anything to say for yourself?”

Her eager, ready to please face fell – the smile faded, the eyes darkened, the lips curled one under the other, her gaze slipped away.

Damn it, Pine, you are a prime, rare arsehole.

“I…,” Pine chewed his lip, “I didn’t mean it that way,” he said, pressing his hand flat upon the table, pushing it forward, his eyes lowered yet flicked up to hers. “I suppose I want to know what you think, your… philosophies, your… your ideas; not someone else’s. Certainly not a rehash of some dead cove’s ruminations.”

“Okay. What about you?” Kristiane straightened in her chair, perching upon the edge of it, her own hands mimicking his, flat upon the black lino tabletop. “What are your words, Pine? What are your thoughts? Hm?”

You don’t want to know my thoughts. My thoughts would scare the piss out of you, darling girl.

He stilled, wordless, silent for a long moment, before he spoke. And when he did, his words tumbled out quickly, as quick as his movements – he stood, gathered up the empty bottles, tucked them beneath his arm, turned to go…. “I’ll just go and get us some more drinks.”

“No!” Kristiane stood from her chair just as swiftly, and just as swiftly grabbed him by the wrist, clutching him tightly. “You will not get us more drinks. You will sit down, and you will talk.”

He glared from her, to her hand on his arm, and back to her again, fighting the urge to twist her arm up, clap his other on top of it, and wrench her wrist into a locking submission hold, to shove her arm behind her back and pin her to the wall and….

But her face went soft; a small smile and a furrowed brow. “Please, Jonathan? Please don’t go.” she breathed. She gave his wrist a small, pulsing squeeze and then grinned more broadly. “Besides, you owe me a story.”

He stared blankly at her, but then, slowly... slowly... he relented. Couldn’t help himself. “I do,” he nodded. “I owe you a story.”

***

“You know how you told me how you and your troupe... how you lived in caravans for a time... Winnebagos?”

“Yeah.”

He sighed. “There was a time when I’d have given my left bollo—... I mean,” he corrected, blushing, “my left arm for something like that. Something with a proper bed, and heat and protection from the sodding dirt and sand, and better still, wheels.”

She cocked her head. “I don’t peg you as the homeless type.”

“Oh,” he smirked. “I wasn’t homeless. I was in the army.”

“Afghanistan?”

“Yeah, and Iraq. Two tours. Special Forces. SAS.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, wow,” his eyes rolled self-deprecatingly, his lips pressed together, pursing against his teeth. He debated for a fleeting moment on whether to tell her, whether to lay upon her the sadness and despair of it, the fear, the sheer horror of it.

But she’d wanted to know. She’d wanted to know him.

And so he would give her.

“You know how you also said that you felt touched by the children you performed for? That you felt yourself a mentor for them?”

“Yeah,” she breathed, a slight tremble permeating her voice, a worry that she knew what was coming.

“I worked with children, too,” he said, factually, blankly. “But for me, it wasn’t that sort of relationship. It wasn’t... I wasn’t a mentor to them. I was there for them, I held them and took care of them, saw them to safety.”

“Safety? From what?”

He smiled ruefully, his eyelids dropped to half mast with the memory of it.

“From us.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“They were the children of insurgents, of members of terror cells, of... our enemies... our... targets, our... objectives.” He swallowed hard, the word tasting of foulness and bile in his mouth. He looked straight at her, then, allowing her to see... to know... the anguish, the regret, the sin in his eyes. “I would murder their parents, their older brothers... and then swoop in and become their saviour.”
He blinked, breaking his hold on her, allowing his own features to ripple and change like a pebble thrown in water. “I suppose,” he whispered, “you’ll want that drink now.”

“That can wait,” she said quietly. Kristiane sat back, absorbing his story, inviting his past into her present. The resonance of his voice, the broken breath that caught in his throat twinged something deep within her. The tone and texture of his voice reminded her in a backwards way of corded velveteen. Rough against the grain, but smooth and soft with it.

One of her favorite books as a kid, when she was holed up in the back of her parents bakery, had been Corduroy, America’s answer to Paddington Bear. Corduroy wanted to be adopted from the department store but thought he couldn’t because he’d lost a button from his overalls. He goes searching through the store at night, looking for the thing that would make him whole and lovable for adoption. When he mistakenly pulls at a button on a mattress, he falls to the ground, arousing the security guard with the noise, who returns him to his shelf. Corduroy was adopted without his missing piece, and his new owner replaced it for him.

Jonathan reminded her of Corduroy on a much grander scale. The hotel manager worked at night, hiding from the terrors he’d witnessed and been apart of. His deeds in the hotel, waiting on the upper class that wouldn’t normally give him anything more than a polite nod, were his penance. He hurt, he lashed out at her, because he searched for that elusive thing that would make him whole and worthy of more than distant good manners. But would anything heal his wounds, replace his missing pieces?

The damage, the vile and nightmarish atrocities he’d had to do in Iraq and Afghanistan, Kristiane couldn’t begin to imagine the tragedy of living it or enduring it. But war wasn’t in her vocabulary by choice, because it set friends against friends, brothers against brothers… Men against men. The impulse to both run away from what he told her, turn her back never to lay eyes on him again, and simultaneously wrap her arms around him in comfort, showing him the empathy he needed, simmered deep within her.

She didn’t react to that impulse because she saw the contained rage in him when she grabbed his wrist a few moments ago. That move hadn’t been intentional- to touch him- but her default mode was tactile. Growing up in theatre, around high emotion, she grew accustomed to connecting with people that way. Theatre was grand, and gestures were too. Kristiane had seen his eyes flick from her hand to her face. He didn’t wrench his wrist away but the instinct to do that was there, to do just that in the harshest possible way.

“What do you want me to judge you? Call you a monster?”

He couldn’t be sure what he wanted from telling her, only that he wanted her to know. “I wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

Shaking her head from side to side, she looked down at her hands, twining her fingers round each other. “We’ve all done things we’re not proud of, that we’d like to take back or undo. From my perspective, true monsters have no remorse, but I see that in you, you have it. You don’t like what you were made to do in the name of God or country or honor or the greater good. But you’re not bad because you’ve done bad things.”

He sat silently regarding her and her point of view. It was a sensitive subject to tread upon, a mine field of human emotion. Some would revile him with outrage or disgust. Some would celebrate his masculinity, his bravery and his sacrifice, herald his victory. But this strange New Yorker with the voice of an angel accepted it.

“You know, one of the first nights I came here, I saw something you did. I don’t know if it’s in your night manager handbook or whatever, or if you consider it your ‘job.’” Air quotes again.
Theatricality fell out of her. Some oozed sensuality, others oozed viciousness, Kristiane oozed drama.

“I saw you go beyond your duty. I think you were on earlier than normal and I was leaving for the theatre. A family arrived, a typical mom, dad, and sons. One of those boys, he must’ve been about six, seven… he came tearing through the lobby and tripped over something… his own feet? I didn’t see that part of the fallout, but I saw you. You took notice to this… kid, screaming his head off because of something he’d hurt—”

“—his knee…”

“His knee, alright… But you dropped everything, you went to him, you comforted him, and then you picked him up and carried him into your office to tend to him. You let him cry and carry on as much as he needed, but you were there for him.”

“Alex. His name was Alex.”

She nodded, leaning closer to the table and to him. “And that’s why I don’t think… no– scratch that– that’s why I know that you’re not bad. War is ugly, death and violence and all that, but you’re not because you had a hand it. You weren’t responsible. You’re not the villain.”

After a few silent, tension filled moments, Kristiane said with a wicked smile, “I’ll have that drink now.”
You’re not bad because you’ve done bad things. You weren’t responsible. You’re not the villain.

He let the words wash over him, clean him... like a fastidious mother with a cool, wet flannel - not quite cleanse, never cleanse, but just enough to tidy him up a bit, sluice away some of the grime and grit, make him... presentable.

And he let the relief show in his face, in the deep inhale and the long exhale, bursting forth upon puffed cheeks, in the tilt of his head into his hand, in the covering of his eyes, the pinching of his nose. “Thank you,” he said, his words buried in his palm. He looked up over his fingers then, and repeated. “Thank you.”

She smiled warmly, leaning forward, folding her hands between her open knees. “You are very welcome. I meant every word.”

He shook his head, letting his hand fall limply to his lap. “I’ve no idea why I just told you that.” He groaned, a small, quiet sound in his throat, accompanied by a roll and flutter of the eyes. “I’m terribly sorry. I should never have...”

“Yes you should have, and I know exactly why,” she said, her tone matronly, charmingly know-it-all.

“You do?” he quirked an eyebrow, resisting the temptation toward guarded sarcasm. “Go on. Why don’t you educate me.”

“If we’re to be friends, real, true friends... we need honesty between us, don’t you think? You have this... this thing... this guilt... hanging over you, and you didn’t think there could be truth between us until you told me. You wanted to be sure I wouldn’t hate you for it. That... that I’d still want to know you even with the knowledge of it.”

“Do you? Still want to know me?”

“I already said so, didn’t I?” Her New York accent thickened significantly, her hands flying up in a similarly Brooklyn gesture.

“My God, Kristiane,” he chuckled, “you are incredibly astute. I don’t think I could keep anything
from you if I tried.”

“I’m an actress, a student of people,” she shrugged. “I study characters, Jonathan, and you… you are a character. And I mean that only in the most factual and unobnoxious way possible.”

The corner of his mouth tucked back. “I suppose I am that. A character.” He sighed. “What if there’s more?” he challenged. “What if… what if I’ve done other things, other terrible things? Been other people?”

“I’m sure you have. Many terrible things. Many other people.” She waggled her eyebrows, her eyes flashing. “I’ve seen two of you… maybe three already.”

*I want one of your many selves to sleep with me tonight.*

*Go away, Sophie. Not now.*

“You’re not the first to tell me that,” he said flatly.

“And I won’t be the last, I’m sure. That’s who you are.”

“And something tells me you’re a bit of the same. Many people. One of my kind, just… in a different way.”

“Now, you, Jonathan Pine, are the astute one.” She pointed at him and winked, clucking her tongue against her teeth.

He chewed his lip, considering her for a long moment. He could bed her, the watcher in him knew. Easily. Charm the shit out of her, small touches - she liked to be touched, he could tell - give her compliments, look her in the eye, ask her to sing, give her coos and cuddles and talk to her with his bullshit limited knowledge of Broadway musicals. Lie to her. Tell her exactly what she wanted to hear. Yeah, he could reel her in. *Piece of cake.*

But that’s not what he wanted. One time, maybe, it was. But that was ages ago. Not now. He didn’t want Sophie. Didn’t want Marilyn, Yvonne, Jed… especially not Jed. He didn’t want to be anyone’s sloppy seconds. He didn’t want Kristiane to satiate an obsession, for what pleasure he could take from her body, what pleasure she could take from him - what favours he could do, what protection he could give - which is how it usually played out.

No, he wanted her mind. Her song. Her smile. Her respect. Her companionship. Her for her. For the way she made him smile, laugh… a rare thing indeed. The way she made him feel horribly uncomfortable. The way she made her demands of him. The way she touched him. The way she confided in him. The way she listened.

The way she made him want to spill his Goddamn guts to her and then some over and over and over again until he had nothing else to say, until she’d emptied him of everything he ever was. Even after a few short days.

Confide in her.

*Rest … in her.*

“My penchant for astuteness tells me that you, Miss Taylor, are right bloomin’ knackered,” he said, quietly. “Instead of another drink, what say I get your key from Carl, walk you upstairs, turn down your bed, and put on the kettle for you. You’ve a show to do tomorrow night, and you need your rest.”
“But I thought you took the night off. You’re not on duty,” she teased.

“True. I’m not on duty,” he stood and, as always, extended his elbow to her. He peered down, his smile uncharacteristically shy. “But this… my friend… isn’t duty.”

Kristiane hesitated.

She went to reach for the proffered arm of her escort, but she pulled back, held back, and paused. Her previous inadvertent touch on him blared like a warning siren, still fresh in her mind, and the tortured look in his eyes when she grabbed his wrist flashed before her. He could be violent, he admitted that much to her. But his other side (sides?), he was sensitive and protective. Which side would she incite with touching him again?

Her gut instinct, the one that led her to him as someone she could trust with her problem, told her that he wouldn’t hurt her. If she posed no threat to him, he wouldn’t need to retaliate. In those few short days, she felt safe with him before she knew more about him. Now that she knew more by his own admission, she didn’t want to cause him harm or fear or unease.

She lived to please, to entertain, to be liked. Deliberately she lifted her hands up, palms toward him and moved in. It was a subtle gesture, to give him time to balk, back out, reconsider his offer. Then her hands made contact with his upper arm, grasping gently, followed through, and pressed into him, as much for herself as she did for him. Her breast brushed against him in the close proximity, her overcompensation of her notably shorter legs.

Ever the gentleman, he didn’t make a production out of it, rather enjoyed the feel of her at his elbow. A distant and far cry from the coarse, grainy and grimy treatment of sand against his skin, or the clap of his brothers in arms’ against his back or the unforgiving, imposing presence of his pack strapped to his back. In his mind, the flesh of a woman—

“Do you know why I quote and sing other people?” she asked suddenly, tearing through his thoughts.

Pine’s expression fell from the confident friend to the vulnerable former-self soldier suffering a form of post-traumatic stress disorder. The wind in his sails lost a knot or two.

“I can take a little heat in the kitchen, Jonathan,” she euphemized his putting her on the defensive. “Not gonna take you to task for it.”

“Forgive me—“ How could he apologize for wanting to know her?

She squeezed his arm, his muscle rippling beneath her fingers, maybe stress, maybe the offensive again, Kristiane guessed. “Nothing to forgive. I can take it, but do you know why?”

He shook his head, guiding her to the doors of the music that led to the rest of the hotel.

“My parents weren’t- how would you said?- engaged? invested… involved… and I was always made to feel like I didn’t matter, because my wants didn’t match theirs. What I wanted, what I worked for didn’t matter, because it wasn’t what they prescribed for me.”

A reminder of family turned Pine’s head towards what he missed in his childhood, what he had gone on without, what wasn’t there. He remained connected to Kristiane, but the horror that this boisterous woman suffered a similar fate made him ache, not just for her, but for himself. She didn’t deserve it. Hell, he didn’t deserve it.

“And I took to the stage as a safe place, more than anything, but I also fell into books. I don’t
flatter myself as an original. There will always be people that came before me who said it better. My addition…” she shook her head, “doesn’t add much.”

“Don’t sell yourself short.” He reached the end of the corridor and moved the curtain to the side to turn off the lights of Kristiane’s music room. In the darkness, he’d shut off some connection to the conversation with the woman on his arm, but in that moment forged a deeper bond with her than mere employee-client relationship. The conversation finished, but their kinship had only just begun. “My character thanks you for your addition.” He felt her smile into his shoulder as she allowed herself to feel the exhaustion of the evening creep into her muscles, the tension of being on to cool off.

“Did you just make a joke?” Kristiane leaned into him more, relying on him to guide her through the hallway, past the bar into the grandiose lobby. Suppressing a yawn with an amused sound, she gave his arm another appreciative squeeze.

A genuine grin pulled at the corners of his mouth and he tapped one of her hands in an almost affectionate pat. “Come on then, let’s get you to bed.”

When they appeared in the lobby, a slightly harassed Carl looked about ready to jump out of his skin with nerves, his hair sticking at odd angles from running his fingers through it. “Boss! Johnny, message fer ya!” his accent more pronounced in his troubled excitement.

Pine nodded but kept going towards the elevators with his new friend in tow.

“You need to get back on duty,” she teased, her voice edging toward tired, not quite a croak, but not her pure sound either.

“I’m fine right here by you,” he assured before, “Carl, I’ll see to Miss Taylor first. Any messages can wait.”

“Boss, it’s the cold lady, she’s been calling—ringing like an air raid is coming. Urgent, she said.”

Missing the reference, Pine grouched back, “Miss Taylor needs assistance first.”

Not to be put off, Carl repeated with emphasis, “Johnny, the cold lady.” He spoke in code to protect the innocent, and those not so innocent that hid in shadows.

Burr. Angela Burr.

“What’d she want?” Pine’s words tumbled out on a hiss of breath. Angela Burr. The cold lady. Cold indeed. He hadn’t heard from her since the attack on the Leytonstone Tube Station months before, when she’d spotted him on CCTV one station away and phoned him, pleading for him to hightail it, to get in there in advance, find the knifemen, and stop the massacre.

He had been too late.

Before that… the disastrous trial of Sandy Lord Langbourne, after the Roper affair. After Limpet. When Burr had begged Pine to testify… and he’d refused; and, by way of his lack of apparent existence, and his lack of citizenship in the United Kingdom at the time, she had no power to compel him.

So, twice he had let her down.

So, why was she phoning him again?
Carl remembered her as the lady who screamed down the phone at his boss when he’d gotten back to the hotel after the tube station terrorist attack; who had later come in, bought old Johnny a drink and a steak and kidney pie, and apologised.

“Didn’t say, boss,” Carl shrugged. “just got all tchetchy with me when I said you’d the night off. Said something about trying you on your mobile and at your flat, and….”

Pine lifted a hand. “Fine, Carl.” He turned to Kristiane, gripping his hand over hers. “Would you mind waiting a moment? This is important.”

“Is everything okay?” She frowned, cocking her head. “Who is this… cold lady you’re talking about? Is she a cranky customer or something?”

Pine nearly said, “Yeah, one of those,” but to have said so would have been a lie, so instead, he said, “No, but it’s something I need to take care of straight away.” He gave her a slight smile. “Can you wait right here? I still want to walk you up.”

Kristiane nodded, releasing his arm. She pointed to a bank of chairs and tables just beside the counter. “I’ll hang out here.”

“Perfect,” Jonathan said, “I’ll just be a ‘mo.”

“You’d better be.” She winked, giving him a double finger point.

“Or else, yeah?”

“Or else.”

Pine strode around the counter to the employee door on the side. As soon as he entered, the phone rang. Carl answered.

“Thank you for phoning the Covent Garden, this is Carl Sweetin, how may I be of service?”

“Get me Pine. Now,” the voice on the line was clipped, firm, angry. “I know he’s there. I can see him.”

Carl’s eyes went wide, and with his free hand, he stopped Pine, palm to his chest. “It’s her,” he mouthed.

“I’ll take it in my office.”

***

“Get her out, Jonathan,” Angela Burr’s voice was urgent.

“Where are you?”

“Near Tottenham Court Road now. In the car,” she said. “Just left your fine establishment. Came to find you personal-like since you couldn’t be bothered to answer your mobile, but couldn’t risk us being seen together.”

“What in the hell is going on, Angela?”

“Just get her out,” Burr clipped. “Now.”

“Why? Where do I take her?”
“Don’t care, Jonathan. Take her to yours. Take her to another hotel. Just get her out.”

Pine paused, thinking, breathing. He licked his lips, feeling the anticipatory tingle of battle as it crossed his shoulders, shot down his arms and into his fingers, into his heart. “Is… is she in any danger?”

“I’d not be telling you to get her the fuck out of your hotel if she weren’t in any danger!”

“What’s the threat? Is it just her?”

“Yes,” Burr spat. “She’s the target. I’ve someone working on taking out the threat, but others may come in their place. We need her out of that hotel.”

Pine sighed, running a hand through his hair. “How much time have I got?”

“Not much.”

Another pause. “Can I… should I tell her?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely not.”

“How the hell am I supposed to….”?

“You’re the resourceful one, Pine. Just do it.”

***

“Change of plans,” Pine strode out of his office, through the service area and out the employee door. He clapped his hands together, rubbing them with a false carefree glee as he approached Kristiane. “Have you ever been up to Hampstead?” He let his eyes go wide with feigned excitement. “I’ve a brilliant idea.”

“No?” Kristiane frowned. “It’s two in the morning! I thought you said I should be in bed.”

“Yeah,” Pine shrugged. “At my place. My guest room’s much bigger, my guest bed’s more comfortable, I can cook you breakfast in the morning, and then we don’t have to worry about who’s paying your keep. And besides,” he said, quirking a smile, “no more yobbos flitting about after you in the bar after the shows.”

Kristiane stared at the man for all of twenty seconds before she laughed without trying to mask it. Her head tilted back and she let the light mirthful sound peel from her elongated throat, her smile sincere at the top of it and her abdomen tight with the tension at the bottom. She unfurled her crossed leg from the other, placing that foot flat on the floor. Using her arms, she pressed down to leverage herself up, unfolding from the chair.

“I don’t drive…” she began.

He shook his head assuredly, affected smile in place beneath tight lips. “I’ll take you.”

“Meaning…” her eyes bounced up to his in her merriment, “I’m not in the market for a used car, Jonathan.” She paused, her intent landing firmly on his shoulders. “I’m not buying what you’re selling.”

“Kristiane—“

“I had you pegged for a better actor than that,” she waved a forefinger at him before stepping
around him. “I’m going up to my room, for some sleep, by myself.” Kristiane missed his cheat at the
glass windows, catching a flash of Angela’s surveillance, when she turned to the elevators.

His long legs overtook her in three strides, halting her progress. “I’d like to continue our
conversation, the one we had in the music room.” He forced himself to relax his shoulders, to loosen
his grip on her arms in his haste to ‘get her out now.’

“Now that one, I almost believed.” She laid a hand on his chest and gave a little shove, enough
pressure to tell him no without the word, angling out of his touch.

“Give me the opportunity to…” His voice dropped as he recognized the same defiant look of
Sophie’s eyes when she reentered the hotel in Cairo after their one night reflected in Kristiane’s.

“To what, Jonathan? To what?” Her face had turned serious, she’d lost her humor during their
exchange. “To lie to me? To seduce me? To hurt me yourself? To redeem yourself? To wait on me
like your own private guest in your home? To play the night manager some more?”

It was quite a laundry list, and for all she knew any one or all of them could be true. She spent
the entire night with him, telling her truth, spilling her problems and she thought she’d gotten the
same in return. Jonathan had shared something of himself that was personal and painful, and above
all else truthful. Then he disappeared into his office for a phone call, and came out to be put on a
show.

A show. For her. She didn’t appreciate it or want this performance after all the truth. She
wasn’t hurt, only disappointed that he didn’t hold up his end of their friendship.

‘If we’re to be friends, real, true friends... we need honesty between us, don’t you think?’

“Kristiane, you have the wrong idea about... this. I only want to h—“

She cut him off, “Jonathan, I like you, but not this version. I want the version from the music room,
the one who told me the truth to earn my friendship. Bring him back and I’ll be willing to talk.”

Clenching his fists at his side, Jonathan cursed Angela Burr once more for potentially ruining
something for the greater good before it ever got a real chance to be anything at all. He pressed his
lips together, figuring a way to placate Angela and save whatever friendship he’d forged with
Kristiane.

When silence prevailed between her and the back-on-duty night manager despite his claim that he
wasn’t, Kristiane clicked her tongue. “May I have my key then please?”

Dropping all pretense, Jonathan puffed up his chest and returned to his previous self. “If I asked you
to trust me now without question, would you do it?”

She crossed her arms under her breasts. “Which version is asking?”

“The one from the music room.” Each moment she took to answer felt like the ticking of a bomb
counting down to zed. The closing in of some unknown entity growing ever closer in her hesitation.
He wanted to act, wanted to move, wanted to react, to be ready, but he couldn’t until he had the
charge he was meant to protect as a willing participant.

Mercifully, she finally said, “Yes, I would.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Pine pounded on the down button, his teeth grit, a slight growl emanating from his lips. “Come on,” he hissed, hitching the full rucksack on his back. “Come on.”

The lift opened with a pleasant ‘ping.’ Jonathan threw himself sideways and squeezed in before the doors opened fully. Once inside, he tapped his toes upon the marble floor, his fingers on the strap of the rucksack full of things from Kristiane’s hotel room.

When the doors opened again, he strode out at a clip, keeping his pace quick, yet not panicked. Not in an apparent rush, as far as anyone else could see. Cool as a cucumber.

“Thank you, Carl,” Pine clipped, tossing Kristiane’s key onto the desk. “Where… where is she?” He peered around the lobby, a mild frisson of panic flowing across his shoulders when he did not see her.

“In your office, Johnny,” Carl whispered. “Waiting for you.”

“Thanks.” Pine strode around the counter. Carl took him by the arm, stopping him. “What is it, Jonathan?” he looked grim. “Something wrong with the pretty lady?”

Pine sighed. “I don’t know,” he said. “But, if anyone asks for her, simply say she is unavailable and if they ask where they can find her…..”

“Don’t give ‘em nothin’. You got it, boss.”

With a nod, Pine opened the door to his office where he found Kristiane, thumbing through one of his books. He tensed, wanting to stop her, instinct kicking in to protect his precious privacy. But, he didn’t. Instead, he smiled, a quick flash of a smile. “We should go,” he said, urgently.

“If you say so,” she set the book back on the shelf. “Ready when you are, Mister Lawrence.”

He gave a closed-off chuckle, licked his lips and cocked his head. “Come on.” He held his hand out to her. “We’ll have to go out the back way, I’m afraid.”

“What are you afraid of?” She didn’t move to take his hand. She didn’t move at all, in fact. Rather, she stood there, in the middle of Pine’s office, her face expectant yet wary.
He swallowed, working his jaw as he looked away, blinked hard, and then looked back at her. “You said you’d trust me,” he whispered.

“I… I do, I…” she faltered.

“You have to trust me,” he said, “please.” He held his hand out once again.

“Why?” she said, flippantly, “does my life depend on it or something?”


And that time, with a shaking hand, she took his. “What do I do?”


He stepped closer to her and bent his head, touching his forehead to hers. “Do as I do, do as I say, follow me, and above all, no matter what happens, trust me.”

“Is this some kind… some kind of joke, Jonathan?” She pulled away, frightened by his tone of voice, by the shimmer of fear in it, by the depths of his earnestness. “You… you sound like something out of a Bond film, or something. God, please… tell me this is a set up, a ruse, some kind of way to try and get me in your bed or something… anything.”

“I wish it were, Kristiane. Christ, but I wish it were.” He lifted his hand to cup her cheek, to touch her, to reassure her, but he was stopped short.

Stopped short by the noise.

There was a crack of gunfire, a crash of glass, and a scream, followed quickly by Carl’s booming, Dorset voice. “Dispatcher! Shooting at the Covent Garden Hotel! Shooter active, I repeat… shooter active!”

Pine clutched Kristiane’s hand harder, squeezing tightly, tight enough that she gave a small gasp of pain. “Let’s go,” he hissed, palming open a secondary door, hidden behind his desk. “Back way. Need to get you out of here, now.”

The door opened up into a service corridor, the floor a gray concrete slab with settlement cracks spidering this way and that, the walls a sickly yellowish green. Exposed piping and ductwork decorated the ceiling in a confusing array of snaking coils, a commingled collection of white, stainless steel and black. The stench of mildew and sweat greeted Jonathan and Kristiane when they entered. The underbelly of the Covent Garden Hotel.

Jonathan pulled the door shut with a capping slam and marched towards the other end of the hallway, away from the echoing sounds of sirens and the beginning murmurs of panic and chaos. He grasped the hand of the trembling actress in his care… company. Shrugging under the rucksack of what belongings he could grab from her room, he kept an increasing pace for the exit.

Kristiane’s steps doubled his in an effort to keep up with him. She said nothing, at a loss for what to say. From what little he told her, she had trouble processing that this mess had been because of her. What had she done to cause someone to pick up a gun? Who would do this? Why? How? A million question, and yet she couldn’t vocalize a single one to Jonathan. She brought all this on him, and then lectured him about trust. Why hadn’t he turned his back on her, ignored her trouble, left her alone?
She had little to no experience with violence or crime or gunfire; she was out of her element. She’d lived in New York City with all its crime from the age of eighteen and had only ever seen the aftermath of a shooting when she was twenty-five. A robbery gone south at a twenty-four hour deli/grocery that closed for nothing on 53rd Street. The only damage had been a gaping hole the size of a softball in the front glass of the storefront. Police had set up crime scene tape keeping pedestrians safe from the shattered shards of glass on the sidewalk. The place remained open for business while statements were given. Nobody had been hurt, no money had been stolen and the suspect had been arrested hours before Kristiane stopped in to buy a drink with her friends.

She’d also learned how to hold and use a gun, a stage gun, a prop. Kristiane had appeared as Squeaky Fromme in Sondheim’s Assassins in a regional production of the musical in New Jersey during the summer of 2003, before the revival landed on Broadway with a brand new cast. She couldn’t be sure if it was the same as an actual gun, but she doubted it.

Jonathan took a sharp right at the end of the hall, bee-lining for an exit door. He stopped short of throwing the thing open and cursed heatedly, “Goddamn it!” With irritation, he dug his phone from his jeans pocket. He didn’t release Kristiane’s hand, maintaining a physical vigilance on her.

She didn’t know why he stopped until his vibrating mobile appeared from his pocket.

“What is it?” he demanded into his cell phone.

Kristiane sought out comfort and support from this shockingly versatile man, pressing into him as they stood still, lacing her fingers through his, finding some sense of stability with him.

Angela Burr barked into the phone, “I bought you some time, Jonathan. Sent my boy in to create a diversion.”

“What?! You did this?”

“Have you got the Disney princess then?”

“Yeah, yeah, got her. What the devil have you done?”

“Fireworks, Jonathan. Fireworks and distraction. Two perps were about to enter your establishment there, all stealth-like and whatnot. Couldn’t have that…”

“Did you pick them up?”

“No can do, soldier. Let them run off with their tails between their legs, need them to lead us to their fearless leader. You know how all this goes… Leader hires laymen to do the dirty work.”

Jonathan sighed in irritation and impatience. “I’m at Gower, and I’m parked on Bloomsbury. Is it clear? Where’s the cavalry?”

“Quick, ninja-like, Jonathan. Emergency services are out front. But perps saw you having a domestic with the princess in the lobby. Don’t take her to yours, now that they’ve seen you. London’s big, but not big enough, get it?”

He stared hard at Kristiane, taking in her relaxed appearance, jeans, t-shirt, high-heeled boots. “Got it. I’ll see to her.”

“Go underground, I’ll find you at one of the safe houses. Ditch the mobile. I’ll get you another.”
“Understood.” He rung off, took off the back and crushed the sim card beneath his heel. Throwing the mobile aside, he took hold of Kristiane’s hand once more. “Can you run if you have to?”

She gave a nod, her expression blank. She’d heard about every third word from the straightforward, no nonsense British woman screaming frankly at Jonathan. Kristiane didn’t recognize her voice, and wondered how this woman knew so much about the predicament.

This time he cupped her cheek. “Remember,” he repeated his earlier instructions for her, “‘Do as I do, do as I say, follow me, and above all, no matter what happens—’"

“Trust you.”

Chaos.


For he knew, that as soon as he had Kristiane in the car, it would all disappear. Poof. Just like Houdini. For he also knew that MI6 didn’t only stand for Military Intelligence, it could have stood for Magicians Incredible. For that’s what they were.

Incredible magicians.

Indeed, they once made Jonathan Pine himself disappear. Completely.

Semper Occultus.

The Circus.

“Come on, then,” Pine whispered. He grasped Kristiane’s hand again and made a mad dash out the door, down the alley toward the Shelton Street Car Park. They wound their way through Neal’s Yard and Nottingham Court in the dark - and down and about more dank side alleys. Jonathan slipped through them as if he were a rat in his own hole - which in a sense, he was.

“This way.”

He dashed into the side entrance of the car park, nearly dragging Kristiane with him the last hundred yards under concrete abutments and massive colonades to his car.

“Are we… are we there… yet?” Kristiane huffed, coming to a clumsy stop, her high heeled boots clanging on the hard, flat cement floor.

“No,” Pine clipped. “We’re not.”

“Aren’t you going to open the door?” She leaned against the low slung blue sedan, a newer model Mercedes. Pricey for the night manager of a hotel; but Kristiane didn’t even think to say anything. “Let a girl… sit… for a while… after a run… like that?”

“Not in this car,” Pine said.

“Isn’t it yours?”

“Yes. It’s mine. But we can’t take it.” Pine tossed the words out over his shoulder, his eyes darting left and right and back again, scanning, reconnoitering. Satisfied with the coast being quite clear, he
bent to his knees beside the front tyre well, reached his hand inside and fished about, grunting and panting with his own effort as he did so. “Come on, come on. Where the fuck is it, Angela?”

“Where’s what?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he barked. “Maybe it’s on the other side.”

“Sorry,” Kristiane huffed. “Can I help?”

“I’ll get it.” He jogged around to where Kristiane was leaning against the car’s bonnet, and repeated his search, feeling about the curved inner fender above the wheel. “Aha!” he exclaimed, tearing the item away from the panel. He scooted back on his haunches and then stood, unfolding his tall, lanky body. At the same time, he brandished a manila envelope, tearing into it. “Phone, keys, ID. Okay,” he murmured, yanking the keys out.

“We’re not taking your car, I gather?” Kristiane questioned.

“We are taking a car… and it is mine now,” Pine replied. He pressed the button on the fob, and another car, parked across the car park, chirped to life. “That one,” he pointed. Kristiane’s jaw dropped. “It’s a fucking Ferrari!”

“All the better if we need to get away. Nice and fast.” Pine winked, finally feeling some hope, some joviality come back to him. “Go on,” he said, opening the door for her, “get in.”

***

Pine pulled the car into a parking space marked “Restricted” at the end of Wellington Court, just outside of Hyde Park. “Were here,” he said, unfolding his legs from the car. He strode around to the back where he took out Kristiane’s rucksack. He also found and retrieved a second packed bag, presumably his own. He shut the boot quietly, not to wake the neighbors, before he opened Kristiane’s door and held his hand out. “Miss Taylor,” he said, his voice preternaturally calm. “We have arrived. It’s up there,” he pointed. “Penthouse flat.”

“Jesus, Jonathan!” she ogled, craning her neck to see the facade of the building. “It’s huge!” She peered up at him quizzically. “Is this your place?”

“Nah,” Pine shrugged. “It did belong to a… an old friend of mine… once,” he said obtusely as he took her arm. “But that friend got into a spot of trouble with Queen and Country - a naughty bit of illegal arms dealing - and well, he had to trade this six-bedroom beauty in for a prison cell. So now MI-6 uses it as a safe house. Nice, really. Very posh, and I mean very posh. How could it not be posh in the middle of Kensington?”

“Is it really safe?”

“Quite.”

“Are we safe now?”

“Safe as houses.”

“Ha, funny. Is that his car, too?” Kristiane cocked her head toward the red Ferrari as they headed up the steps, to the door. “That so-called friend of yours?”

“Yep,” Pine let his lips pop on the terminal ‘p’. “Or it was. Surrendered as well, poor chap.”
Pine entered the code on the keypad and led her and into the building. Once inside, he pressed the button for the lift, but stayed in silence as they entered, continuing as Pine pressed the button for the Penthouse floor. A sense of relief, of security mixed with a profound exhaustion washed over him, such that he felt compelled to bend his head and rest it atop Kristiane’s, his arm resting lightly around her waist. “I’m sorry for all this,” he murmured.

She tensed. “Can you at least tell me what’s going on?”

He chuckled. “Honestly, I don’t rightly know yet.”

“Okay, well, how about this – tell me about this friend of yours who had this amazing car and this flat you’re about to take me to.”

Pine gave her a side-eye, smirking. “Maybe,” he said. “If you behave.”

And the lift opened.

Thanks to Angela and her foresight, the lights were blazing, illuminating every inch of the colossal space of the flat.

An ‘Ooh’ from the actress set her boots in motion.

Bounding heels slapped along the marble floor as they carried the actress towards the wall of windows overlooking Hyde Park. It made for an impressive view in daylight, but instead of admiring the darkened vista of Kensington’s pride, Kristiane stopped short at the shiny black grand piano. She bypassed the high-end furniture and the lavish footprint of the flat.

With her signature dramatic flair, Kristiane feigned throwing herself against the Steinway, “My people!”

Jonathan smirked. “It’s just a musical instrument.”

If he had to be stowed away with someone, he’d pick this woman. He saw her fear, concern for herself and for him, but she wouldn’t play the victim or wallow in it. He hadn’t seen her cry. He hadn’t seen her wilt under the pressure of not knowing what the fuck was going on. He took her hand, directed her on what to do and she had done it.

She’d done it. She’d kept pace with him, dodging in and out of alleyways and side streets. On high heels.

That very same woman stared him down with incredulity at his perceived insult. “There’s no just about this, Mr. Pine! This,” she stroked her hand over the ebony and ivory keys, “is where magic happens.” With that she poured herself onto the piano bench and carefully depressed one note, middle c. She hummed along with the reverberating sound, the acoustic of the extravagant layout pleased her. “Magic.”

Before Kristiane could get become too acquainted with her 88 friends, Steinway and all his sons, Jonathan hustled her back off the bench. With his arm around her back, he pulled her towards one end of the flat. “Until daylight, you’re safer away from that window.”

“I thought this was safe as houses.”

“Until morning and I have visibility, I’ll watch you in there.” He nodded to a pair of doors at the end of the hallway, past a few of the six bedrooms along the way.
Her body relaxed and her muscles stopped fighting him. With direction, she became more pliant, amenable and cooperative. “Usually people have to pay to watch me,” she quipped with that undeniable New York City edge buried beneath it. “I should probably pay you.”

“I don’t need any payment from you.” He pushed at the doors with one hand, splitting the seam down the middle.

Roper had honed his charm and class, manners and knowledge from some of the top English schools – ‘You English, Pine?’ - reading, studying and learning how to disarm people to do his dirty work. In his many years of schooling he’d picked up and collected quite the collection of books. Everything from The Bible to The Art of War to Catcher in the Rye to The DaVinci Code. The human condition, how to play people and the dirtiest of deeds were printed on the pages of his library, either fact or fiction. Roper absorbed it to avoid capture or recourse.

Until Jonathan Pine, of course.

‘To the core, sir.’

‘Wise man.’

Kristiane took one step into Roper’s once-sacred space, the library that housed floor to ceiling books, the fifteen foot walls decorated in nothing but books. She took another reverent step inside. Then another. And then one more. “This is out of Beauty and the Beast!” She spun around in the space, taking in as much as she could all at once, the wooden ladders, the leather bound tomes, the massive collection.

“Beast…”

She couldn’t know how close she was.

“I’m to stay in here?”

Jonathan closed up the doors behind them. “The room is a panic room actually, a well-disguised one. We’ll stay in here until I get word from Angela.”

“Who is Angela?” Kristiane wandered towards one of the bookshelves, mesmerized by the sheer number of books. She ran her hand along the books at waist high distractedly, not paying attention to the leather or binding. The adrenaline and the rush of flight had siphoned off with the quiet and the safety.

Jonathan didn’t know how to answer. “A friend.”

Kristiane had never been in a place so silent. Jonathan didn’t help fill the emptiness. No ticking of a clock or the wind blowing outside or even Jonathan breathing from the center of the room, the lounge area. A vacuum of stability after all the turbulence of the last few hours, and Kristiane thought she might go insane with it.

“Are you the night manager? Is that who you really are?” She fingered one of the books, displacing it and sliding it out of its place. She leafed through the yellowed and foxed pages of a book probably three times as old as she. The respect that she paid that book told him all he needed to know of her scholarly pursuits that she’d only hinted at to this point.

“It’s part of who I am.” He moved to one of the couches in the center of the room and removed all the cushions. He proceeded to unfold the bed hidden inside, preparing for some sleep.
Kristiane replaced the book to its original position, moving along the shelf. She read the spines, and picked another that interested her. “Who’s been giving me my key every night for weeks?” Only this time she’d turned away and asked rhetorically. Maybe she wanted to know, perhaps she didn’t want all the bloody details.

When she reached one of the ladders in the far corner, she propped herself on one of the steps and watched him. “They’re gonna keep coming for me, aren’t they? These things don’t go away on their own, do they?”

“I won’t let them,” he told her solemnly, his earnestness at the center of it.
He peered at his watch. 3:46 am.

He’d watched her sleeping for the better part of an hour, a book – William Least Heat Moon’s *Blue Highways* – spread open, but unread, upon his thigh. Pine sat, his legs curled under him, upon a massive, white brocade wing chair, heedless of the possibility of blue stains from his jeans.

“What’s been giving me my key every night for weeks?”

Her question, one that he purposefully didn’t answer, rang in his mind, tolling loudly in the eerie, artificial silence of the library cum panic room. She’d asked him more questions, the curious thing, but he’d side-stepped all of them. Instead, he silently went about his usual business, only in a vastly different setting.

He’d made her bed. He’d turned the covers down. He’d gone into the small kitchenette off to the side of the library and made her a pot of tea. A quite unnecessary pot of tea, for when he brought it back into the main salon, when he’d set it down on the table beside the converted bed, he’d found her asleep.

Sound asleep. She’d looked… peaceful, all tucked up in the duvets, her hand curled around the fabric beneath her chin. Her face was – quiet. Her eyes didn’t appear as wide-set when she slept, but her mouth was fuller, as those muscles she used to make her bread and butter simply… relaxed. There was no false smile, no smirk, no broad pulls of her lips to form vowel sounds around high notes, just… peace.

And seeing her in that state made a strange state of peace wash over Pine as he stood there, peering down at her. Strange, it was, in the midst of… whatever the hell it was they were in the midst of. Burr still hadn’t phoned him with a briefing. But then, it was the middle of the night, and she with a two-year old. Probably sleeping herself, the dear. But still, the desire to just… know ate at him.

But instead, the sight of Kristiane made Pine’s heart lighten, just that little bit.

“What’s been taking her key from me every night for weeks? Hm? Who exactly are you?” He’d whispered his own question back to her. He extended his hand out of some sort of odd reflex, a
strange need to… to touch her. This, he did, gently, barely touching the back of his fingers over the cascade of her hair. “I won’t let them come for you,” he promised her again. “I won’t.”

And now, sitting in the chair, he kept a safe distance, removing himself from the temptation for more contact. For more study of her face, of the way she breathed, of the way she… no.

No, Pine. She’s not for you. You know who you are. Beast, that’s what you are. No one is for you. You’re toxic. You kill. You can’t.

“Oh, shut it you,” he murmured, putting silence to the voice… that voice… in his own mind. “Fucking shut it.” He lifted the book with an irritated huff, but before he could glance at the page, the new mobile buzzed in his pocket. Startled, he fished it out, and answered the call.

“International Exports, Limited, may I help you?”

“You’re up early,” Pine drolled.

“Willie’s teething,” she complained. “Bugger’s been up and down all night, he has.”

Pine smiled. “Sorry to hear that. Listen, what in hell is going on, Angela?”

“Where’s the Disney Princess?”

“Call her Sleeping Beauty,” Pine clipped. “She’s knackered sore; fell asleep soon as she got under the covers. What is going on?”

“We’re not completely certain yet, Jonathan,” she said, sheepishly. “There’ve been threats….”

“What sort of threats?”


“What has this to do with Kristiané?”

“The threats have come in the form of letters, sent by regular old Royal Mail – and those letters have been written on the back of sheet music. They were addressed to management at the theatre. Theatre security contacted us, and we’re looking into it.”

“Sheet music?” Pine asked, frowning. “Anything specific?”

“Songs from Carousel…,” she said, “songs the Disney Princess sings.”

“Again,” Pine sighed, annoyed, “what has this to do with Kristiané?”

“They’ve also sent letters on the same sheets of music to her agent in New York, and,” Burr said, “We’ve traced calls to Miss Taylor’s mobile phone, and none of those calls are coming from theatrical agents, theatres, or stage management companies here. They all come from outside the country, but we can’t pinpoint any of it. Not yet.”

“She has been getting some strange calls,” Pine affirmed. “She came to me about it – asked me to look into it. She also asked me to look into who is paying her bills for the next month after Carousel closes and she starts her next show.”
“What’s the show?”

He shook his head. “She’s no idea. She’s been trying to figure that out. She just gets calls to show up at a certain place and a certain time and that’s that. No script, no score, nothing. She’s not showing it, but she’s frightened out her wits, Angela.”

*****

“Safe to come out?” Kristiane called from the open doors of the library, assuming Jonathan left them open on purpose.

“Kitchen,” came his curt reply, a disembodied sound from the vast display of marble in front of her.

She couldn’t see him from where she stood, but she felt this overwhelming need to be with him. An impulsive need to be in his company, in his presence after the hellish night. His demeanor, his natural disposition of quiet strength dampened the discordant music of her life. Since this ordeal started, the beat was off, the notes out of tune, the composition topsy-turvy.

Jonathan was order, Jonathan was discipline, Jonathan was balance. Jonathan was quiet.

After sleeping off her crash from stress, the singer rifled through what items Jonathan had rescued in haste from her hotel room. She’d scrubbed her face clean of makeup and changed into a similar but cleaner outfit of jeans and t-shirt. Kristiane padded out of the library on bare feet, following the sound of sizzling bacon and the delicious smell of butter.

Vulnerability wasn’t new or foreign for her, but she felt a certain amount in the daylight. She was a star who shined brightest at night. Daylight showed her fragility. For that she tucked a jumper around her tighter, hiding her blemishes, her imperfections, what makeup and stage lighting and fancy costumes covered nicely. On her own, in the daylight, she was mortal. On stage, in the twinkling, glittering lights, she was invincible.

The man worked at the six burner oven in the chef’s grade kitchen, with the saucepans steaming, the frying pans heating, the kettle brewing, and the griller grilling. He attended each element with equal amounts of care and attention, composing his own brand of magic like Kristiane did with music. He wore a new and clean heather gray polo that fit him so well that the material almost verbally complimented his physique. It was loud and obvious. He coupled the soft collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows with a pair of black Tyler jeans that hugged him in all the right places.

Her blood, her muscles, her pores, the very core of her ached and burned to wrap her arms around him, to feel his strength, his influence. But she didn’t. Too informal, too impolite, too domestic. Instead she watched in fascination at the hidden skill she didn’t know he had. Wisely she kept the massive island between them, to stay away.

“You really did want to make me breakfast,” her tone betrayed her surprise and her amusement.

He appraised her toned down appearance, her hair tied up and back, her makeup free face, her wide amused eyes. She had that eager to please look to her, that one he missed while he watched her sleep. No, Jonathan- NO! Watched over her while she slept. Vigilance, duty, what needed to be done. To know firsthand that she wasn’t in immediate danger. Quickly he turned back to the skillet before he disrupted the balance of creating. With a slight smile in his voice, he remarked, “Each version of myself is a cook.”
“Oh, a sense of humor this morning.” She liked this version of Jonathan. “Can’t blame a girl for thinking it a line.”

“Has the ‘Let me make you breakfast’ ever worked on you?”

She grinned triumphantly at the back of his head and broad shoulders. “Yes. Once.” She paused for the desired effect. “Last night.”

He gave into a smile, and then a small chuckle, and eventually surrendered to a full on laugh. He was reminded of her sense of humor and how much she took the piss out of him last night over drinks. The cheery, lighthearted sound fell out of him as freely as water from the tap or butter melting over an open flame. “That almost went—“ Tits up. “—belly up!” Better.

“Can I help?”

“Do you cook?”

“Not often, but I do when I find myself in a kitchen. My parents were bakers, my family owned a bakery.”

“I’ve got this here. But next time, we’ll cook together.” He got two white plates out from the cupboard to his right, and dished up what he’d created, one of his specialties. Not quite the fried English breakfast, rather a healthy alternative using a lot of the same ingredients.

With a polite dismissal, Kristiane popped herself into one of the barstools at the island, glancing around her surroundings like she hadn’t last night. “This is a fucking palace of an apartment! What does one do with such extravagance?”

_Murder people. Maim children. Abuse women. Create war and panic._

“You don’t want to know,” he said with finality, placing her plate in front of her. He placed another plate next her at the island, handing over linen napkins and silverware from a drawer.

“Thank you, Jonathan. If this is half as good as it smells…” she didn’t finish as she took a bite of a vegetable omelet. She moaned around the mouthful, nodding her approval.

“Enjoy.”

After several minutes of comfortable not-quite-silence sharing their first meal together, Jonathan considered how to broach something that skirted around in his mind. The debriefing from Angela got him considering how Kristiane was involved with this sheet music, explodey type chaos. “Can you take me to your theatre today? Can you get inside?”

Her eyes darted to his, and he saw that fear and trepidation that she tried so hard to hide. “Is that safe? I thought we had to stay here.”

“You have a performance tonight, yes?”

She nodded, her eyes growing wider with alarm.

“We’ll keep up appearances for now. But I’ll be with you. If I see anything, hear anything, sense anything, I’ll get you out. There must be a reason that they want you in London.”

She dropped her fork and pushed her plate aside. She swiveled in his direction. “If you want me to do this, I will. If you believe it’s for the best… just tell me what to do.”
“Be yourself for now. Nothing’s changed. You just didn’t sleep in the hotel last night. That’s the only difference.”

She nodded again, putting all her trust in him once more.

“Did you get sheet music when you started this show?”

“Uh… yeah, of course. But this score, I knew since I was a kid. Didn’t need it, didn’t use it.”

“Where is it?”

“My dressing room at the theatre. Why?”

“Finish your breakfast, Kristiane,” he lifted his chin dismissively, pushing the plate back in front of her. He knew, once again, he’d skirted one of her questions. He knew there’d be one time when she wouldn’t let him. But it hadn’t come yet.

She eyed him, wary. Yet, she still lifted her fork and stabbed into the fried potatoes in demonstration of due obedience. He was glad of it, not only glad of her apparent enjoyment of the fruits of his labour, but glad of her understanding.

Of her trust.

For if he told her what he’d suspected, she’d be worried. Afraid. Even more so than she already was, and he couldn’t have that. She was a tough cookie, as they say, but he wondered if even this plucky New York-bred American had her limits.

He certainly had his.

And so, he too wordlessly tucked back into his own breakfast, consisting of a mere two slices of unbuttered toast and a cup of black, bitter coffee.

***

“Isn’t this car a little high profile? Open top and all? I mean, aren’t we supposed to be hiding?”

He smiled, eyeing her sideways as he maneuvered the Ferrari through the busy Saturday London summer streets. “You’re a famous American actress, Kristie,” he said, his voice carrying over the din of the roaring engine, “best to keep up appearances. Hide in plain sight. Attract as much attention to yourself as possible, make them think you’ve no idea what’s going on.”

“But I don’t know what’s going on!” She shouted, flinging her hands up. “That’s the problem!”

He chuckled. “I think you know what I mean, darling.”

Her eyes went wide for a split second, a fleeting microexpression of what appeared to be affronted shock. Pine saw it and swallowed, cursing himself inwardly for his flippancy. Calling her darling. You fucking idiot. The hell you’re on about? Ass.

“I mean, he corrected, “make them think you suspect nothing.” He turned down the last road toward the theater car park. “Nearly there,” he chirped.

“Jonathan,” Kristiane said, her tone quite interrogatory as they pulled into an underground parking spot and Pine shifted the car into park. “Lemme ask you something.”

Pine looked intently at her, his hands in his lap. “Of course. Anything.”
“Don’t you have to work tonight? I mean, how are you going to be at the theatre to… to… protect me or whatever it is you’re gonna do? What about your job? What about your boss? Won’t you get fired?”

He sighed, his mouth twisting, the corner of it pulling back to crease his cheek. He rolled his eyes downward, averting her gaze. “I, er,… no. I won’t get fired.” He sucked his lower lip between his teeth. “I’m sort of the boss.”

She frowned, her head quirking to the side in a questioning angle. “Huh?”

He laughed, a quiet, breathy chuckle. “Let’s just say, I’ve an ownership interest in the company that runs the Covent Garden.”

“So, what? Are you like… rich or something?”

He bobbled his head. “Or something. I’m a… silent partner,” he said, conspiratorially. “Very silent. Not even the rest of my partners know I’m a partner. I transact all my business with them by proxy, all through numbered back accounts and the like. Through solicitors.”

“And you do this… why? Why do you work as a… a night manager, of all jobs, when you own the place? Why so secretive?”

Because I stole a cool, smooth 300 million of Richard Roper’s dollars. Because Roper still has friends. Because I value my hide, thank you very much.

He went still for a long moment, staring out the windscreen at the chipped concrete wall before them. He licked his lips, once, and then sighed, giving a small, wan smile. “We should go,” he said quickly, shoving open the door and alighting from the car.

***

Kristiane pitched herself against the car’s passenger door in aggravation without waiting for Jonathan to come around and open it for her. The infuriating man!

He offered up these little nuggets of himself, these fascinating facets of his life and personality, almost but not quite voluntarily. Like a pearl in a clam or Mary Poppins bag of supercalifragilisticexpialidocious-ness. A shred of evidence that would lead to more trust or would snap and bite at her for asking. She never knew which.

Because Kristiane worked herself ragged to get where she was, existing on ramen noodles for months, when peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were considered a luxury, when she slept on a friend’s couch for weeks because she couldn’t keep her apartment or pay her rent, when she had to scrape pennies together to get to her next voice lesson, when she almost had to walk from Manhattan to Brooklyn because she couldn’t afford the subway fare, Kristiane never once took for granted what she earned or how quickly it could be taken from her again. In some ways, she appeared privileged, but she’d worked for those perks and it was a precarious business she chose.

Humility. She lived it, embodied it, swore by it. To combat the notion of celebrity, she engaged with others, showed interest in them. She came across as flighty and whimsical, but the truth was she had her feet firmly planted on the ground. She walked to work every day, from the hotel to the theatre and back again. She picked up her own groceries, she did her own shopping. She stayed in a five star hotel because her producers put her there, not by choice. She’d be just as happy with a miniscule one bedroom flat.

Kristiane tried with this man, engaged with him, showed interest in him, latched onto a piece of him, to relate, to be a friend. He seemed as keen to turn cold and tell her the least amount to keep her
at a safe distance away. Was that first story a fluke or did he feel a sense of shame for telling her anything at all?

Jonathan covered his astonishment at her opening her own door this time. She pushed back some at his emotional tug of war with her, and let him fall on his ass.

“You’re on my turf now, Pine.” She hefted her rehearsal bag on the Ferrari’s spoiler, and she thought she heard it huff in exasperation for being so put out. Digging past books and sheet music, character shoes and Band-Aids for emergencies, she recovered a tube of red lipstick and mascara. Bending at the waist, she used the rearview mirror to apply both within seconds.

Aware that her pose accentuated what God, twice-a-week dance classes and daily workouts gave her in Jonathan’s general direction at the rear of the car, Kristiane flaunted her assets in a way of revenge. It was childish, but showing him what he couldn’t have made her feel a little better about having ‘a friend’ not trust her, or for having ‘a friend’ throw her celebrity in her face, or for having ‘a friend’ shoot her down – again!

She straightened and lugged her bag over her shoulder, leading the silent watcher to the door marked Drury Theatre Lower Level. “Play the part, Pine.” A masked warning. Kristiane pushed the button marked deliver and waited expectantly for the intercom.

“Yes?” a voice sounded a few moments later.

“Heidi, it’s Kristiane. Would you let me in please?”

“Of course, luv,” the speaker crackled. “Be right down.” The thing went silent.

“Now, Pine,” Kristiane instructed without looking at him, her voice cold and distant. “Put your arm around my shoulders and pretend you can tolerate me.”

Jonathan knew he’d annoyed her, irritated her, worked her last nerve. She shoveled his shit back at him with her American attitude, and it was neither the time nor the place to hash out their differences. He shot her down, deflated her balloon, brushed her off and sidestepped her questions so much that she was, as they say in New York City, just done.

Prime example of another human interaction he’d handled wrong. You are an ass, Pine. She would tell you so to your face.

Jonathan did as Kristiane told him. Truth was, he could tolerate her. He could more than tolerate her. But he repeated that common litany in his head, she’s not for you.

A tall lanky woman with a pink dye job about a few months past due for a touchup and a clipboard firmly planted in the crook of her elbow opened the door. Heidi smiled for Kristiane, pushing her frizzy hair back out of her face, her gaze sweeping over the man at her lead’s side.

“Heidi,” the actress bubbled. “This is,” her hand slid across Jonathan’s abdomen, feigning some sort of intimacy between them, playing into some show for the stage manager’s benefit, “my boyfriend, Jonathan.” She rested her head against his chest, playing the enamored lover.

“A gnawing, gnashing feeling pulled at him that he shouldn’t enjoy that touch for appearances. It’s not real, Pine. She’s an actress and a good one. Play along but don’t fall for her charade, ass. He cupped her shoulder, squeezing her to him, giving back the put on affection. Offering his hand to shake, he plastered his signature night manager smile on his face. “Heidi, it’s a pleasure. Thanks for having us.”
Then Kristiane, playing her part, grinned up at him. “He wanted to see my work before we strike.” She addressed the stage manager but she played the loving girlfriend by keeping her eyes and smile on him. “Do you mind, Heidi?”

*****

“What exactly are you looking for?” Her body language said it all. Her arms were wound around each other under her breasts. She stood on one leg with the other cocked out to the side. Not just annoyed, Kristiane was mad. Her cheeks were inflamed. She didn’t want to share this with him. Her scripts and music and blocking sheets were hers, and she didn’t want to share them with the man sworn to protect her, but she didn’t want to share the room with.

Jonathan met her heated gaze with his matter of fact one. “I’ll know when I find it.” He flipped through her book, caressing each of the pages. Invisible ink… encrypted pages… unique textures… anything out of the ordinary. “Who gave this to you?”

She tsked. “Heidi, my stage manager.”

“Who does she work for?”

“Playful Productions.”

“And this is as she gave it to you?”

“Yes.” An exasperated sigh. “Except for my notes in the margins.”

“I need more time to study them. We’ll take them with us.”

*****

A flash of movement and a spark of cold steel met her periphery when she stepped into the nearly empty parking garage. Gut instinct recognized the possibility of a threat by the speed. Kristiane reacted quickly. Heaving her bag up in an arc, she used the bulk of it as a weapon on instinct. The heavy bag made contact with her assailant’s head. He grunted with the impact of the unexpected hit.

A burning down her left arm made her scream out in pain as it shot from her elbow to her hand, forcing her to drop her bag. Momentum kept her spinning towards the attacker. She shoved the heel of her right hand into the face of the man she’d never seen before. Just shy of her intended target of his nose, she hit hard at his cheekbone with a sickening thud. She cursed against the pinch of pain up her arm from the collision.

The man reeled back, but recovered quickly enough to make another move at her. The attacker tried to grab at her around her waist, but she followed through with the last of her follow through, with a knee to his leg. It had gone wrong, aiming for his groin. But he dropped like a sack of potatoes against her defensive move, his knees landing hard on the concrete.

Jonathan swooped in to deliver another set of right hooks on Kristiane’s assaulter, kicking a knife soaked with blood from his hand.

Feeling dizzy, confused and shaken, Kristiane stood motionless. Her chest felt tight with the hammering of her heart. Searing pain radiated from her left arm, pulsing, beating, and excruciating, blinding pain. And wet… her fingers dripped with wet. She looked down. The flesh of her arm showed a gaping wound and bled profusely. Her blood poured down her arm and pooled onto the concrete, leaving a dark mass of her life. She dropped to her knees, covering the wound, holding it
together, trying to keep her insides on the inside, but she couldn’t quite grasp what happened.

“Jonathan,” her voice so still that she didn’t recognize herself. She couldn’t register that her bodyguard had incapacitated her attacker or checked for ID, another weapon or evidence of what he was after.

Blood flowed from between the fingers of her clean hand, rivers flowing down and soaking into her jeans. Pain coursed through her and she thought she might pass out from the random spots of light in her vision.

With more body behind it and a lot more volume, she called out again, “Jonathan!”
“No, no, no, no… NO! Bastard! No!”

Pine had turned on his knees, his back to the man for just a moment, just a split second, God damnit, to search the inert, groaning man’s cargo pants - pockets, so many fucking pockets - when he heard it.

Pop. Crunch.

Pine froze, shuddering. It was a sound he knew from long ago, from another life. But he knew it well. One inhale confirmed it. Marzipan, a brand new bottle of pure almond extract, burnt cookies from a Chinese restaurant. Whatever it smelled like, the suicidal scent was distinct.

Pine whirled on his hands and knees, hovering over the man. “Who do you work for?” he bellowed, shaking him, practically begging for information as the bitten-down cyanide capsule in the man’s mouth did its dastardly, swift, fatal work. “Tell me, damn you!”

But the man didn’t speak. His eyes were wide, frightened, yet proud and defiant as he stared unyieldingly into Pine’s. His lips moved to form words behind the spew of froth and blood-tinged foam that filled the cavity of his mouth. There were two words, and two words only that Pine was able to discern, that Pine was able to see beneath the quickly descending veil of death upon the man’s face.

“Fuck…. you….” It came out in a wheeze, followed by a wracking cough, a powerful, flailing convulsion – and finally, death. The man died at his own hands, at Pine’s hands… and with him died any leads, any information, any possible way to….

“Jonathan!”

Pine heard Kristiane’s weak, tremulous voice behind him, and the sound of it smote him to the core. He whipped around, and the sight of her – her arms, hands, jeans, and shirt painted with rivulets and splotches of bright red blood - sent a sliver of ice down his spine. “Kristie!” He dashed over to her. “Jesus Christ, you’re bleeding!”

“No shit, Sherlock!” she hissed, her teeth grit tightly behind drawn-back lips. “The fucking sonofabitch cut me!”
“Burr,” Pine clipped, his shoulder cradling the phone as his hands worked swiftly on Kristiane’s arm. “I have one to pick up, and one to clean up. This location. Get here. Now.” He rang off and tossed the phone aside, returning his full attention to the task at hand.

“One to pick up?” Kristiane grunted in pain as Pine tied a neat knot at the top of a makeshift bandage. Made shift out of one of his white t-shirts, torn into long ribbons, tourniqueted at the top with one of her wide elastic hair bands. “What does that supposed to mean?”

“It means you,” he said. He leaned back on his knees and assessed the bandaging job. He chewed his bottom lip and squinted, not quite happy with the way the white t-shirt was rapidly turning red, but a field dressing was a field dressing, and it had to make do. “They’ll see to your injury. Get you some stitches in that arm. It’s good he didn’t slice through a vein, or an artery.”

She nodded, licking her lips, her breath shallow, yet steady.

“Kristiane.” He drew his fingers gently down the length of the bandage, his own breath shaky. “I… I don’t know what I’d do if…,” he stopped himself, inhaling sharply and then clearing his throat. “Just…,” he swallowed. “I’m, er… you’ll be okay. It’s… it’s good.”

“I’m lucky,” she said, flatly. “Is that what you’re telling me?”

He looked away for a moment, and then back at her, his eyes earnest, yet dark. Serious. Intent. “I don’t believe in luck.”

***

“Does it hurt overmuch?” Pine stood beside Kristiane’s gurney, peering down at her. He didn’t touch her, but he kept himself close – one hand beside her head, the other near her wounded arm.

He wanted nothing more than to take her up in his arms and comfort her, to take away her fear and her pain and her tears and her anger and bring them deep inside himself, to imprison them so they could never touch her again. But he knew he couldn’t. Even if he could, he wondered if she would let him.

She’s not for you, Pine. You could’ve gotten her killed today. What happens the next time? You annoy the shit out of her, anyway. She despises you. Don’t bother. She’s not for you.

“It’s not so bad,” she replied. “They’ve given me a ton of shots to numb it up. Can’t feel a thing right now.”

He nodded, pulling back. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“For what?”

“For this,” he gestured toward her flayed open arm. “I should have been more vigilant. Watched better. Protected you. Did my job.”

“Are you a professional bodyguard?” she smirked, her eyes twinkling.

He chuckled quietly. “No. I’m the night manager of a hotel.”

“See?” she perked. “That’s why.”

He frowned. “That’s why what?” He took a step back and picked up a white Styrofoam cup of tea
from the table beside her, bringing it to his lips.

“That’s why I was the one who took the fuckface out, and not you. I beat the shit out of him. Kicked him in the ‘nards. I Took. Him. Dooooooown.”

Pine had taken a sip, and with that colourful statement, had all but spat it out, sending tiny droplets of warm, brown liquid in a spray upon the white gurney sheet. His laughter continued, and he choked and gasped with it, before his breathing settled into long, whooping “oh”s and a final, “Oh, Christ.”

“Well, I did.” Kristiane smiled broadly. “Didn’t I?”

“That you did,” Pine replied, setting the cup back down. “You did indeed.”

“Maybe,” she bobbed her head back and forth on the pillow, her eyes rolling in a knowing, self-congratulatory manner, “maybe I ought to be the bodyguard from now on.”

“Maybe you should.” He sighed, then, and his smile faded as he looked at her. As he looked at his failure that seeped from her arm, turning the sheets a mocking red. As he looked into her face – her beautiful… living… thank God she was living… face. “Kristiane, I…,” he began, but he was cut off.

“Welcome to River House, Miss Taylor.” Angela Burr appeared from behind the curtain, parting it widely with a sweep of her arm.

“River House?” Kristiane looked up at Jonathan, questioning. “What’s River House?”

“It’s the headquarters for certain branches of British Intelligence,” Pine said.

Her eyes went wide. “Like… like James Bond and M and SPECTRE and Moneypenny?”

“As if,” Burr snorted. “Nah, nothing of the sort. Nothing as exciting as all that, I’m afraid. Same place, though.”

Kristiane’s eyes roved quickly around the cubicle. “But this looks like… I thought I was in a hospital.”

“You are,” Angela replied. “MI6 has its very own ED right here in this very building.” She gestured, indicating the rest of the space. “Right convenient it is – ‘specially for those very times when we don’t want the coppers pokin’ about our business now, innit?”

Kristiane furrowed her brow, her reaction delayed and dulled by the pain killers streaming through her blood. “And we don’t want the coppers snooping around the criminal behavior?”

Angela scoffed, stepping further into the MI6 triage and hospital room. “Nothing gets by your girl, huh?”

Jonathan straightened involuntarily and shuffled on his feet. To subvert, he introduced the two women. “Kristiane, meet your new friend Angela. Angela, Kristie.”

The investigator, interrogator and patroller all in one woman moved to the other side of the patient’s gurney. “Misjudged you, princess. Pegged you the wrong sort. Underestimated you.”

The drugged woman swung her head, her muscles loosened by the medication for her wound. “Princess? Gimme a tiara!”

Ignoring Kristie’s demand, she patted her arm in an obviously placating manner. “You held your own from what my boy tells me,” she nodded towards Jonathan.
“Beat the shit outta the gooovoooooon,” she slurred. “You gonna fix me up already? I’m bleed… ing…” her voice trailed off.

“Did you one better, sweetheart. Brought you in a specialist to patch you up like new… or better. Medical advancements will set you to rights better than the bionic woman.”

“I don’t wanna be robotic… Can I get one of those… one of thooooooossssee…”

Jonathan cut in, “Should we see about adjusting her Vicodin, Angela?”

“She’s had enough to take down an elephant, she’s fine,” the woman deadpanned as a reply.

“—Annnn agent name?!” the patient exclaimed. “And annn agent nummmmberrrrrr, and a band-aid then I can swimmmm.”

Jonathan cracked another smile at the cheeky, squiffy woman, her high rather endearing. He brushed her hair back from her face.

Angela answered, “Someone else’s department, luv. I’m gunna need borrow your man—“

“Noaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaoo,” Kristie moaned softly, the sound flowing out of her in an even wheeze. “But can’t he stay?”

Burr gave Jonathan a steady look, telling him in no uncertain terms that he was required to go for a debriefing with her and Joel Steadman. She gestured with a tilt of her head and a swing back that Jonathan had to talk and learn what they could about what happened that led them to this point. Of course, there needed to be a plan going forward too.

He tipped his head in acknowledgement, ready to do whatever he had to, whatever was best for Kristie. He bent over and hovered by her face to get her to focus. “Kristie, I’ll be back straight away.”

Her eyes swam with the effects of the pain medication, tears forming at her bottom lid. Her lower lip trembled as she remembered her fear and the calming effect he had on her. “Don’t go.”

“Listen, stay here. Angela and I, we’re going to get you a Bond name. Next time you see me, I’ll have one for you.”

*****

“We done you a disservice, we have,” Angela spoke not two hours later at Kristie’s bedside. The wound had been treated, the drugs worn off, and the patient sat up against a few pillows. “Disney princess…” she shook her head. “That’s not—“

“I played one once, on stage, Belle. But me, a Disney Princess? I’ll only play one if you pay me.”

“Well then, princess, gotta discuss some particulars with you right quick. This thing, whatever it is, it’s not over, not by leaps and bounds,” Burr stated firmly, getting down to the point. “You’ve got a few options, all of which—“ she shrugged helplessly “not favorable.”

Kristie fiddled with the new brace on her arm, the new technology made her hyperaware of her own skin working to repair itself. She had barely been awake for the procedure, but the doctor had explained about some technobabble or other that would accelerate her healing. “What is happening with me? Why are there people after me?”
“I think you have something they want.” Shaking her head, Burr sat down in the chair under the window, the sun blocked out by the tinted glass. “We don’t rightly know all the details, we’re working it… but here’s the deal—I can send you home, put you on a plane back to the Big Apple and Time’s Square and the American attitudes, if that’s what you fancy. I can’t protect you from here though, I got no pull, no people, and no shit to do that.”

“I’m not leaving my show! You fixed me up, I’m going back on that stage. I’m finishing this show.”

The other woman held up her hands in surrender. “Thought you might. Thought you’d say that. I can pull strings and be puppet master from here and surround you with my best men.”

“I’m—as long—I want… Jonathan.” The thought popped in her head, and as soon as she said it, she knew it to be true. She didn’t care if the world was crumbling around her, she felt a sense of order with Jonathan.

“We’ll leave things as they are then with enough security to put that Bieber kid to shame.”

*****

When Jonathan returned to her room after his debriefing and Kristiane’s discussion with Angela, the actress felt that familiar pull to go to him. Whether it was his calming presence or his familiarity or the fact that he’d been there for her ordeal, she wanted to soak in his strength. Maybe because he’d seen what she’d been through, or he’d called for help or he’d gotten her medical attention, all she knew was he’d kept her company.

She’d been angry with him for not telling her about the details he knew, but when the bad guy came for her, Jonathan was there. She didn’t want another handler or bodyguard, she only wanted a friend, however closed off he appeared.

Jonathan sheepishly reached for the hand of her injured arm, to ask after her, to show concern, but the thought better of the touching. “Feeling better?” His gaze swept over her newly acquired, clean of blood clothes that looked odd on her. “I like this costume,” he teased, winking for her, recalling their chat over beer the night before. Had that only been a few hours ago?

Striking a model pose, Kristiane twirled a 360 showing off the government-issued street clothes, only for a man instead of a woman. “As dear Angela told it, not many agents my size… ‘Better to look like I slept with a man and put on his clothes than wear poorly fitted females.’ Her call, entirely.”

“Huh, never considered it that way.”

“Did you see my biometrics? I’m almost brandy new now!” she said brightly showing off her deep gash and scratch down her arm. The plastic brace was gone, leaving behind a film that held her flesh together, while the internal thingymabobs worked on the inside.

Puzzled, his forehead crinkled. “Did you—did you just say biometrics?”

“Yeah, sounded good, didn’t it?”

He paused and then erupted into a laugh at the same time she did. “Not… not at all…”

Unconsciously, she reached out and touched his hand as she moved in closer, laughing with him. “I’m an actress for a reason. Science didn’t stick. History, literature, those stuck. I don’t know, MI6, biology, human anatomy, new creation for healing lacerations. These Bond people get cut up a lot, and helpful in a pinch like mine… so… biometrics!”
“I got you your own call name while you were getting sewed up… or taped?”

“Oh! What is it?”

“Songbird.”

“Songbird,” she repeated proudly. “I like that! Magic bandage, magic drugs, and my very own Bond name all in one day. Not a bad day for Kristiane.”

“Except that one part.”

“I’m okay, Jonathan. I’m not entirely helpless.”

“I’m grateful for that. I saw you use some self-defense techniques.”

“I took a few classes when an ex-boyfriend got rough with me.”

Angela stepped into the room then, “Discharge papers for you, Songbird. You’ve got a show in a few hours. And you, boy, need a chat private-like, hush-hush, downlow and all that.”

She pointed at him and then out in the corridor, gesturing for him to follow.

Pine gave Kristiane a small, reassuring nod and a wait here gesture, a quirk of the eyebrow ensuring her compliance. At her own tiny bob of the head, Pine turned and followed Angela Burr out into the corridor.

“What haven’t you told her?” Pine clipped, his voice a raspy whisper.

“Nothing,” Burr shrugged, her own voice pitched low. “She knows what you know what I know what anyone knows. Except for them of course. They know. But they ain’t tellin’ are they?”

Pine sighed. “Okay, then,” he prompted. “What do you want?”

“You’ve been free of us for some time know, yeah? Out the loop with… things.”

He cocked his head. “Things….”

“You know, things. We’ve not asked you to involve yourself in our sort of business for a while, and I can understand you not wanting to be involved in it now.”

He narrowed one eye, frowning. “What are you saying?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m saying, that if you want out, you can have out. You don’t need to keep on minding the songbird’s cage if you don’t want to. You’ve lived in peace these few years, Jonathan. Far be it from me to take that away from you now after all you did for me.”

He pursed his lips. “I wouldn’t call any of it peace, Angela. Having made off with three hundred million of Richard Roper’s dollars, I can’t help but feel I’ve a perpetual target on my back.”

Burr said nothing, but her face spoke volumes. “So,” she said. “Do you want out? Should I assign someone else to the pretty girl in there? Do you want to go back to your hidey-hole hotel?”

He turned his head and looked through the narrow divider of light that peeked between the cubicle’s privacy curtains; at the woman dressed in men’s clothes, sat upon the mussed up gurney, her legs swinging in trousers too long for her, her shirt sleeves turned up in thick rolls in the crooks of her elbows, her hair loose in heavy waves around her pale face, her eyes turned up to the ceiling in a

I want to be with her.

“You sure?”

Pine turned and fixed Angela with a serious, minatory glare. “More than sure,” he affirmed. “Just make certain someone takes my place at the hotel for the duration. Someone with at least half a brain, preferably. I don’t want to find the accounts gone to piss whilst I’m gone.”

***

“You going to be okay?” Pine rest his hands on Kristiane’s shoulders, smiling down at her. He’d wanted to ask her about the former boyfriend ever since she’d mentioned it, but he knew, the time wasn’t right. There was much more to think about, much more to focus upon.

You’ll simply have to ask her later.

You hope.

She nodded rapidly. “Yeah,” she breathed, and then swallowed hard, flicking her eyes up to his. “I’ll… I’ll be fine.”

He looked into the open stage door area, down the empty, black, echoing, concrete block hallway, and then back at her, smiling. “I’ll be sitting house right,” he said, brushing his hand down her arm. “Angela told me she got the office manager to get me a house seat. I’ll be front row, right where you can see me, okay?”

“What about when I’m not on stage?”

Pine fished into his pocket and pulled out a small, hinged box. Kristiane’s eyes went wide at the sight of it, and she peered up at him in confusion. “What is… the hell is that?”

“Oh,” Pine chuckled. “No, it’s… it’s not that… it’s… well, here,” he opened up the box to reveal a small earpiece. He tapped his own ear. “I can hear you, and you me. We can talk whilst you get ready, and if you need me, just…,” he cringed, thinking.

“Just whistle?”

He laughed. “Yeah, just whistle. I like it.” He lifted his hand from her shoulder and let it hover for a moment before pressing the tips of his fingers lightly to her face. “Have a good show, Songbird,” he whispered. “And don’t worry about a thing.”

“Don’t say that,” she smirked.

He blinked. “Say what? Don’t… don’t say what?”

“Have a good show,” she instructed. “You need to say, ‘break a leg’.”


“Kristie, luvvie! Issat you canoodlin’ out there?” A voice echoed from the end of the corridor. “Kristie, you’re late for your call, you are. Get your pert little arse in here. Cast meeting in ten seconds!”
She gave a small shrug beneath a chastised face, smiling up at Jonathan. “Gotta go,” she mouthed. “See you later.”

And off, down the corridor she went, disappearing around the dark, dark corner.
“Songbird to The Night Manager.”

“Kristie,” she heard the urgency in his voice “where are you?”

“Relax, Pine,” she giggled while closing her dressing room door behind her. The cast huddle before a show helped get everyone on the same energy, and they all genuinely liked each other, at least professionally. Her co star Steven was the cast clown and made everyone laugh before they took on the responsibility of telling Rodgers and Hammerstein’s heartbreaking story. “I’m fine. I wanted to check out my Bond gadget.”

“Who’s Godot? Why’s his note to wait for him funny?”

A very light giggling, the loveliest sound, floated into his ear from her. “If you need me to explain it, the joke loses its charm.”

*****

“Do you think you look like a crazy person talking to yourself in the lobby?” She couldn’t resist poking fun. Most of the time he seemed a bit rigid. She liked ruffling him some, hoping to make him laugh again.

“Not talking to myself, talking to the woman who can’t shut her gob for two minutes.”

“I’m an actress, Pine. I’m already crazier than that guy on the subway who asked if he could do the banking for my pet tree. I don’t even have a pet tree.”

Pine rolled his eyes hard and that changed the sound of his voice, modulating it lower. “Some of us are taking in an evening at the theatre.”

Julie Jordan’s dress for act one hung on its hanger, ready to show Kristiane in her role. Thanks to MI6 technobaubles she wouldn’t have to do much extra to hide or costume her wound, the magic film making it look like her skin. “I didn’t know Tower Bridge was on the market.”

*****
Kristiane shoved her feet into her character shoes, the last of her costume, before she went to hair and makeup. She loved her new toy and she felt a sense of excitement in taking the stage that night. Not only did she survive someone hurting her, she had someone she knew in the audience. “Hey, do I get to keep this thing when this operation is over?” Her stomach twinged, pulled tight, as her fear slipped through. Over… Operations didn’t always end well.

“I’ll put in a word for you.” He said it flatly, giving away his uneasy demeanor.

“I’m sorry about all of this, Jonathan,” she found some of her personal confidence without him being right there. “Musicals aren’t your thing. I’m sure this isn’t what you signed up for when you said friend.”

As she made her way to the wings and Jonathan wove his way through the audience to his seat, she confessed, “I was mad at you this afternoon.”

“I know you were,” he whispered stepping around a couple drinking themselves silly in the aisle.

“I’m not mad anymore.”

*****

Actors will say that they can’t see the audience beyond the stage lights, and most of the time that was absolutely true. No silouettes, no vague outlines, no shapes, just a dull gray beyond downstage. Mostly true, except for the first two or three rows. From her first scene on stage at the carnival, Kristiane knew Jonathan was there, his presence. She knew that she was safe with him there.

She poured herself into the performance, erasing the upheaval of the past twenty-four hours, at least for a little while. Losing herself and bringing out Julie felt the perfect escape. As a bonus, she could share this with her new friend, however unwilling he was about musicals.

His eyes followed her, she felt it. The night manager. The vigilant watcher.

*****

“Jonathan?” She couldn’t imagine why she asked, she knew he was there, always on the other side, always watching, always ready. “Are you watching the show?”

He didn’t respond to her prompt, but she knew he was in the audience, by the strong earthy sounds coming from her co-star Steven as he sung his way through Soliloquy.

Kristiane was stuck back stage during a long scene before her next cue. “Clear your throat or something so I know you’re listening and didn’t fall asleep in your boredom.”

Politely, he coughed discreetly into the crook of his elbow, trying to draw the least amount of attention from his fellow audience members.

“Good. I wanted to tell you something. It’s almost easier to do it when you can’t talk and you’re not in front of me.” She breathed in and poked at one of her miniature carousel horses absently, a gift from the cast when she started as leading lady.

If I loved you

Time and again I would try to say

All that I’d want you to know
“It’s not every day that there’s someone in the audience for me. Actually it’s rare, because all my friends are back in New York or off gallivanting around the globe with their boyfriends,” there was more than a little hurt in her tone as much as she tried to hide it. “My family, they don’t know where I am, and they wouldn’t fucking care. I don’t date here because I suck at it. I don’t date at home because I suck at it.”

If I loved you

Words wouldn’t come in an easy way

Round in circles I’d go

She got up from her makeup chair, needing to move, needing to get away from the mirror. “Since I came to England, I haven’t done anything to make friends… to put that effort in- I go out with the cast to the pub, but I keep all of them away from getting close. Maybe because I’m visiting or to protect myself or being foolish or self-serving… I don’t know.”

Wistfully she inspected the cards she’d received from her producers at the top of the run, all preprinted with their canned signatures like a Christmas card. She kept them out of habit, to fill the space, to fill her loneliness more than anything else.

Longing to tell you but afraid and shy

I’d let my gold chances pass me by

“All this shit to say I’m grateful. Jonathan, I’m grateful to have you here, it’s nice to have you here for me. I’d forgotten what it was like.”

He hummed lowly to let her know that he’d heard it all while Billy Bigelow talked himself into a robbery on stage.

“Whether you’re here for duty, country… or revenge… or you feel you have to, I don’t know, but please don’t let be for that guilt. That guilt, it hangs over you.”

You have this… this thing… this guilt… hanging over you.

“Whatever happens to me, or has happened to me, it’s not your fault. I don’t want that guilt on you. I trust you.”

Soon you’d leave me

Off you would go in the mist of day

Never, never to know

How I loved you, if I loved you

~*~*~*~*~

“Thought I was at a Liverpool match there in the second act,” Pine joked, his eyes uncharacteristically bright. He leaned in the doorway to Kristie’s dressing room, arms crossed over his chest, legs crossed below. “Everyone was singing along… You’ll Never Walk Alone… It was a bit surreal.”

Kristiane chuckled, peering at him over her shoulder as she pulled her hair back into a high ponytail. “Didn’t they sing like that when you came before? I thought they did that every night. You
said you’d seen the show already.”

“I came to the press preview,” he said. “It’s not just reporters in the audience those nights, you know. The theatre invites anyone whom they think can sell tickets for them, and who better than a hotel manager or a concierge? There were a whole slew of us in the back row, but we were too er… proper… to sing.”

She grinned as she stood, tossing her bag over her shoulder. “I’d always wondered who the stiff-assed men and women in suits were, sitting there on preview nights when all the reporters looked like slobs.”

He shrugged. “Now you know.”

She stood in front of him, close… very close, and looked up, her head slightly cocked, her eyes – full of… something. “Now I know.” Her smile broadened for an instant before she ducked her head and stepped quickly past him into the corridor. “Let’s get out of here, shall we?”

And Pine followed.

***

“What in God’s name?” Pine cursed as he strode out of the lift into the parking garage. “Jesus Christ!”

“What?” Kristiane followed behind him, peeking around his shoulder to see what had made Pine suddenly so furious. “What happened… what…. oh! Jesus Christ is right!”

“Stay back,” Pine barked, throwing his hand protectively behind him, shielding Kristie. “I need to make sure they’re not still here.” These last words were whispered over his shoulder, intent and intense.

Kristiane clutched her bag closer to her, her hands wound nervously around the strap. “Oh… okay,” she breathed, her voice shaky. “Why did they… why did they do that?”

“Dunno,” Pine said quickly. He wished he had a gun. A knife. A weapon. Anything. He’d killed with his bare hands before, but what good were those against a Ruger or a Beretta? No good at all. Damn. You idiot.

He stepped forward, slowly turning his head left to right and back again, hawk-like eyes scanning the halogen gloom of the parking garage. Another step, and the frisson of impending combat zinged across his shoulders, down his back, his arms, his legs, up to his hyper-observant brain. Yet, he heard nothing but the whoosh of the HVAC, saw nothing but grey and water stains and chipping yellow paint… smelled nothing but stale exhaust and piss and damp and dirty concrete. Another step, and again… nothing. He inhaled a long, shaky breath and let it out slowly through pursed lips and puffed cheeks.

He turned and held a hand out to Kristie. “Come on,” he said, wiggling his fingers. “It’s safe.”

“You sure?” Her eyes were wide, frightened, owl-like; yet she stepped quickly towards him, her own hand outstretched. She reached him in three strides and grasped his hand like it was her lifeline, pulling herself in towards his body, aligning her shorter frame to his, her head tucked into the crook of his shoulder. “You sure it’s safe?”

“Safe for us,” he sighed. “Not so much for the Ferrari anymore.” He groaned, sounding pained, almost sympathetic toward the plight of the once beautiful white car. For the vehicle had been utterly
ransacked. That could be seen clearly at a distance - the tyres were slashed and flat, the car sat upon its gleaming rims, the doors were gouged, the windscreen and windows smashed in, the back and front panels kicked or pounded into an unrecognisable pulp of metal and plastic, wires and tubes.

Pine stepped toward the wreck and peered in, careful to place his hands where he wouldn’t be cut with shards of glass. “They tore the seats and carpets to hell, too. Tore out the panels,” he observed. “Hm. Strange.”

“Why’d they do that?” Kristiane’s voice was pitched high in outrage and fear.

“They were looking for something, I believe,” Pine said, straightening. “Something they think you have. Something they’re willing to destroy, maim… possibly even kill for.”

Kristiane swallowed audibly, her face gone ghostly white. Once again, her hands went to the strap of her bag, her fingers curling around, clutching so hard that her knuckles went as pale as her visage. “What… what do we do now?”

Pine thought for a moment, his hands on his hips, lips bitten, eyes searching. He sighed, then, looked Kristiane square in the eyes and said, “We ride the Tube to Kensington. We need… someplace public. Crowded.” He pressed his hand to her back, guiding her to walk stride for stride with him. “They’re not ready to strike yet. They don’t have what they need. They’ll do nothing to give themselves away until they’re ready.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Once again,” he said, “we’re going to hide ourselves in plain sight.”

“You’ve got security around the theatre?” Pine asked into his mobile, clipped, precise. “Good, good… double it! We’re on foot. And Angela? Send someone to pick up the Ferrari… a fucking basket will do.” He rung off before Burrs could properly respond, turning his head in both directions along the street before guiding Kristiane northbound.

Kristiane said softly, “I’m sorry ‘bout the car.” Men and their toys, and yet she, too, hated that the beautiful piece of machinery had met a particularly cruel and bitter end. Only added to her already significant worry about her own safety and her fate. But she couldn’t think about it, couldn’t fathom it… The magnitude of it made her want to crawl into a ball and cry or move to the farthest point on the globe that she could think of- Antarctica, New Zealand… Honduras?

His guidance was no more than that of a lead dancer, a slight pressure of his fingers or wrist along the small of her back. Kristiane followed along. She noticed that he slowed his footsteps to match her shorter strides, his body shielding her hurt arm and her from the crowd and the traffic. He kept her towards the building while he scanned the theatre folk for any sudden movement or weapons, any threat to the star of Carousel.

Through the parting in the foot traffic, a girl of about eighteen or nineteen approached them. “Uh… uh… Miss? Uh, Miss Taylor!” A meek, small voice of the teenager greeted nervously. “E-e-excuse me, uh, Miss Taylor… Kristiane!” Her nerves made her voice waver and shake. The young fan, about three inches taller than the actress wore a Carousel t-shirt and clutched the show’s program tightly against her chest with both hands, one brandishing a sharpie.

“Hi!” the performer greeted brightly, slowing to talk to the girl. A subtle touch of Kristiane’s hand along Jonathan’s thigh caught his attention and he stopped with her.

“I-I-I’m sorry, Miss Taylor—“
“Please, it’s Kristie,” she waved her closer with her good hand.

Springing forward excitedly, the girl gushed, “Oh my God, Kristie, I’m… I’m such a big fan. I’ve seen the show three times. You’re my favorite Julie, your voice is to die for. I watch you on YouTube all the time. I listen to Daddy Long Legs all the time, all the time. You’re my favorite singer.” The words all flowed out in a rush of nerves, giddiness and sweetness.

“Have I seen you before?” Kristiane’s brows folded over her nose and her eyes squinted. “You look familiar.”

An inhuman, high-pitched squeal sounded from the girl. “YES!!! Last month, I met you.”

Kristiane bubbled, “Aren’t you sweet? Thank you, sweetheart. What’s your name?”

“It’s-it’s-it’s Daysi.”

“Daysi, that’s pretty. You didn’t say much last time.”

Daysi’s jaw dropped with her idol remembering her after all. “No… nervous. But, can I—would you sign this for me please?” The younger girl handed over the program and sharpie. Kristiane obliged while Jonathan crowded her left side from bumps or scrapes, anything to irritate her already wounded arm.

He remained the silent watcher, ready for just about anything, a tsunami, King Kong, another attack on Kristiane, maybe even the resurrection and the revenge of his beloved Ferrari. He kept one hand at her back, prepared to push her out of the way of an incoming meteor or throw himself on top of her in case of a bomb, or guiding her into a dash for some place safe.

This young girl seemed the perfect distraction, hiding in plain sight, doing what Kristiane did following a performance. She continued to grab other audience members’ attention, and they too wanted an autograph.

“I’ve been studying,” Daysi interjected, her enthusiasm drawing in others.

“Where have you been studying?”

“The BRIT and it’s been brilliant! Singing, acting, performing. I want to be you when I graduate. You’re such an inspiration!”

Kristiane poised with sharpie in hand listened while this girl spilled all her wishes, signing autographs for other people as she went. Posters, napkins, t-shirts passed through Kristie’s hands and she met each of their faces with a smile. She entertained them, gave them an extra bit of theatricality and experience to their night to go home with, making a special memory for them that would last. It came naturally to her that it wasn’t an act. Being social and discussing her business was her craft on top of the actual performance.

“What’s your favorite song from the show?” another woman asked.

Laughing, Kristiane looked up at her companion and said, “I should say You’ll Never Walk Alone in English company. But I think If I Loved You is my favorite.” Her eyes flashed up towards Jonathan’s as he drew in closer when the crowd started to disperse, having their minor brush with fame.

*****
“You look tired,” she commented as the elevator doors to the Kensington flat closed to the outside world. Her protector leant against the back wall, hands propped against the waist high ledge, his head inclined back, his eyes closed. It’d been the first indication that he let his guard down for even a moment during their time together. “Did you sleep at all last night?”

He merely shook his head without opening his eyes.

A pang of guilt pinged inside her. He’d put aside his job, his priorities, his life for her and he hadn’t slept for taking care of her. She picked at the film that disguised her wound, the injury prickled and jabbed with an uncomfortable pulsating, itchy and entirely foreign to her and she wanted to do… something about it… anything.

“Is it paining you?” His slightly slanted from drowsiness eyes were on her, assessing, appraising… caring?

“‘It’s… doing something? During the show, I could ignore it. During the autographs, I could ignore it,’ she stated with a shrug at the irony, considering she’d been using it. “Now, it’s playing diva.”

He smiled and escorted her off the elevator when it opened to the safe house. “I may have a solution.”

“Drugs?”

*****

“…a naive teenager, I thought Terry was the love of my life. We were inseparable until a few months ago.” Kristiane cupped both her hands around her cuppa, the one that Jonathan made for her to distract from her injury. She absorbed the warmth into her body, though she wasn’t cold. But it was something to occupy her hands…

“What happened?” he sat forward, resting his elbows on his thighs, his own mug of tea firmly in hand.

A sad smile, a twitch of her eyes from him to the wall above his head. “Life. Professional jealousy. Personal disagreement.” She sighed, each description sounding darker. “An emotional break-up. Finally faced the truth that we couldn’t work.”

“Why not?”

“He’s a gay man and I’m not.”

“Is he the one? The one you took the classes for?”

Kristiane shifted, though not uncomfortably, only to tuck her legs beneath her on the makeshift bed. “Oh, God! No! Terry would never hurt me like that. Not physically…” The implication that he hurt her in other ways remained unsaid. “That was Scott. We were friends first, dated by mistake and fucking disastrous lovers.”

Jonathan sat back in the wing backed chair. “How did it happen?”

Pulling the band from her hair, Kristiane let her thick strands fall free around her face. It was a defense mechanism, something to hide behind. “We traveled in the same circles, hung out at the bar, played sports, caught each other at auditions. We were friendly, you know… ‘hey, how are ya? How’s things? You still living in Brooklyn?’ that type of thing. Then it became a friendship. It only made sense that we date… I don’t know… that’s what normal people do, isn’t it?”
Jonathan said nothing and gave away nothing in his silence.

“It wasn’t love, it was convenience, nothing more. Then we starred opposite each other. He was Gaston and I was Belle. Beauty and the Beast. We left the show at the same time. I was offered Daddy Long Legs, the lead in a new musical. Scott got the Beast tour. My career took off while his dwindled after that tour. He got mean… resentful, he hated that I was successful while he wasn’t. I kind of stuck it out with him, because… well, actually I don’t know why I stuck it out with him.”

“Did he hurt you?”

Kristiane nodded, setting her mug aside. “It was… weird. We broke up, had very little to say to each other there at the end. We kinda drifted apart, but he showed up unannounced this one day… out of the blue. He wanted someone to yell at for a while and,” she gestured to herself “as the ex-girlfriend, I got the honor. When he was done yelling, he… wanted… something else—from me. I might have told him that he wasn’t ever any good at that and that I’d rather ride the subway naked during rush hour than to have him touch me again.

“He didn’t find the humor in it. He didn’t appreciate it. So he touched me again - in his way. Threw me around a bit, hit me, hurt me a lot. A neighbor called the cops because of the noise and Scott was arrested. By some miracle, he made bail and skipped town. I never saw him again, but I swore if he ever came back for me, I’d be ready.”

“Could he be behind this thing?”

A cynical ugly ironic laugh burst from her. “Hardly. He wasn’t smart enough to find England on a map with a neon sign flashing you are here in red, let alone come here. I can almost guarantee that he wouldn’t know how to pronounce Switzerland, so they wouldn’t give him a bank account there. He never could budget his money either.” She scoffed, trying to brush off the nasty memory and the bad taste in her mouth from talking about it anymore.

Her normally sensitive blue eyes flashed with anger and she gritted out, “Your turn.”
“My turn, yeah? We’re playing that game again, then, are we?”

“Yes, we are. I told you my….”

He broke in. “And I very much appreciate you telling me about… about Scott. You know I’d never do… I mean… thank you for trusting me with….”

“Quit rambling, Pine, it doesn’t suit you.” She, in turn cut off his speech. “Now you tell. Tit for tat. Out with it.”

“My turn,” he nodded, affirming it to himself. “Fine. Hm.” He shifted in the chair, pushing himself up to rest back down in the deep corner of it, crossing his ankle over his knee, his arms over his chest above – hiding, protective.

“Yes. Fine. Talk.” She scooted higher against the back of the fold out bed, crossing her own arms over her own chest – challenging, daring.

He flicked his gaze away, up toward the bulb of the floor lamp that gave soft, quiet illumination to the library, and then back to her, finding her face uncharacteristically hard, yet… eager. Needing. As if she was silently demanding, wordlessly waiting for him to finally… finally … open the fuck up.

He swallowed audibly, clearing his throat, before giving her a hint of a smile, a resigned narrowing of the eyes, a surrendering sigh.

_Tell her, Jonathan. Tell her everything. Tell her my story._

And so, Pine rose from the chair, and with slow, deliberate steps, crossed to the bed to stand beside Kristiane. “Lie down,” he commanded, taking the mug from her hands and setting it on the side table. “Get comfortable, this may take some time.”

She obeyed, a triumphant grin playing on her lips. He pulled the duvets up over her, tucking them gently beneath her chin. He gave her a small pat on the shoulder, turned, and sat back down in the overlarge white wing chair. He leaned forward again, elbows on his knees, and ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know where to start,” he lamented, clutching his fingers into the short locks at the back of his head.
“The beginning’s usually the best place,” Kristiane murmured.

Pine chuckled, nodding his lowered head. He took a deep, slow breath to tell her, to tell her all about Roper and Mallorca and the arms deal and Tradepass and Cairo and Zermatt. All about the Haven. Devon. All about Burr and Danny and Jeds… and Corkoran… and Hamid. How they died. All of it. The money. All of it.

And it all started with four words. Four simple words.

“Her name was Sophie.”

***

Kristiane had watched him, wide-eyed throughout his story, listening with rapt attention, asking little questions, giving short comments, gasps or smiles as appropriate. But as he finished, Kristiane’s mind seemed to whir with even more questions, with the need for more of the telling, with the want for more information… the desire for more of him.

But most importantly– she’d listened without judgment. Even during the most harrowing moments, the most murderous deeds, the most devious and terrible of Pine’s actions, she did not even flinch.

*Maybe, my darling Jonathan, she can be for you.*

*Yes. Maybe. Thank you, Sophie.*

“Go to sleep now,” Pine had denied Kristiane, smiling at her small grunts of protest. “I’m right shattered, Kristie,” he said. “I don’t think I could talk anymore if I’d tried.”

“Poo,” she pouted; yet she burrowed herself deeper into the covers, pulling them up over her shoulder, burying her face with a quiet mumur in the plush pillow.

“Good night,” Pine whispered.

“Good night,” she said, and then added a quiet, almost child-like: “You’ll stay with me still?”

He rest his fingers lightly upon her shoulder. “I’ll be right here.”

***

Pine shifted in the chair, unable to find the comfort - or what passed for comfort - of the night before. He’d tried to adjust; to bring himself to function on Kristiane’s clock, on her schedule. Sleep in the night, wake in the day, when his normal circadian rhythm was just the opposite.

And so, it had gone three in the morning, and he hadn’t slept since he woke at seven PM the day before.

When it all began.

He yawned, his eyes fluttering as he fought against the pull of sleep. He had to stay awake, wanted to stay awake. Needed to… needed to watch her… needed… had to… watch… her… keep her… safe….

His head jerked up, and he gave a small, startled “oh,” followed by a groan. He shifted again, sitting up straighter, keeping his feet on the floor, legs bent, shoulders… up… and… the musical score on his lap… had to… had to see what was in it… it was on his… on his… lap… and….
Thunk.

The binder had fallen gracefully from his fingers, clacking in a ring of plastic and paper and metal, bouncing off his feet to the carpeted floor below. “Shit,” he muttered as he bent to pick it back up.

“Jonathan,” Kristiane’s voice was muffled in the duvets.

“I’m terribly sorry to wake you, Kristie,” he said. “Go back to sleep. I’m here.”

“Why are you still awake?”

“I need to go over your script. Figure out what’s amiss with…. ”

She cut him off. “No. Just do that later.”

“I need to keep watch.”

“Watch? For what? Isn’t this a safe house?” she muttered.

“It is.”

“A panic room inside of a safe house? Locked… 

He yawned, submitting to the contagion of it. “Yes,” he replied. “Locked up.”

“Then, you should sleep.”

She lifted herself up from the mattress, her head rest on her good hand, elbow on the mattress. “Sleep here,” she patted the opposite side of the bed. “I don’t know how you can sit in that chair all night. Looks uncomfortable as hell.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.”

She smiled. “Liar.” She crooked her finger at him, beckoning, pursing her lips in a knowing, understanding grin. “Come on. I won’t bite.”

Yes, but I might.

“Come here,” she patted the bed again. “I won’t sleep until you do now, especially with all that huffing and snorting noise you make.” She pointed at him, her eyes narrowed. “And don’t say no, and don’t you dare come up with some cockamamie excuse about being a gentleman or shit like that. Just get your ass over here and get some sleep. You’ll be useless if you don’t. And I don’t need you useless.”

He sighed and nodded resignedly, his head bobbing slowly, eyes closing. “Mmkay,” he said, and stood, stepping with slow, shuffling steps toward the folded-out sofa bed.


He laughed as he knelt atop the mattress, twisted his long body, and lowered himself down slowly upon his side, facing her. “Thank you,” he said, curling his legs up and tucking the duvets up over his shoulders.

“No,” she replied, her eyes gone suddenly soft, yet bright in the moonlight that trickled in from the high window. “Thank you.” She lifted her hand, let it hover for a moment, and then rest it gently upon his cheek.
He took in a sharp breath at her touch. Her skin was cool and smooth and warm at the same time, and it sent a frission of desire through him. Out of reflex, instinct, he didn’t know, he covered her hand with his and pulled it away from his face.

But he didn’t let go. Instead, he studied her hand in the dim light, entwining his fingers slowly, methodically, carefully, around hers, as if her hand were the most precious thing in the universe. A find more precious than rubies, as they say. He drew his long index finger down the length of her palm, delighting in the way her fingers curled in.

“Is your arm still playing diva?” He ghosted his finger down the skin-coloured dressing.

“Not so much. The bio-super-bot thingies are working. Keeping the bitch in line.”

He gave a breathy chuckle. “I’m very glad to hear it.”

“Hm,” she replied, sleepily.


She is for you, Jonathan.

“I am so terribly sorry,” he whispered.

“For what?” her hand jerked in his, but he held it fast. “For this? My arm? Jonathan, it isn’t your fault, I….”

“No,” he said, “Not for your arm. Not for anything I’ve already done.”

“Then.. for what?”

“For what I’m about to do.” He pushed back on her fingers with his thumb, opening her palm to him.

“Oh. What exactly are you about to do?” There was no fear in her voice. Rather it was pitched low, smooth… a bit… erotic.

His eyes flicked from her hand to her own intent, heated gaze, and back. “I’m about to do this,” he whispered. He pressed himself forward, covering his face almost completely within the span of her hand. He soothed his needy mouth, brushing it against her skin.

“Oh,” she whimpered, but did not pull away.

He, in turn, moaned. He tasted her flesh upon his tongue. He inhaled her deeply, filling his lungs with her - bergamot and citrus and sharp undertones of stage makeup and spirit gum. He opened into her, drawing his lips back together slowly, sensually, only to explore another, deeper spot and caress her yet again.

“And, I’m most sorry, I think, for this.”

In a swift, smooth movement, he pushed her hand down and pulled, gently drawing Kristiane closer to him. Without another word, he licked his lips, lifted his head…

…and, his eyes closed, he tipped his chin forward, and homed in, finding her lips in the darkness. With a small whimper in his throat and a light, gentle touch of his lips, followed in suit by his tongue, he begged her to open to him, to let him in – to give him rest, to give him succor, to give him, even just for that moment… peace.
And more importantly, for him to give it to her in return.

Gut instinct and self-preservation made Kristiane pull back, withdraw from his advance. The jaded city girl battered from the ambitions of life and the cruel fists of a man not worth her time or tears couldn’t know what to do with Jonathan Pine. She recognized the necessary evils he’d pursued for a greater purpose, his virtue in place of his ego, and that trait was foreign to her. She’d surrounded herself with fellow actors and performers and their egos were their biggest attribute. The kiss didn’t feel entirely selfish, it was for both of them.

Jonathan was tired and needed sleep, his defensive nature turned to low with the length of the day. And yet, he reached for her in weakest hour. The press of his lips felt of purity, no danger, no avoidance, no hiding, no more fucking questions and no running. Pure attraction between a man and a woman.

His warm breath against her cheek.

His hand in the thick of her hair, while his thumb swiped tender, intimate strokes against her cheek.

His tempting smell, the seductive power of sun, Birchwood, cardamom and man. All man.

So Kristiane hesitated, pulled back… uncertain. She didn’t know how to respond, if she should or shouldn’t. Invite him in or dissuade him. She attracted the worst type of men, her past checkered and unharmonious, but oh Gods, she wanted to! Her insatiable need to please, to entertain, to make another human feel wanted, to fall into this small advance with her natural flair for dramatics.

She’d be a greater liar than Shakespeare’s Iago if she claimed to not be interested or she hadn’t thought about this very moment. She thought about his lips against hers. The reality of it was all too real. She needed space, air, room to breathe.

Her eyes rose from his parted lips to his eyes, shifting nervously from the left to the right.

“Jonathan?”

“Shhh, kiss me.”

All this within a blink of an eye, barely a breath separating them, and she surrendered to him. No… not surrendered, he didn’t want her surrender. He didn’t want her concession. He didn’t even want her obedience. He wanted her desire, her want, and she gave it willingly, eagerly.

Like her palm only seconds before, when his lips parted, hers followed suit. She touched her tongue to his, moaning into a deeper kiss, a mixture of tea, honey, lemon and warmth. So very warm.

She regained control of her hand from his to place it back over his face and hold him closer to her. His bigger hands gently held her cheeks to him, spirited that she kissed him as much as he kissed her.

“I don’t want to stop,” he breathed into her mouth as he swallowed another whimper of desire from her. He crushed her to him once more, and he dipped into her, to taste her, to drink her in.

When they parted to suck air into their lungs, she confessed, “I don’t want you to…”

Jonathan massaged his lips against hers, the urgent press giving way to unhurried touches of his mouth to hers. He couldn’t stop, didn’t want to give up the privilege of kissing her he’d earned by telling her his secrets. But his eyes pricked with the basic human need to sleep, rest and recharge. Slowly, reluctantly, he stopped but he still couldn’t bring himself to separate from her. Nibbling at
her lower lip, he dragged away, worrying and abusing that part of her until she wore him like her lipstick.

A brilliantly white smile sparkled at him from the dim light, but he couldn’t be surprised. Kristiane’s star shone brightly so much of the time. “The diva bitch has been silenced.”

*****

A strange feeling invaded Kristiane as she stepped into the would-be palace by Manhattan standards from the library safe room in the morning. She was showered and dressed in new clothes left by Angela or one of her team, thankfully of the female variety and in her size. A simple white blouse over denim capris with a thick cuff at the bottom.

This feeling, logically she tried to fight it, tried to discount it as a drug hangover or whatever it was… but the undeniable truth was she felt safe and at ease in the place. After her peace had been disrupted at the hotel, she knew that she was safe with Jonathan after a harrowing day. She – almost - felt at home.

The mouth-watering smells emanating from the kitchen drew her in like the previous morning. Jonathan was again at the oven preparing a meal for them. “You let me sleep in,” she complained, wiggling into one of the bar stools at the island. “I wanted to help cook.”

“I was up hours ago, and I couldn’t stay still any longer.”

“I thought you might sleep in after… what? 30 hours awake.”

He shook his head setting a pot of tea and a carafe of orange juice in front of her before turning back to his cooking. “I can only sleep a few hours. I don’t need much.”

“So what’s the plan today?”

Plating up another hearty breakfast for his songbird, Jonathan said, “I need to get back to your score and look for clues. Carl at the hotel got a message to Angela that whoever is after you got into your room and tore the place apart, like the Ferrari.”

Kristiane stared unseeing into her plate for an inordinate amount of time. Every time she thought about getting back on an even ground, another resounding blow hit her defensive wall… that invisible fortress she’d put up around herself to keep from crying. It was getting harder and harder to ignore that this problem wasn’t going away on its own. She wasn’t just playing house with her… what would she call him now?

A familiar touch on her shoulder brought her out of her space out. “They didn’t hurt anyone, just got by security because of Angela’s light show. It’ll be fine.”

Her gaze dropped to her newly bandaged arm and then back at him. “This isn’t fine, Jonathan. They’ve destroyed my room, your car, fucked up my arm, and I don’t want whatever it is they’re looking for. They can have it. I want to enjoy my last three performances in Carousel in peace.” Her fortress was failing, she could feel it. A lump formed in the back of her throat, a mass of confusion, fear and desperation.

Tears were rare for her, except when it came to the stage. Kristiane could count the number of times she cried about her own life or circumstances on two hands since she was eighteen. She kept all that emotion for the stage where it belonged. But this threat… she felt the tears at the back of her eyes, stinging to be free.
She pleaded, “Please give me something to do, Jonathan. Anything. When Scott exposed my vulnerability, I did something about it, to protect myself. Give me something to do.”

Jonathan Pine may have been one of those buttoned-up, closed-off sort of men, but for all his own sentiments had been hidden away and tamped down, he was quite adept at reading the emotions of others. It was what made him a good liar, an effective mole, a brilliant intelligencer, Angela Burr had once told him. It was, as Jonathan saw it, the distinct advantage of having an empathetic, ancient soul embodied in tandem with a cold, calculating mind.

And thus, he could see the burn behind her eyes; he could feel the pounding of her heart, the ache in her head. He knew the tingle of her fingers and the tight, painful curdling of her stomach.

He knew… she was about to break.

The trouble was, his mind was wholly unsure of what to do about it. He chewed his lower lip, his brow furrowed as calculations whirred, as his heart ached for her. All of his combat training, all of his knowledge, all of his late-night-silent-observer-distant-watcher-librarian-of-detail-hoarder-of-personality study of human nature had failed him utterly in that moment. He found himself at a loss – just like he’d had with Sophie, holed up in that cramped desert house in Luxor - unsure of whether to offer comfort to the beaten and bruised woman; to hold her in his arms or to hold her pushed away at a distance.

I want one of your many selves to sleep with me tonight.

And like Sophie’s sultry words, Kristiane’s wide-set, wet, and doe-like eyes told him, he thought, what she’d needed.

“Come here,” he said. He gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze and a push, turning her on the bar stool to face him. A light cup of her elbow, and she obediently stood, allowing him to enfold her in his arms. “I swear, I’ll protect you, Kristiane.”

“I know that, and I appreciate that, but…” she hesitated, her words muffled against his chest. “It’s not… that’s not what I need, not… not all of it. I meant it. I need something to do. I need to feel useful, Jonathan.”

“I understand,” he said, rubbing his hand up and down her back.

“Do you?” She lifted her head, tipping her chin up to look him in the eye. Her face, Jonathan noticed, gave away no fear, no sadness, no exasperation… only… a set, steely determination. “Do you really?”

Perhaps he had read her wrong; and the thought of it made him smile.

A Disney Princess, after all.

“Maybe I do,” he whispered, nodding. “You don’t need my protection. You need to grasp the nettle, that’s what you need. You need to retake control of your own situation, steer your own outcomes.”

He nodded, his grin broadening. “Frankly, I think I’d be better at supporting you in that way than any sort of cry on my shoulder touchy feely sort of business.”

“Oh?” Kristiane cocked her head. “Don’t get me wrong, I think I like the touchy feely business. I like it lots.”

He chuckled. “Do you, now?”
Her smile fell, the curve of her mouth folding slowly inward, the muscles relaxing as her lips parted, falling into a pillowy soft, warm red and quite tantalizing ellipse. Her eyes softened in stride, the lids occluding halfway down her irises, her lashes long, swept down and bedroom-like, shading Pine from the raw flame of her gaze.

“Yeah. I do.”

“Do you want something to do right now, Kristiane?” He swallowed, his nose flaring as his breath hitched, as heat cascaded from his chest outward, engulfing his body with want. “To take charge of… of something?”

“Yes.”

“Then take charge of me,” he growled. “Right… now….” And closing his eyes, he tilted his head, parted his own lips, spread his open palms across her back, pressed her chest to his, and gave Kristiane Taylor something to keep her quite busy.

Quite busy indeed.

***

“Here,” Pine handed her the binder in a quick, business-like manner. “I know you said you haven’t looked at this for some time, but maybe,” he paused, opening the score in front of her, “maybe you can tell me if something’s wrong with it.” He chuckled. “I don’t read music. I can’t make heads or tails of it.”

She set down her fork and absently pushed her empty plate aside, her other hand automatically going to the edge of the pages, turning them one after another as she chewed.

Pine picked up her plate and headed toward the sink; but a small “hm” noise from Kristie stopped him in his tracks. He stood behind her, craning his neck to peer over her shoulder, the empty plate perched in his stilled fingers.

“What is it?” He cocked his head.

“There are pages missing.” She flipped sheets of music back and forth, a confused, concerned frown on her face.

“How many?”

“Eight, maybe ten,” she replied, absently. She squinted, her brow furrowed, and she gave a small, breathy groan. “Oh… now that’s weird,” she whispered.

“What’s weird?” He set the plate down and returned to Kristiane’s shoulder, hovering over her, one hand on the back of the stool, the other resting on the counter beside the open binder.

“The songs… my solos… they’re not in here.” Her flipping became more frantic, as if she were searching for a lost earring or a pair of missing glasses. She even lifted the binder, peering beneath it. She pulled open and searched the side pockets, flipped a thumb across the script portion of the binder. “They’re not in here.”

A spike of ice shot down Pine’s back, a frisson of fear, of battle-readiness scratched its way across his shoulders, making him straighten, his muscles tense, his face go hard.

“What?” Kristiane felt, then saw the strain in Pine’s body, the stiff catch of his breath. “What’s
He’d heard the clip of Burr’s voice in his mind. “The threats’ve come in the form of letters… written on the back of sheet music… Songs from Carousel… songs yon Disney Princess sings.”

Dear God, he thought. The pages… the letters… they took them out of her score. Her binder. Her.… her music.

He contemplated not telling her – in that split second thought of keeping that fact… that reality… that revelation to himself. She doesn’t need to know, that part of his mind screamed at him. It’ll only make things worse… make her feel worse… make her feel… violated… responsible, scare her, make her… make her…

No. That time it was Sophie speaking to him, her soothing, musical voice calm and lilting in his mind’s ear. Tell her. It will frighten her yes, my dear Jonathan – but it will also galvanise her. Make her want to fight. Tell her the truth, my love. Oh, but you must. She needs to know. Trust in her.

And so, he told her. He told her with his face blank and his shoulders squared, his lips a tight, thin line. “There have been threats of a… a terrorist nature….”

Comically, Kristiane blinked. And then blinked again. If it weren’t so dastardly and vile, he would laugh at her response, but it looked sadly bleak and disheartening to see her so outside her comfort zone.

She popped up from the stool as if it bit her, feet planted on the floor, hands on her hips. The binder, her score, something she kept and treasured from every production she did, became dirty, filthy, unclean with the word. Terrorist. “Terr—but what’s that got to do with my music?” The hysteria she felt coiled around her vocal chords, making her sound shrill.

Jonathan took quick to her side to comfort her or corral her, he wasn’t sure which yet. “The threats are in the form of letters on the back of sheet music, Carousel sheet music… your songs.”

Kristiane stared him down, unblinking, but he could almost see her brain shifting around her head, working it through. “Why my songs?” she demanded, the shrill still there.

“I don’t know. Angela found out through several producers, agents and theatre house managers. They’ve all been getting threats, in New York and London.”

“What kind of threats?”

“Explosives, bombs… I’m not entirely sure. I haven’t seen them.”

The entire situation compounded by the people after her set her mind into overdrive to figure the logic of it. Panic tore through her and turned her nervous system up to ten. Her hands shook and her body tensed, even her eyelids. “Are they trying to frame me? Claim I did it? That I sent those threats?”

Jonathan reached for one of her shivering hands to hold. Her fingers felt cool, her palm clammy and damp. His thumb drew circles over the back of her smooth hand, an attempt to calm her. “I don’t think so, Kristie. These are not isolated incidents and the producers, managers are working with the authorities. They’re all aware that any letters that they get are part of this bigger conspiracy.”

“Why am I involved with this? I didn’t want this.”

He shook his head, despising the fact that he didn’t have answers for her or ones that made any
sense. “We don’t know. I don’t know. But I’ll protect you until we get the answers and this is sorted.”

“And what happens then?” Instead of waiting for an answer, Kristiane beat a retreat to the library.

*****

Jonathan found her sitting in the middle of the bed they shared only a few hours before. She played with strands of her hair, pulling and twisting them around her fingers distractedly. She wasn’t looking at anything in particular, just silently sat, building and fortifying her invisible fortress back up around her. He sat beside her quietly, not to disturb her.

“What time is it?”

The question was spoken softly without a hint of her sharpness before he washed up in the kitchen. “Just gone ten.”

“Have you ever been to Brighton?”

“Ugh… Brighton?”

Kristiane touched her shoulder to his with a small tap, her temper improving, stepping back into herself. “Yeah, Brighton. London-by-the-sea, that Brighton. Where 84% of the gay population in all of England lives.”

“Yes, I know Brighton and I have been, not in recent years, but I have been.”

The woman crawled out from the middle of the bed and got out, favoring her injured arm. “I want to go there. Take me there.”

Pushing to his feet, he went to her, gauging her mood as he did. Before he had the chance to ask, she jumped to answer, “I’ve never been and I want to see it. With my life and freedom in the balance, and these people gunning for me, I want to live and enjoy myself. I should be safe there. Gay men love me.”

“You have a performance tonight.”

“I’ll go without you, Jonathan.” She looked up at him from beneath her lashes. “And I want you there.”

*****

Two hours later, the unlikely pair, the night manager and the songbird, were walking down Queen’s Road from the train station to the seafront. After one cab and one train ride, Jonathan and Kristiane took a leisurely stroll. They’d spent the hour train ride trading stories and experiences, sharing coffee and avoiding the other travelers on the train.

“Well, songbird, you got us here. What’s your plan now?”

The picturesque view of the clear sea under the golden sun made her more alive, the warm rays perking her mood. The water glittered, the seagulls sang, and the light breeze smelled of seaweed and lotion. The vibe of this city felt happier and more carefree than that of London and she wanted to soak it all in.
“I want to eat too much food. Ride the ferris wheel, the carousel, and waste too much money on one of those crane grab thingys. The boardwalk is calling to me.”

“Your wish, Kristiane.”

She almost took off at a run, Jonathan on her heels across King’s Road. Her enthusiasm and zest for fun had wormed its way into his demeanor, lightening his mood. He rode the carousel with her twice, took her on the Ferris wheel and watched children ride the donkeys on the beach with her. She danced on the boardwalk to Michael Jackson’s Beat It blaring from the arcade. After too many games of losing the stuffed animal to the uncooperative claw and stuffed full of chips later, they walked by the Royal Pavillion on their circle back to the train station to return to London in time for her call.

Jonathan knew that Kristiane was avoiding the truth of her present ordeal, but he appeased her, enabled her. She needed the reprieve, she needed to smile and laugh and enjoy herself.

“Is it insensitive to ask you about the woman you were- were…” she fought with asking at all. “Involved with… J-j-j… Jed?” Jonathan had shared so much about the arms deal, Richard Roper and the sins he committed to keep those weapons out of the wrong hands. He left out some of the details about the woman he ‘rescued’ from the worse man in the world.

“Jeds. We grew apart soon after. That wasn’t real. We used each other for mutually beneficial reasons. She returned to her son and her family, and I came back England, my home.”

She stopped and ducked behind a tree in the park, and he followed. Leaning against the bark with her hands behind her back, her voice low in her throat, Kristiane asked, “Are you using me, Jonathan?”

“I have no reason to use you. Seducing you isn’t a means to an end,” he closed in on her, stepping in. Closer, drawn in by her open pose.

“You’re a master of distraction. On the train, you ran your fingertips, just your fingertips, up and down my arm. But you haven’t tried to touch me inappropriately.”

“Are you disappointed that I haven’t?” His gaze figuratively undressed her from the top of her head to her feet as he drew even closer. The way she offered herself up like a buffet that he could feast on pressed him into her. “Do you want me to touch you inappropriately?”

“Honestly, I was wondering if you’d kiss me again. You did last night and this morning, but-but not since… the anticipation is killing me.”
“Is it, then? Is it killing you? The an-ti-ci-paa-a-tion?” His words slithered, snake-like, from his throat, coasting upon a deep, sonorous growl, over his loose tongue, through his slack, warm lips, to carry through the mere inches of air between them. “Do you want me that badly, Kristiane? Truly, do you?”

Pine’s eyes narrowed, blinking with slow desire above a crooked, hungry grin. He felt more than heard more than saw her answer. Felt it in the click of her breath, caught in her throat; in the rush of intense heat that crept up from her breast to her neck to engulf her pale cheeks in a flaming red glow; in the tight grasp of her fingers around his forearms, locking him in place, cuffing him, binding him.

“Yes,” he hissed, curling into her, gliding his hips against hers below, ghosting the rasp of his stubble athwart her tender cheek above. “Yes, it seems you do.”

“Damn it, Jonathan,” she moaned, her breath coming in sharp huffs, her tongue darting out to wet her rapidly parching lips. “Now you’re… you’re just teasing me.”

“That I am.” He tipped his head back, scrutinizing her down the length of his long, aristocratic nose. He rest his hand upon the bloom of her cheek, fingers curling in, dragging down to raise fleeting white lines of war paint upon her skin. “I need to be sure, you see.”

“Be… be sure of what?”

“That you’re not the one who’s using me.”

She said nothing, but blinked; her eyes widening, lips pressing together in a tight, angering line.

“Are you, then? Using me?” His fingers dug in deeper, almost painfully. His eyes shone with a strange combination of bright desire and something dark. “Am I simply a distraction, Kristiane? You say I am the master of it, of distraction. Is that all this is? A way for you to ease your mind? To get away for a while… a vacation from the ugly things that are….”

“Fuck you, Pine,” she spat, cutting him off. She put an end to his tirade not only with her words, but with her hands as well.

“Ah. God, Kristiane,” he moaned, but her name, a prayer, fell unintelligibly from his lips. For she, in
her pique, had clutched him hard by the hair and pulled with all her might. The force of her strength and her desire had carried their mouths, their souls, their hearts together in proof. Solid proof.

– atoms violently caroming, smashing one against the other – the undeniable clash of two rare earth magnets - the unbreakable pull of the planets – the taut gravity of the universe itself –

Pine paid no heed to the outside world. He ignored the sounds of the crowds, the trains, the cars, the tinkling music of the Pleasure Pier in the distance. He didn’t notice the old-biddy-clutching-the-pearls-ohdearohdearohdearohdear-woodyalookithat stares, the cat calls from the gang of yobbos in the park.

They didn’t exist. None of it existed. Neither had the rest of that vast, dark universe just then; for their universe had shrunked, had closed in upon itself like the collapse of a black hole, the very fabric of life reduced to a seven foot by four foot rectangle of space, of cleansing light and gifted joy that was found only within the confines of their entwined bodies.

Within Kristiane herself.

Light that beamed from her lips, her tongue, her teeth – oh, Christ, her teeth – to his. His for the taking. His for the giving.

And when he felt her anger melt away, felt her very flesh go slack beneath his wandering hands, his clutching, groping, wanting fingers, felt her fury cascade down her skin to resolve into a shimmering dew upon the grass beneath their feet, he knew.

He knew.

*She is for you, Jonathan, my darling. Have her.*

*I know, Sophie. Now, please… leave me be. Leave us be.*


With a heaving, quite audible gasp, he parted from Kristiane, his swollen lips curling into a blissful, yet knowing smile. He sighed, content…


“What time is your call?”

“Huh?” She peered blearily up at him, her own expression one of elated rapture. “What’d you say?”

He chuckled. “What time is your call? When do you need to be back?”

“Seven,” she said. “Why, what time’s it now?”

He looked at his watch. “It’s gone half four. There’s a train in twenty minutes. We should be on it.”

“Poo,” she blew the word out upon puffed cheeks. “I suppose.”

“But, *after* your show,” he intoned, his voice a sultry sing-song.

“After?”

“Yes.” He traced her lips with his fingertip, a small moan vibrating in his throat at the tickle of her
warm tongue upon it. “After. I do still want to… to touch you inappropriately, Kristiane. Quite
inappropriately. Sinfully. After.”

She cocked her head, a jaunty angle, her eyes shining, brows like gull wings perking upwards,
mimicking her wide, knowing smile below. “After it is, then.”

“Oh. The anticipation shall kill me.” He grinned, wrapping his arm about her shoulder. He led her
away from the tree, back out into the world, toward the train station, holding her tight, pressed firmly
to his body as they walked.

***

Angela Burr met them, standing arms akimbo and legs wide at the end of the platform at Victoria
Station. She, unlike the two of them, unlike Pine and Kristiane, did not look happy. Not at all. Quite
the opposite, in fact.

“What’d you think you two are on about then? Going off to Brighton with not so much as a by your
fucking leave?” Her tirade spilled out upon a sibilant, whispering hiss, fury spitting from every
word. “Had to track your God damn credit card to find out where you’d gone.”

Pine shrugged. “Didn’t know we needed to check in, boss,” he said, flippantly.

Burr grunted, her lips pursed, then pulled in, a taut, white line cutting across the bottom half of her
face. “You don’t,” she rolled her eyes. “Not… not really, but…..”

“What’s wrong?” Kristiane stepped forward, placing a hand on Burr’s shoulder. “Has something
happened?”

“Has something happened, she asks. Good, that one.” Burr’s lips quirked to the side, a sardonic,
single chuckle erupting from behind her nose. “Oh yeah, something’s happened, it has. What, were
you lovebirds too busy canoodling in yer own private car to watch the tellys they’ve got in the
seats?”

“We… had them… turned off,” Pine said, absently. “Angela,” he frowned, eyeing her
sideways. “What the hell’s going on?”

Angela licked her lips, digging her teeth into her lower one. She looked away, up at the television
screen hanging from the station rafters. She pointed. “See for yourself.”

Pine peered up at it, read the white and red headline that scrolled across the bottom of the screen, saw
the carnage-filled image splashed behind the talking head of the newscaster, heard the screams from
the soundtrack – and the world seemed to collapse and fall away beneath his feet. “Jesus Christ,” he
swore.

“My show,” Kristiane’s voice came small, and quivering, from beside him. “Jonathan,” she clutched
his hand, her skin cold, clammy, her own flesh trembling. “That’s my… that’s my show.”

On the screen, the image showed the marquee of the theatre, the once glowing white sign hanging by
a mere cable, swaying to and fro in the smoky, choked, filthy aftermath of what seemed to have been
a massive explosion.

The letters, CARO SE and a dangling L remained.

Not much else.
Pine swallowed. “Was... was anyone inside?”

Please, no. Oh, God, say no.

Burr nodded slowly. Pine could see tears pearling, shining fit to burst from the canthi of her eyes. “Children, Jonathan,” her chin quivered, puckering as she fought against an overwhelming wave of grief. “The fucking sodding cunting bastards murdered a class full of children... just there to see a wee noontime show. Peter Pan, it was, or summot. But... yeah. Children.”

Gulls cried and wept their sad song while pigeons pecked and chirped their lonely existence, begging for a handout. The grayish brown sludge called the Thames swirled and rippled horrendously in the damp stormy winds blowing through London. The water crashed and churned with the tear in the world, a gaping hole where a century’s old theatre once stood proud and nineteen young souls learning how to believe in fairies and think good thoughts with the hopes that they too would fly.

Kristiane felt sick with fear, sick with sadness and ill at ease with what to do about it. Her stomach felt like the cresting waves of the Thames River, disturbed by something uglier and more sinister than a roiling, mounting, growing storm. Her storm struck and she wasn’t sure she could find her fortress again, her hiding hole, her denial to pull around her like a cloak.

Singing lessons were a weekly occurrence for her since the age of eight. Even as a working professional performer, she kept up her technique by working her diaphragm and placement and how and where to breathe. Except she couldn’t remember a single bit of advice or lesson, with the still burning rubble of soot and destruction and human life. Innocent children.

Heavy, heavy raindrops pelted against her hair, her bare skin of her face and arms unevenly with the incoming storm but the storm inside her had already begun raging, in her stomach, in her heart and in her head. This was too near to her, too close, too real and breathing didn’t come easy. Only tears. Angry, sorrowful, unavoidable, mournful tears. Tears that she buried behind her denial for too long pushed through and couldn’t be tamed. At first she poured them into Jonathan’s shirt, her face planted in the expensive cotton fibers against his chest. Sobs wracked her body until she had no more left.

Joel Steadman joined them not long after the reality crushed down with heartbreak and helplessness upon them. He spoke quietly in short phrases, militant, precise calculated facts in his strong authoritative voice. “Intel deciphered the code for this attack too late. But they cracked it, saved two theatres in Manhattan and one more here. There are four more to decode.”

Jonathan’s raw gruff voice asked, “This was premeditated?” His arms tightened around his songbird instinctively, protectively, picking up the underlying meaning. “As in set to go off at this time?” It wasn’t meant for Kristiane, the terrorists knew her schedule, one she rarely strayed from until this thing began. This wasn’t meant for her.

A stiff nod from Joel confirmed it. “Lost two men trying to rush in to get the kids out. We got some of them, but tragically we didn’t have enough time.”

Kristiane couldn’t take anymore. She tore herself from Jonathan’s embrace and burst out of the train station, hoping to find a place to breathe. It didn’t get any easier, and the sky opened up and let loose a terrible cry of her own to join Kristiane’s. The distraught actress didn’t know where to go, only that she needed to move, away seemed the only logical solution. Away from the destruction. Away from the deaths. Away.

“Kristiane!” Jonathan pounded the pavement after her, dodging one cab in the crosswalk. “I
can’t let you go it alone.”

She spun around when he grabbed her good wrist to stop her. “Why not, Jonathan? Why not?”

Anger. Outrage and abiding anger stiffened her body into a straight edge, and she could sting anything in her way.

“You’ll be exposed.”

“I am now.” She held up her arms in surrender, resigned that this evil force would get her no matter what she did. “Let them come. Let them get me. Maybe this will all end!”

“You don’t want that, Kristie. Ple—“

Without listening, the irate woman took to storming away again, back to her rage induced stalk towards Westminster Abbey and the Embankment. Tension, stress, and bile all built to a crescendo in her blood and she needed to move or she’d shatter. She already felt consumed by it.

He caught her almost too easily with his hands on her hips, not quite as intimate as a lover, but someone more intimate with her. He crushed her to the wall of his chest, their rain slick clothes slapping together. The spirited woman struggled away from him, pushed and clawed out of his grip on her. Jonathan showed her his palms in a show of not wanting to hurt her.

“And that’s what this is all about for you! Can’t allow your next lay to get away!” Her eyes were alight with untapped fury. To hell with the Disney Princess.

“Kristie, it’s not about that. You wanted me this afternoon and the desire is entirely mutual.”

Logic and truth didn’t factor into her need to get away. She blamed herself for the situation since it all seemed to surround her. The too-hot under the collar ingénue stepped in closer, lining her body to his, to look up into his face. A challenge. A gauntlet. “Which one am I, Jonathan? Which one?”

“What are you on about?”

“Which one am I? Sophie, Jed or Marilyn?”

His expression hardened at the mention of their names.

And still, she couldn’t let up. Mercy wasn’t in her nature with unbridled rage pumping through her. She needed to hurt him, and she didn’t know why. “Am I Sophie, the one you still carry with you? Jed? The one you used for the greater good? Or Marilyn, the one night stand you left behind believing you died? Which one? Where do I fit in?”

She loathed every single solitary word she spewed at him in her pain, hated it with every breath she took to utter them. She lashed out specifically to hurt him, to bring him down to her level because misery loves company. But she hated herself for every pungent syllable and for judging him.

_You jaded bitch! You hurtful traitor!_

She threw herself at him, and then blamed him for taking her up on it. She wanted to lose herself in the feel of him, in her attraction to him, however unlike her it was, and enjoy what was left of her life, convinced these fuckers would get her. Control couldn’t be taken back in this ordeal, it was bigger than her, and that was too much for her to overcome. Impotence. Useless. Hopeless. She felt them all, and she was drowning in them all.
Was she angrier that Jonathan made no secret of his seduction of her, or was she angrier that they didn’t have the time right then, right there to follow through? Or was it… something else?

… And goddamn it! When he kissed her, she felt it in her knees, in her toes, in places she thought long dead. She felt more alive and more powerful with him, so why this need to tear him down?

Because she couldn’t ration it away. She didn’t want to be his next story for his next conquest. She wanted to be his, and that was mind bending new thing for her, since she prided herself on her independence, her own ambition and her own decisions. But this quiet observer knew how to direct her, protect her, and ultimately make her feel less like a piece of meat and more like a person.

But one thing repeated itself over and over in her mind, like some sick joke left to taunt her:

Her name was Kristiane.

No. She’d never mean that much to him.

“Am I just another notch in your bedpost?”

“Is that really what you think of me?” he hissed, his face a taut mask, his words pattering out of his mouth like the drops of rain that pelted his skull. He hunched himself against a renewed onslaught of wet, the rain slicing sideways with the wind, the water sluicing in a cold trail between his shoulder blades and down his spine. It traced the spear of shock-ice that pierced him vertically from head to sacrum, the tongue of hot flaming anger that licked, burning at his skin. “Is it?”

She didn’t answer. Rather, she kept her upturned glare fixed firmly to his. Her New York-I-fucking-dare-you-to-move-asswipe moue smeared upon her face. I dare you to move. To speak. Dare you to prove me wrong, fucker. Go on. I dare you.

He gave in, his mouth twisting into a saddened, yet sardonic grin, his eyes flicking upwards, looking somewhere above her head, and then back to her. He nodded, then, his lips curving downward upon a deep, resigned sigh, his chin puckering beneath. “Fine,” he spat. “So be it, then.”

He pushed past her, striding away, his numbed legs carrying him down toward the Tube Station stairs.

“Pine! Where are you going?” she shouted, her theatrical voice heard over the din of the increasing storm.

He stopped. He turned. “Out of the fucking rain!” he shouted back.

“What about me?” She stepped toward him, her shoulders hunched, fists balled at her sides. “What about your job… what about protecting me?”

“Protecting you is not my job!” he sneered, pointing harshly at her. “I don’t work for God damn MI6 anymore. Haven’t for years! Do you think I want to be involved in this sort of shit again? All this… this… nonsense? I don’t. Believe me, I don’t.”

“Then why have you stayed with me? Why did you… why did you help me?”

A single, sad chuckle burbled up from behind his nose as he shook his head, his eyes gone softer, almost… pitying. “If you haven’t figured that out by now, Miss Taylor, I sadly fear you never will.” And with that, he turned on his heel, and took two long strides away from her.
“Where… where will I go?” Her voice had taken on a shudder, an undertone of fear behind the loud, booming bravado.

He looked over his shoulder, bending his head and shoulders against the continued downpour. “You’ve nowhere to go,” he said, frankly. “Except, perhaps, with me.”

And he held out his hand. “Are you coming or not?”

***

They sat across the aisle from each other, in silence, sullen and wordless, dripping wet and freezing inside the train car. When the Covent Garden station came blurring into view, Pine stood and stepped toward the door, hanging on to the rail above.

“Why aren’t we going to Kensington?” Kristiane stood to his side, gripping the side rail.

He said nothing, simply looked down at her, and then back to the doors as they schussed open. He stepped through, smiling wryly to himself as he felt her follow. As before, he held his hand out behind him, inviting her to take it. When she did, he did not grip her gently as a lover – rather, as a minder, a parent guiding a petulant child. There was no affection in it. None whatsoever.

He’d not give her any, not just yet at least.

Not until he’d had words with her.

***

“Where are you taking me? Why are we here?”

“We’re going back to your room.”

“Why? What are we doing?

“You ask too many questions, Miss Taylor.”

“Oh, Miss Taylor, is it? Is that how it is now… Mister Pine?”

The lift doors opened, and he stepped through, Kristiane at his heels. “It only is if you wish it to be.” He strode to the end of the hallway, to her door, where he activated the lock with his master key, opening the room. He stepped in, and again, she followed.

“I thought Carl told you they ransacked this place. It looks fine to me.”

“I’d asked Carl to have it restored for you after the police finished their nasty business. All your clothes have been cleaned, all your toiletries replaced, anything that has been damaged, the hotel has purchased new for you.” He watched her as she stepped through past the bed toward the window. Satisfied she would stay put, he went to her closet, where he hefted out her empty suitcase and rested it upon the stand.

“Hey! That’s mine!” She strode over to him, her hands flying to her suitcase. “What the hell are you doing with that?”

“Sit down, please,” he said, gesturing deliberately toward the bed. Ignoring her grunt of protest, he reached into the closet, took down a group of trousers on their hangers and set them down upon the dresser.
“Answer me, Jonathan! What are you doing?”

He let his face go placid, professional – the Night Manager’s mask firmly back in its place. “I am packing your things for you,” he said, calmly. “I’m packing your things, and then you will change into dry clothes. Then we are going to go back downstairs, where I will fetch you a cab. You will go to Heathrow, where you will get on the next plane to New York, spend six hours in the air, and go back home.” He swallowed down a wave of grief at the very thought of her leaving. “Home…where you will be safe.”

She lunged forward, slapping her hands upon his, stopping his busy movements. “No!” she hissed. “I… I don’t want to go back!”

“You need to. You can’t stay here,” he said evenly. “You’re in too much danger.”

“It’s true, isn’t it?” He straightened, stepping away, his arms folded defiantly across his still-damp chest. “If, as you say, I’m only in this to get you into my bed; if you’re only just a notch on my bedpost; if I’m only out to shove my cock into your dripping, stretched out cunt, then I… ung!”

Her hand cracked across his snarling, sneering, looming face, knocking his lips back down over his bared teeth. “Shut up!”

He grunted as his head flew to the side, and the grunt morphed into a low, threatening growl as he turned his head slowly back – enough to make her retreat, shudder, the whites of her eyes glistening in her fury and fear.

“I am not that bastard Scott, damn you,” he pushed the words out through grit teeth. “Neither am I Terry; just like you are not Sophie, you are not Marilyn, you are not Jed. I am Jonathan.” He thrust a finger at his chest, and then turned it to poke at hers. “You are Kristiane.”

“Yeah? And Pooter’s the clown! What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” he spoke slowly, his hand unclenching, fingers stretching out to hover over her breast, emphasizing his words, “that I want you for you, that I find you… find you….”

The word didn’t come. He couldn’t find it. Damn it, he couldn’t find the word. Not the word for what she’d meant to him these past few days, from a distance the past few weeks.


There were so many words. So many. Too many.

With a frustrated huff, he shook it off, continuing. “It means that I understand how you are feeling right now. I’ve been there, remember? I am probably one of the few people in the world who
understand what is going on in that mind of yours,” he gave her forehead a gentle poke. “It means I know you’re scared. I know you’re angry. It means that I am not here for you to vent your spleen upon. I am on your side, Kristiane. I am not here for you to throw my chequered past into my face. I am not here for you to use as a punching bag, either physically,” he rubbed his cheek, “or verbally. I am the last person in the world you should be alienating right now. And you’re damn close to doing just that.”

“But… but… why me? Why is this happening to me?” Her own tension, her own anger, seemed to resolve slightly, only slightly, as her shoulders fell, her back softened, her eyes flickered.

“I don’t know,” Pine whispered. “I intend to find out. But you need to let me. You need to help me.”

Kristiane licked her lips as she studied him, gauging him. Her mouth shook as did her hand as it came up to wipe at her cheek. “I… I don’t want to go back to New York,” she said, her voice quiet. She inhaled and exhaled sharply through her nose, fighting back a renewed wave of tears. “I don’t want to go home.”

Pine reached tentatively for her; and feeling her acquiescence, took her by the shoulders, drew her to himself, and enfolded her in his arms. “I don’t want you to go, either. But I can’t help you if you don’t trust me.” He tilted his head down to engage her, to catch her eye, to give her a small, comforting smile. “Do you trust me, Kristiane?”

There’s a grief that can’t be spoken
There’s a pain goes on and on
Empty chairs at empty tables

Jonathan struck a sharp chord of fear in Kristiane so deep, gravelly deep, that her heart stopped beating, stopped pounding, stopped fluttering for him. Oxygen turned from an invisible gas to a weighted solid, hardening in her chest, turning her lungs to rock. She felt herself shrivel and retreat, a wish to undo the last few hours, to return to that point in time when her life felt almost right. That kiss in the park with Jonathan. The last time her insides weren’t in turmoil and she could somehow avoid her bitchy diva attitude.

That dissonant chord blared in her ears and she screamed to put it right, stamp it down again, or tune it. “No! I…I don’t want to go back!”

Please not now, please don’t give up on me, please don’t hate me, Jonathan.

Fear was a fickle, scalable, and powerful emotion that could so easily dictate human behavior. Kristiane had an irrational fear of spiders, but those little fuckers weren’t worthy of more than a scream, and that’s all they merited since that summer stock theatre program when she was eighteen. Whenever she met one or two, or shacked up with them as roommates, a scream and a swat was more than enough for the creepy-crawlies.

Then there are those creaks and bumps in the night that woke her from a deep sleep, her heart hammering in her chest, her head a whirl of confusion of reality or subconscious. Then there were those two or three nights that she got lost in an unfamiliar neighborhood in London and she couldn’t find her way out. Of course, not dire or life threatening, but scary.

A bomb taking down a theatre with precious lives inside, men after her, attacks on her person terrified her beyond the telling of it. After creating a career and public persona as a people pleaser
and an approachable, affable performer, she couldn’t guess why anyone would hate her so much, enough to kill her. But at the same time, it didn’t feel entirely personal, any actress in her position would’ve been the target.

But then there was Jonathan Pine, packing her bag and sending her away from him, sending her out of his life and she lost all ability to function. A task more difficult than trying to read and understand the original Greek text of Antigone with one lesson of the language.

Kristiane’s music room, the one that Jonathan gifted to her, where this all began, flashed through her mind, abandoned, dark, empty chairs at empty tables. Black walls and floors, with the same black chairs and tables. The room never felt empty when she went in search of herself because she found music and a song to ease her mind again. Her mind and heart felt like that room when he said that he would put her on a plane to New York, sending her back to an apartment that no longer felt like home in her absence, sending her back to certain death.

She loved her Broadway friends dearly, but she couldn’t see any of them willing to put themselves in danger for her, but Jonathan had, when he barely knew her, barely tolerated her. She couldn’t see any of her friends jumping in to save or help her when she was attacked with a knife. She couldn’t see them trying to work out just exactly was going on, so it could be resolved. Jonathan wanted to protect her, put aside his job and his life to be with her, and put some effort into figuring out the problem with the sheet music.

If she left, her music room would remain lifeless, desolate and deserted. Without Kristiane to fill it. Without Jonathan to fill it. Without her songs and his laughter to fill it. Only silence.

Her vision tunneled and darkened around the edges when he made his intent known, to put her on the first plane back to New York City alone. She wanted to turn the world off. Reset it for when she felt a sense of happy, a small pocket of equilibrium in the chaos. Back to when she and Jonathan kissed and promised to share something more intimate.

Yes, she wanted the distraction, but she wanted him more than that. She wanted to be with him, as her balance in the upheaval of her life and career. She liked his stability, his even temper and his calm. But she also liked the broken man, without ego or arrogance, his ultimate desire to do good, his loyalty, his dedication. He was confident and he was present.

He may have been surly and moody and mysterious, prone to shutting up when the subject got too personal. But he was her surly, her moody and her mysterious. Well, she wanted him to be her surly, her moody and her mysterious.

He said it himself when trying to reason with her, “I am probably one of the few people in the world who understand what is going on in that mind of yours.”

*Her kindred spirit.*

The only words that restored her, put air in her lungs, set her heart back to fluttering, filled the abandoned music room in her head with versions of Jonathan and Kristiane, were Jonathan’s. “I don’t want you to go, either.”

Pairs of them, pairs of Jonathan and Kristiane filled the room, occupied those tables and her heart sang with it. The Night Manager and the Broadway star. The quiet observer that offered a lost woman friendship. The audience member and the performer. The MI6 agent and his songbird. The man and woman stealing kisses behind their menu. Each moment of their collective experience together filled that room in her heart. Music filled her heart, and soared.
“Do you trust me, Kristiane?”

Her mouth twisted into a teasing smirk, “We’re back to that?”

Jonathan wouldn’t budge, his face slack, awaiting her answer.

Sobering, Kristiane placed a hand on his arm, just below his elbow to convey the importance. “I’ve always trusted you, Jonathan. I don’t know how to handle any of this, violence, running, hiding, death, destruction. This is not my world, and I don’t think I belong in it. I was unfair to you, and for that, I’m sorry.”

Ugh, she hated the sound of her own rehearsed voice, because he deserved better. But it rang false in her head, and it wasn’t. Yes, she reacted badly to everything that was going on around them, but what truly scared her, what was at the heart of her temper tantrum was her intense attraction to him. Her emotions for him weren’t anything she could control, and that was the kindling and gas of the fire of her rage. When she felt vulnerable, she did something about it. Hurting him seemed the way to do that, make him retaliate and hurt her, so she could squash whatever it was she felt for him.

It didn’t play out that way, and she nearly lost the only friend she had in this trauma and torment. Because she couldn’t decide if she wanted to pull him in for him to hold her, or push him away because he rocked the foundation of who she thought she was, she couldn’t be entirely honest.

Clearing her throat, Kristiane tried another way. “I trust you… I do trust you. Since you offered your friendship, I trusted you. I’m sorry that I was cruel to you. Please don’t send me out there on my own. I don’t know what I would do…” Without you, Jonathan. “I never wanted to be needy, I never wanted to rely on anyone else. I’m sorry that I struck out at you.”

Jonathan stroked his hand over her back, just once, up and then down. “Apology accepted.” But not all was forgiven or forgotten, that would be too easy. Stiffly, he stepped away from her. “Let’s get you packed up and get you back to Kensington where it’s safe.”

Kristiane watched him for a long moment, his concentration on organizing her things. She didn’t earn her friend back yet. As she put her cell phone, her makeup and her address/date book into her bag, she knew that she’d have to tell him more.

*****

If I loved you, time and time again I would try to say, all I’d want you to know…

“Jonathan, I’m scared—“

“I know you are, but I’m here—“

The lift doors closed behind them, and she cut him off his familiar promise to her by placing her hands on his wet shirt. Both hands high up on either side of his chest, just shy of his shoulders. But it wasn’t the tender touch that stopped the words in his throat, it was the softened expression in her eyes, her face relaxed with it. “No,” she slowly shook her head, her focus on the void along his chest between her thumbs. “Please listen for a minute. Jonathan, I’m scared about the emotions you stir in me.”

If I loved you, words wouldn’t come in an easy way, round in circles I’d go…

His pride, the injured part of him smarting from her questioning him about his intentions, held strong and fast to that part that didn’t like her much after her insults. It was fading too fast, was he too quick to forgive her? The earnestness he read on her face melted the hard exterior, that angry bit of him
fighting his own feelings for her.

“I’ve never felt this, for anyone and I don’t think it’s something that I can resist anymore. I don’t want to.” She fed one button open to reveal a slice of his chest. “I picked a fight with you because I’m scared. I don’t want to be scared anymore. Not of you, not of what I feel for you.” She pressed in on another button, slowly sliding the widening sheets of cotton. Then Kristiane angled in and pressed her lips to that piece of skin.

*Longin’ to tell you but afraid and shy, I’d let my golden chances pass me by*

Jonathan held his breath, thoroughly unprepared for the new light he saw behind her eyes. No pretense, no mask to hide behind, no righteous bullshit anger to keep him from her, there was truth. He couldn’t ignore her, or hold onto to his pride much longer.

His splayed hands took her in, brought her body against his in a heated embrace, and groaned with it. Groaned with her words poking along in his heart. Groaned with her pliable, delectable, and magnetic being so close to his. Groaned against the lingering sparks of anger he felt for her and the bursts of forgiveness, in the middle, somewhere near his throat, warring for supremacy.

Kristiane hooked her arms around his neck, lifting up on her tip toes. She wasn’t convinced that he’d forgiven her, and she’d been horrible to him, in her fear, confusion and grief. His touch, his hold around her lacked the passion and the tender possessiveness that she came to expect when he held her. She was just his ward, his responsibility.

*Please, Jonathan, please remember the park when we found our own Narnia together behind that tree. Remember the quiet of the library and you kissed me for the first time. I’m still that woman, with a few more thorns, but the same woman.*

Slanting her head, Kristiane pressed a small kiss into his thin lips, sadly expecting that he wouldn’t return it and he didn’t. Defiance hardened his gaze, and his wounded pride stilled his hands on her and his eyes on her. “I hurt you, I know.” She pressed another kiss against him.

Like pages torn from a notebook, she could see his pride diminish, decrescendo and fade. “I won’t do it again, I don’t want to hurt you.”

One more small kiss and their eyes remained locked. “I’m sorry.” She felt a strong silent sigh from him against her lips, and she saw him let go, release the tension that she’d created in him.

With a calming breath, a tiny beat, she whispered seductively, “I think I need some help out of my wet blouse.” His fingers curled into her wet clothing and her flesh beneath, and his hold on her changed, morphed from guardian to lover. His eyes slid closed with hers.

Massaging her meaning into his lips, she murmured, “I’ll need something to help me get warm again.”

It wasn’t her words that cooled his anger, turning that tap down to off until the last drips fell. No, it wasn’t that she invited him in. It was her, her proximity, how close she stood. Her fingers rubbed at the base of his neck at the top of his spine. Her breasts flattened against the wall of his chest. The muscled expanse of her abdomen pressed against his, so he felt each breath she took from her diaphragm. His thigh angled between her legs, cradling his. Her flesh, her bones, her blood, her. *Kristiane.*

When she was near, he couldn’t hold on to his anger or annoyance.

Kristiane tipped her head in offering as her tongue rasped along his bottom lip, begging for him to
take control. A surprising nervous giggle bubbled up from her as she experienced her first bout of performance anxiety since she was fifteen. “Jonathan, I’m- I…” a nervous laugh, “I’m not good… at the seduction part.”
“Oh, really,” he deadpanned, unable to stop his mouth from twitching, his tongue from wetting his lips, his breath from leaving his body in tight huffs. “You… you seem to be doing… ah… just fine.”

She laughed again, but her laughter slowed, dying down to a desirous moan as Pine’s hands coasted up her sides to land just beneath her breasts, supporting them, weighing them, but not quite touching… yet. She gasped, her eyes flicking back up to his. She blinked rapidly, her eyes wide, shining and questioning; as if she could ask what it was on her mind, communicate her worry to him in a code of her own.

And surprisingly, Pine deciphered it. Understood her. In response, he gave her the benefit of a small, acknowledging nod, an affirmative purse of the lips, a slow, gentle caress of his hand over her temple, down the length of her hair, to press at her back.

It’s not improper. It’s not unseemly. It’s not a travesty if we do this, as long as what we do, right here - right now is pure. As long as it is true. As long… as what we make is love, or at least, some semblance thereof. We need it. We need it so we can go on living through this. We need… each other.

And his own eyes asked the question of her: Do you agree?

But before he could answer, the lift doors opened once again, spilling light from the elevator cab out into the darkness of the Kensington flat.

“Come on,” Pine whispered. He stepped reluctantly away from her, and with one hand, took up the handle of her suitcase; the other, he held out for her to take – and when she did take it, he curled his fingers around hers, imbuing his hand with as much warmth, as much desire, as much affection as he could muster.

He pulled her through, and like in a dance, turned her in a wide arc back to him, back into his embrace. He dropped her suitcase like so much dross, kicking it aside with his foot as his hands went back to her flesh, to caress, to explore, to curve hooked fingers deep into muscle and around bone and beneath breast. The very feel of her lips canting and sliding against his made him moan, made him dizzy with battle-lust, made him want to throw her to the carpet below their feet, rend her clothes asunder and take her right then and there.
No. You’ll not be a brute about it. Not with her. No Beast for this Beauty. No, you must be Prince Charming… or at least as much as someone the filthy likes of you can be.

With the lift doors closed behind them, the foyer was plunged into a relative darkness, the only light the moonglow and the city-shimmer that slithered in between the closed curtains. It was a warm light, a comforting light suffused with marigold and crimson and cerulean, enough to cast a faint, almost otherworldly luminescence upon their skin.

Enough, Jonathan thought, to infuse Kristiane with radiating heat like the angel she was. An angel of God to whom he suddenly felt the need to make his confession.

Forgive me, Kristiane, for I have not sinned enough. It’s been two years five months ten days since I last had the wet, hot flesh of a woman round my cock…. En nomine Patris….

“I… I…,” he stammered, “I… uh, it’s been a while for me, as well. I fear I may be a bit out of practice.”

“You mean to tell me you’re not some… licentious libertine? Was I wrong about you?”

“Not wrong in the sense that I can be one, if that’s what you want me to be.”

“Hm. You mean,” she teased, pressing her thumb against another button of his damp shirt, “you’re not the master of seduction I thought you were?”

He laughed. “I thought you said I was the master of distraction.”


He bobbled his head, his lower lip pushing out in a mock pout. “Fair enough, but let’s not call the whole thing off, yeah?”

Kristiane’s face lit up like a freshly-hung fresnel lamp. “You made a theatre joke!”

His eyebrows rose, and his grin broadened, his teeth showing bright white, cutting through the ethereal gloom. “You should count yourself lucky I made a joke at all.”

“Oh,” she breathed; and her face went suddenly slack with renewed desire. “I count myself lucky all right.”

He pulled back in surprise, cocking his head. “You do? I thought… with all that’s going on, and all the….”

“Sssh,” she pressed her fingers to his lips, silencing him, her own voice a mere whisper. “I am the luckiest girl in the world right now, and I want to stay that way for as long as I can.” Her lips curled in a wry, knowing smile, and her eyes lifted seductively from beneath her lashes. Her hand drew slowly down his throat to trace lower atop his exposed skin, until her fingertips wriggled under the bottom of his shirt, within the small hairs just above the line of his jeans. “Shall we retire to the safe room?”

Pine shook his head slowly. “No,” he growled, finally allowing himself the luxury of a generous handful of one breast, and then another. Her flesh was wonderfully warm against his palms, the heat wafting up from beneath the chilled, still-damp shirt. The feel of her, the need of her sent a jolt through him so strong his vision tunneled and he thought his breath would escape him altogether. “The master suite. I want to have you in a proper bed.” He huffed his words, barely able to speak, his bared teeth digging hard into his lower lip. “Now.”
“Lead the way, sailor,” Kristiane intimated with a wink and a grin. She poked through the last of the buttons on his shirt, running a hand down the center again, mapping the way to his belt buckle. “I’m all yours,” a low rasp of sound.

“Christ!” he spat out with impatience, the woman playing on the resolve to treat her entirely like a lady. Frustration boiled in his blood of being too long without a woman. He’d had offers, dozens, since he took post at The Covent Garden Hotel. Mostly from bored wives, older than he, of politicians, dignitaries and CEOs craving an orgasm because they hadn’t had one in fifteen years, if ever. When Jonathan handed them their key, they’d repeat their room number for him and either make a subtle reminder that their husband was otherwise occupied or make a lewd hand gesture to make it clear what they wanted, what they expected.

He didn’t normally accept an invitation for sex, except for this little firecracker he would. He craved her to dull the ache of withdrawal, one of the pitfalls of returning to his half-life, and hiding from any one of Roper’s contacts still living large.

Jonathan took off near a sprint away from the library to escort Kristiane to the place he had in mind. He nearly dragged her to the end of the corridor to a different set of double doors. He pushed the massive wooden doors open, scooping her around the waist to pull her inside hurriedly. He spared a moment to close and lock them behind, cocooning them inside not to be disturbed by the outside world.

Kristiane didn’t have time to appreciate the massive master suite, identical in size and shape to the library. She was back in his arms with her mouth open to his insistently questing tongue. She held him tightly to her, her racing heart a comfort after the scare of losing him. She wanted to be with him like this since he kissed her the first time.

He hunched to her, bending her backwards, the pull of her too strong, his will too weak and the readily available woman he had against him. Heavy steps led them towards the bed, an awkward give and take walk with neither loosening their grip on the other to get there any quicker.

Kristiane fell into the bed with Jonathan on top of her when her legs met the solid surface. Their mouths fell apart, as their breathless panting created a harmonious ditty of human desire.

Mother Nature made her presence known with a terrible crack of thunder and flashes of lightening. Jonathan barely noticed as he took in the vision of the beauty beneath him. He painted a caress from the base of her neck down the center of her heaving chest.

Raggedly, brokenly, he whispered, “You- Your blouse… is transparent.” It didn’t still his hand for a moment in flicking a button open on the damp material. “It’s thin… white… wet.”

Magnetically her fingers traced his swollen lips, smiling when he laid a kiss along the pads.

“Have you never seen a bra before, Pine?” A teasing lilt joined the bedroom voice she’d mastered.

“Not with cherries on them,” he chuckled, exposing the criminal piece of clothing. His hand not quite circling, not quite ghosting, not quite weighing, but a bit of all to the flesh below.

“Angela won’t let go of the Disney Princess thing. I think she wants me to be. I’ve… I’m her own personal… dress up doll.”

“She left a gown in the closet.” The flat of his hand covered the bare cool skin of her abdomen.

Kristiane moaned with the pleasure of it, her eyes sliding closed to concentrate on the touch of him, the feel of him, the warmth, the lead of him. “I won’t…” she sighed outright when his thumb
teased the bottom outline of her bra. “Be… wearing…” She never got the chance to finish.

Jonathan dropped kisses to her neck before tasting her skin with swipes of his tongue, lapping at her fluttering pulse. His teeth then nipped at the flesh of her earlobe. “Need you naked…”

The sinful gravel voice in her ear nearly undid her with its base wish. A breathy yes pushed through her parted lips. Followed by a barely audible please as she fell into the eroticism of his control of her. He undid the clasp of her bra in the front, and he immediately took one breast in his mouth as his hand covered its twin.

“Oh, God….” her hands clasped his head, giving into the sensation of moist warmth surrounding her.

His thumb danced and circled over her peaked nipple, as his tongue mimicked the enticement to the other.

“Ah! Ouch!” Kristiane gasped, her back arching beneath him, fingers clutching, pulling at his hair above; for he had bitten her. He had sunk his teeth deep and sharp into the flesh of her breast, having been unaware he’d even done it, having been wholly unable to control his hungry, seeking mouth.

“Oh, no. I’m… I’m so sorry,” he whispered, lifting his head to peer at her face, to gauge the signs of pain from his bite – surprised to find instead the poetry of pleasure written upon her face.

“Nooooo, don’t be sorry,” she murmured as she stroked his face, his neck, as she insinuated her hand beneath his shirt, pushing it back off of his shoulder. “Want you to… to do it again, in fact,” she begged, “but… lower.”

Pine swallowed audibly. “Lower? You mean….” Wriggling out of his shirt, he pointed downward with a glance of his eyes, a lingering gaze in that place. “You mean… bite you… there?”

“Jonathan, please,” she moaned. “You want me naked? I want you… there.”

And therefore, naked she became – in the blink of an eye, she was naked.

Pine’s fingers scrabbled and tugged, pulled and yanked as he divested her of jeans, of knickers below, shirt and brassiere above, as he moved her, lifting her bodily and boldly up the bed to lie upon the pillows and still-tucked duvets. And when he’d finished, he sat up, his long, lean legs straddling her body, and he looked down upon her, unable to stop his fingertips from touching her, from cascading over her here… ghosting upon her there….

Everywhere.

And Christ, but did she look wanton – in repose, ready and redolent beneath him, her skin glowing yellowish white and grey in turns with each cutting stroke of lightning. Her hair – oh God her hair – it was fanned out like a dark halo upon the white pillow. She was, in a word… beautiful.

“God,” he groaned.

“Not God. I’m just Kristiane,” she smirked. She rest there, her arms flown up above her head, giving his eyes free rein to rove over her shadowy form. She had to fight hard against her nerves, against her instinct to cover up, to hide her nakedness. This was no acting part, this was real. Very real.

All too real. All too new. All too good.

For Pine’s part, his mouth went suddenly dry, such that he had to press his lips together and work his
jaw to produce enough saliva to even speak let alone do the thing she’d wanted. His tongue slid across his teeth, snaking out to wet his lips.

“Jonathan,” she whispered, his name a sacrificial prayer. It made him smile with satisfaction to hear it, made his heart skip a beat. A rare thing, that. An offering. An offering sufficient to warrant immediate answer to her most fervent, most heartfelt petitions.

Including that one. “Please.”

“Yes, of course, Miss Taylor. I am, as always, at your service.”

He bent low to her, snaking his body down her thighs, her knees, to kneel at her feet at the base of the immense bed. To fall at her feet, more like. He shifted himself forward then, slowly, gently wrapping his arms around her thighs. One upon each shoulder, Pine hugged them to himself as if he were carrying the most precious artifacts in the world. The skin of her legs looked like rare porcelain, felt like China silk, smelled of ambrosia, how could they not be?

A coruscation from the storm outside illuminated the room, and in that split second, he saw her once again, saw her, saw Kristiane -his Kristiane- with her legs spread wide for him, her eyes damp, bright and eager, her lips parted, dark and pillowy, her breasts perked and soft above her heaving stomach….

… and that part of him, that red-mist, battle-bred part of him, that limbic few centimetres of his brain switched on and took over. Not out of any perception of threat, or need to fight or defend. Oh no. Rather he shook with the kinetic memory of lust, with an ardour to take. To plunder. To bring all of her into all of himself. To touch. To taste. To feel. To feel… oh, Christ, to feel.

To have.

And so, with a sonorous growl, Jonathan Pine bared his teeth, opened his mouth wide, dove deep, curved his back, and took her most intimate flesh firmly between his lips.

“Aaah! Jonathan!”

Forgetting himself, in the heat of the moment and the in the heat of her sweetest flesh, he took to her with reverent aggression and insatiable lust. But beneath the tender brutality of the savage beast within him, there was a desperate lover eager to give his princess every pleasure and every sensation, each painful pleasure and each pleasurable pain. He wanted it all for her.

In sheet madness, Kristiane longed to pull away and get closer to the roaring furor of sexual awakening at her core all at once. Her soldier, her fighter, her war torn trooper boldly went where no man had gone before. She scrambled beneath him for purchase, to get away, to draw ever closer, to retreat, to charge forward, to stop the all too new sensation, while rip him ever closer, to take more of her, all of her. Instinct, basic, raw, powerful involuntary craving made her hips thrust into the pleasurable torture of his open mouth and jabbing tongue. She asked for the thing, fully completely and entirely unprepared for the pleasure it wrought on her unsuspecting body.

She whimpered beneath him, her hands and arms flying this way and that, yanking at the pillows beneath her head, clawing at the bedsheets, scraping her blunt fingernails into his hair and scalp in her own mania. Her abs contracted in a spike of eroticism and the power of it pulled her off the bed.

She writhed when Jonathan swirled his tongue up to her clitoris. Whooshing exclamations escaped her one after another, unable to stay silent or still with him wrecking her, tearing her bit by
bit and she didn’t remotely mind. She wanted more until there was nothing left for him to take. Her back arched and for each pelt of rain against the pane of glass, he flicked his tongue over her center. She cried nonsensically until he heard an unmistakable, “Right fucking there!” Her hips strained against or with the prison of his arms holding her as her thighs trembled with her crisis.

Just at the edge of an orgasm, so close that her inner muscle constricted and pulled almost to the point, she called, “Jonathan, wait! Kiss me!” He lifted his face away from her sex, dropping his hands to the mattress as her legs fell open off his shoulders, her knees hooked around his wrists. Kristiane pulled at him to bring his mouth to hers.

Meeting her somewhere in the middle of her sit up and his lie down, she gripped him, bringing him into her lips. Before he could ask after her and what made her stop, she kissed him heatedly, lips, teeth and tongue, finding her own beat, her own rhythm. He submitted to whatever she wanted.

Moaning hungrily, Kristiane tasted the tangy flavor of herself on his tongue. She couldn’t quite get enough and it was exactly what she wanted. She could feel his hesitancy, his want to ask why they stopped, why she’d stopped at such a crucial moment. But he indulged her all the same in a kiss when her lips coerced his, her lips demanded it.

When she finally ended the kiss, her hands held his cheekbones captive, rubbing her nose to his.

“Are you quite all right, Kristiane?” Concern. Worry. Panic. They were all present, even that personal inner hatred that cursed himself for displeasing her. The demon too rough with her. The ass unworthy of having her in his bed.

Her rounded eyes met his and she nodded, biting her lower lip. “That- I… this is…” she paused for a long breath, a stretched out beat. With a small shrug of her bare shoulder, she confessed, “… my first time.”

He began, “I’m sorr—“

Fingers over his lips killed the apology in its track. “Don’t you dare apologize. Don’t you dare!” So much passion and vigor in her words and yet there was a grin pulling at the corners of her mouth. “You did exactly what I asked, and… and…” she floundered, grasped at any explanation that would suffice and recover their night. “I wanted…” she gnawed on the corner of her bottom lip “to know… what you…”

“What is it?”

“I wanted to taste you. I wanted to taste me. I wanted to taste me on you—us together.” She flushed brightly in the confession, lightening made her flow with it in an instant.

He chuckled with male pride and let her recline back into the pillows again. “If I do it right, there will be more of that.” He traced one finger through her crease, teasing and relaxing her back into their foreplay.

Kristiane held his gaze though her lids hooded over in her arousal at the fleeting touch. Her breath released in a slow hiss when his finger returned to her sensitive swollen flesh. She all but keened and returned to begging when he slipped on digit into her body.

Jonathan brought that ginger to her mouth for her to suck while he returned to his monstrous appetite for her sweetest nectar. He held her legs open for him and lowered himself back down between her legs. He manipulated her chaos point with teeth and tongue together.
The exquisite sharp totter between pleasure and oblivion had Kristiane at the mercy of one man and one man alone. “Jonathan!” A breathless euphoria, a benediction, a promise.

*Take me in, Jonathan. Take all of me!*

He confidently took her and she blindly followed while he escorted her to an all-consuming climax. Lightning flashed in her head, behind her eyes, thunder rolled through her and wind howled from her lungs. Her storm crested and left her a quivering mass of flesh, damp with sweat and the high Jonathan gave her coating the tops her thighs. She was spent.

Jonathan had laid his head on the pillows beside her to watch the orgasm have its way with her. The rapture of her relaxed features, her eyes closed, her gorgeously parted lips. And he couldn’t keep his hands from touching her, caressing, memorizing, learning all her sweet spots, all the hidden delectable bits of flesh that made her sigh or catch her breath. She was every bit the theatrical being he thought she was.

When she came down, she smiled again. “I’ll bite you back, sailor.” A wicked promise. A mischievous gleam in her eye.

“Ah, but Kristiane,” he huffed, wending his arm beneath her head, cradling her, “I’ve already told you, I’m a soldier, not a sailor.” He moved atop her, sighing as the flesh of his chest seemed to melt, to resolve itself into hers.

“Soldier, sailor, what’s the difference?” Her pointed tongue tipped at the base of her top teeth, white and glowing beneath a broad, wicked smile. “Doesn’t change the fact that you’re still wearing your jeans.”

He rose up on his hands, craning his neck to peer back down his long body. “Well, huh. So I am,” he chuckled. “Perhaps we ought to do something about that.”

“We?” One of her gull-wing eyebrows rose.

“I? Perhaps… I should do something about it?” He sat up, once again straddling her naked middle. His hand moved to his flies, fingers working at the buttons.

“No… soldier. I want to be the one to do something about it,” she corrected. She wrapped her arms around his wrists, pulling his hands away, taking up the delicate, dangerous Operation Trouser herself.

He spread his hands, palms up in surrender, in supplication. “Be quick about it, then. I don’t think I can wait much longer.” He watched her work, growling deep in his throat at her touch on his waistband. Her nails scratched his tender skin as she curved within, her fingers warm, soft, yet eager on his flesh…. close, so close, so incredibly close. His breath stuck at the feel of her, a loud gasp escaping as she parted the fabric, as she turned her hand to explore the spoils of war, to plunder his depths.

She gasped at what treasure she found. “Damn, Jonathan,” she cleared her throat as she surveyed his boxer-covered cock, reconnoitering up and down the length of him, twisting once again down the path to study the weight of his balls. “You’re huge, aren’t you.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I… I… uh… I don’t… think so, if… if you say so, I… Oh Christ, Kristiane!”

He threw himself off the bed clumsily, nearly falling, his trousers suddenly incredibly, uncomfortably, painfully tight around his body. He shoved them down, pants along with them and kicked the ball of fabric aside, sending it flying across the massive room.
Kristiane chuckled at the sight of him, but his agitated sense of anticipation was contagious. “Jonathan,” she cooed. “Come back.”

And so, he did.

He set his knee on the bed and crawled up the length of her, once again tenting his body over hers. He bent his elbows and lowered the entirety of himself, covering her, once again melding himself… his entire self… to her. She spread her legs for him as she sat up, wrapping herself tightly around his thighs, his waist, telling him under no uncertain terms that she wanted him, that she was ready for him.

“Kristiane,” he moaned breathily. His hand brushed down over her face, her hair, to trail down her neck, to rest at her breast. He pressed his hips down, down, down upon hers, sliding forward, coasting himself along that newly familiar terrain, that breadth of her. The sensation, the heat, the slick welcoming surface a delight against his long-waiting, agonizingly hard cock. “Kristiane.” With another moan, another press below, he begged her with an open-mouthed kiss above.

A kiss, a teasing caress of his lips with hers, his tongue sliding over her teeth, a squeeze of her breast, a touch of his forehead to hers, all saying ‘please.’ In response, she lifted her hips, pressed her knees into his flank, and wrapped her hands around his arse, squeezing in invitation, a plea of her own, an entreaty. A demand.

And so, with a slow, slow, oh so very slow roll of his pelvis, with an even longer, even slower, deeper groan, he joined himself to her – mind, body… and possibly even soul.

“Well, Mr. Night Manager, you got me into bed. What to do now?” she teased because she couldn’t handle how gently he’d entered her. As if she were the most precious gift given to him, it was too much for the jaded, tainted New Yorker. She knew what to do with mean, careless and disrespectful assholes, but this… her Jonathan… wasn’t in her bag of tricks.

He chuckled, rubbing his stubble against her clear, smooth cheek. “Try not to embarrass or shame myself.” He hadn’t moved yet, hadn’t rejoiced in being joined with her. Truth be told, he scarcely drew a breath for a few moments in containing himself. Simultaneously he felt himself the inexperienced, jackass teenager, touching a breast for the first time and blowing his wad entirely too soon or the red-eyed demon that could tear her apart with his basic given right to fuck, to fuck hard. Ruthlessly plunder her.

Kristiane grazed her hands from his ass up the broad expanse of his back to cradle his neck. Bringing him into her for a small not-quite inconsequential kiss, no more than a peck, but incredibly endearing, she whispered, “I’m here for the night. If you need to use me—“

“No! That’s not what this is.” The resignation in her offer resolved him even more to do right by her. She hadn’t been treated right and she expected the least. That prick of a boyfriend she’d had fucked up her confidence, he saw it in that moment. He couldn’t fix her, he wouldn’t know how. But he could be sure that he himself was there for her.

Jonathan held her as her body held him, patiently waiting for his cock not to erupt before it was too early. “The pretty lady,” he mused playing with strands of her hair. The thick mane showed the after effects of the storm and his time with her in bed so far, a little wilder but so attractive.

“So you think I am?”

He smiled, surprised that he’d actually said it aloud. “Well, um, Carl always called you that.”
Her fingers scratchy-scratched-y in his hair as her face screwed up into a mock scowl. “So I should be in bed with him then?”

“Christ, no!” He found another chuckle low in his chest as she giggled. “But I think he’s been pushing me at you since you moved into the hotel…” He moved his pelvis back in a low stroke. “…dubbed you the pretty lady…” He pressed into her again. A test, to gauge his own sensitivity to her body and his eagerness to come.

“Should I…” she moved her hands to his shoulders to hold onto him as he began a leisurely pace of rocking his hips. “…send him a… note?” Kristiane’s eyes sparkled with excitement that they were connecting again physically and that she liked what he was doing.

“You’re otherwise engaged,” he planted into her hair, reveling in the intensity of woman beneath him.

She moaned when Jonathan kept the slow, so slow, deliberately measured and prolonged press and retreat within her. A drawn out withdraw and another roll of his hips back in, and she swallowed hard. “I know you didn’t… mmmmmm… like me- oh! - …thought me…” She held him tighter as he gradually gained some speed. “Aaahh! – vapid, without substance… uuuuhh… empty…” She wheezed out the last word, finding her rhythm with him.

Puffed up with confidence that he wouldn’t spill too soon, Jonathan pressed into her harder, lifting her hips with his momentum. “You’re hardly empty now,” he murmured in her ear when she mewled at the delicious pressure.

She sighed as her core constricted around him in the enjoyment of his body and the indecent whisper in her ear.

Jonathan growled at her response, how her body rippled around him only enticed him to do it again, to do it more. “Like that, did you?” He was finally ready to fully indulge in her, fuck her, make love to her, bang her, be intimate… whatever he was doing. He didn’t know what they were doing, only that it was good… oh so good… so very fucking good.

“Jonathan!” her right leg slid up the back of his, dragging her foot up his long leg to wrap around his waist. Her hands sunk back down to hold on to his shoulder blades, remaining connected to him and holding on.

For his part, he sunk his hands underneath her, bringing her closer in, always closer. He cupped the rounded, so soft flesh of her ass, canting her hips up to accept him deeper into her. For each rock and thrust, Kristiane answered in kind with her knee at his hip and her leg at his waist depressing just a fraction more… pulling him in, insisting that he bring her with him to the brink and beyond.

He panted hotly against her neck, leaving a mark upon her skin when he staved off his impending orgasm. Kristiane felt the sting, but she loved the suction of it, his rougher side. She loved that he enjoyed her that much.

As quiet and reserved as Pine generally was, he enjoyed the verbal sparring, the back and forth, the witty banter, the serious conversations he’d had with Kristiane. He admired her powerful will, her spirit, her heart, her mind.

But in that moment, he no longer wanted to talk. *Enough chit-chat.* In that moment, all he wanted - all his body wanted - was her body. He craved her rich textures, wanted the sweet, syrupy delight of her around his skin, to indulge in her milky smoothness. No doubt about it, he hungered for her.
Starved even.

Words failed him. His mind (quite usurped by his cock) failed him. His reason simply skipped off to hide somewhere, abandoning him to his growing abandon, reducing him to nothing but an open-mouthed bellows of bestial grunts and wheezes. He became all hips and cock as he took his pleasure, a rapid-fire piston, a one-stroke automaton, a mere moaning motor.

He bent his knees, thrust deep within her, and curved his back, practically howling in breathy ecstasy as his mouth once again found the flavour of her. He sunk his teeth into her shoulder - a beast thrusting its deadly fangs in for the kill – full of bite and growl and claws and powerful muscles all for consuming her, stilling her. Taking her.

He heard her moans, her wails, felt her nails sink deep into his writhing skin, felt the pounding of her heels against his clenched arse, the taut bow of her back, and knew, somewhere distant in his mind, he knew that she was ready. And so, he let go. He mewled, child-like as he gave himself over completely to the tight ball of flame in his gut, to the blinding white light in his eyes and the paroxysms that bound his muscles tight.

Kristiane’s scream barely registered. He heard nothing save the sound of his own heart as it clanged against the wall of his chest, the tearing white noise of his ragged breaths, and his own high-pitched sigh as he finally… finally… relaxed.

Still panting, still shaking, he lowered himself, spreading himself over her like a pat of butter. “Christ almighty,” he huffed. He shifted, lifting himself up on his elbows to gaze down at her. He took her in, took in and stored up the very image of her – sated and wanton and dewy and breathless and messy and beautiful – as his hands twirled idly at her hair. “Kristiane,” he breathed. “Oh. Kristiane.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Jonathan’s hair gleamed and shimmered with sweat and the ambitious activity he pursued and achieved with his songbird. All hispent up sexual frustration of two plus years he poured into her, and she accepted it with a melodic cry of ecstasy, one he wouldn’t soon forget. He didn’t know why but he felt so tender toward her.

The eager-to-please, let-me-entertain-you look that normally shone on her visage had been replaced by the I’ve-just-been-fucked, I’m-so-relaxed look. And as her lover, Jonathan couldn’t feel prouder, wanting to give her another go already. Duplicate his efforts. Make her feel alive again. Make her sing again. Many times over. Too many times over.

“Jonathan?” a quiet plea, request, and maybe even a prayer sounded from her.

The thoroughly sated and satisfied woman rose up, coiling her body to his as a young marsupial to its guardian would do. She pressed her nose and lips into the long thick neck of her new lover, clinging to him with arms, legs and mouth. Needy vulnerability made her feel exposed, troubled in expressing it. Some actress she amounted to, she thought ruefully.

Jonathan had built her up, made her feel good, desirable, beautiful and worthy of his time while showing her just how weak she was underneath. She didn’t regret giving into her desire for him, rather she felt weak feeling that way at all.

The bulk of him in her embrace was strong, forceful, and confident and she didn’t know if she was trying to absorb it or share in it. It didn’t matter which, as long as he… “Hold me… just for a minute.”

A minute. An hour. A night. All relative to him and his service to her. No, his service to them as lovers. Using the strength of his arms and the flexibility of his legs, he shifted around in the bed, cradling his petite actress to him until he sat up with her in his lap. This was some female emotional thing, he knew that much by how tightly she clapsed him and with so much of herself. Fuck him if he could suss out a woman and her emotions and what she thought.

Mustering, collecting and bolstering herself, Kristiane untangled from Jonathan, separating from him while her head screamed at her. Her internal mania nagged and shouted:
He won’t want you anymore.

He got what he wanted.

You don’t matter to him anymore.

Now look at you…

“Where are you off to, songbird?” he asked lightly when she peeled herself away from him. He hated to let her go, but goddamn it, he loved watching her walk away. Her bare smooth natural femininity. The curve of her slender back to the delicate slope of her ass to her shapely legs… He had carnal knowledge of what she felt like beneath him, and he was ready to crawl after her on hands and knees for another chance of experiencing her.

Kristiane called over her shoulder, “Scoping out the place. Looking for a hot tub or a Jacuzzi.” She disappeared behind the door to the en suite, flipping on the warm yellow light inside.

“There isn’t one.”

“Holy shit, but there’s a bidet in here!” she asked from within, her voice louder with the effort to make him hear. “Who the fuck uses that?”

“There’s a tub and a shower… why?”

She reappeared, her naked ethereal silhouette outlined by the light behind her, the yellow light making her golden. Placing her hands up above her head in the door frame, she rested most of her weight on one leg, popping the other out in front of her. She positively glowed. “Shame. You get frisky when I’m wet.” With an exaggerated, put-on and affected sigh, she crossed to the double doors to the rest of the flat. “Failing that, I’m going to the kitchen to pour a glass of water over my head.”

Laughing, he clambered from the bed and followed her out to the kitchen.

*****

Jonathan watched with appreciation as Kristiane raided the fridge for a snack. He suggested again, “I could cook you something, I don’t mind.”

With a smirk, she glanced over her shoulder. “You’re not wearing anything but a silly grin. Cooking splatters… I don’t want you to singe anything.”

The obnoxious and jarring ring of her phone came from her rehearsal bag. The discarded bag sat neglected by the elevator and suddenly brought reality back into their happy bubble.

Slamming the fridge door behind her, she went to the sound and dug the blasted thing out. Jonathan had followed behind her, suspecting… actually knowing that it would be bad news.

Kristiane looked up at him with the ringing device in her hand. “Jonathan, it’s… private,” she groused with a combination of incredulous disbelief and scared apprehension. Her gorgeously blue eyes turned desperately sad within a matter of seconds. Reality clobbered and crushed her fantasy world. All the denial she’d pulled in around her had been for nothing. All the energy she’d dedicated to delight in Jonathan and his body disappeared with the phone call from the outside world.

Instantly, Jonathan made a decision. He took the ringing mobile from the terrified woman and answered it. “This is Andrew Birch for Kristiane Taylor,” he informed the caller with authority. At
the same time, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders bringing her into his chest to kiss the top of her head.

A long silence met his greeting, and he waited for these bastards to decide whether to speak or hang up and try again another time. “… uh, Kristiane please.”

“I apologize. She’s not available for the foreseeable future. What can I do for you?”

Kristiane wrapped her arms around Jonathan, listening to his side of the conversation boom through his chest.

“I must speak with her.”

“I’m her British representation, any appointments or meetings will go through me. Is she expecting your call?”

“I’m called Spencer…” Jonathan heard shuffling as if the phone had been put down or shoved into a shirt or jacket. He strained to listen for whispering, but couldn’t decipher anything with the scraping and sliding sounds. “I’m with her next production,” the harassed man said with less conviction.

“I haven’t gotten her contract or approved a script. I’m afraid until those appear, you won’t get so much as a meeting with her.” Jonathan hadn’t a clue if what he said was the way of theatre negotiations, but anything he could to take some of the pressure and stress off of Kristiane was worth lying through his teeth.

A louder argument followed, “We’ve paid for her room and board already!” The weasel of a man sounded almost hysterical.

Jonathan kept his cool. “We’re aware of that. However I haven’t reviewed any equity agreement that she’s cleared to perform in London beyond the end of this week. My last conversation with New York equity is that her tenure here in London is over with the conclusion of Carousel.”

“I’ll call back.” The line went dead.

“What in the bloody hell…?” Pine frowned down at the phone, narrowing his eyes interrogatively at it as if the thing could talk to him.

“What’d he say?” Kristiane looked up at him, her arms still firmly clutched around his waist.

“Rang off,” Pine shrugged. Just then the phone jangled again, vibrating in Pine’s hand. “I think this is them again,” he said, and answered the call, that time pressing the ‘speaker’ button. “Andrew Birch,” he clipped.

“Yes,” the voice said. “Yes, I… I apologise for ringing off so quickly Mr Birch. I had a bit of an emergency on my end.”


“Spenser Kraft.”

“Mr Kraft,” Pine intoned, “it seems there is a bit of a misunderstanding about my client’s role in your production. Perhaps if you would be so kind as to provide all the paperwork, I…”
“Paperwork?”

Pine scrunched up his face, mouthing “doesn’t know what he’s on about does he?” to Kristiane… … who mouthed back “not a clue.”

“Of course, paperwork,” Pine sang down the phone, and then mouthed to Kristiane, “what’s in the paperwork?”

And she whispered a list back to him, her mouth working in exaggerated motions so that Pine could read her lips and follow along, repeating each word or phrase she said into the phone.

“Contract, rider, Equity agreement, insurance documents, benefits schedule, boarding agreement, work permit application,” he rattled off the items, imbuing his voice with a tone of practiced ennui. “You know, the lot. Not to mention the script. How can Miss Taylor possibly begin rehearsals with you if she doesn’t have a script? She’s a professional, you know. What sort of crap operation do you run anyway, Mr Kraft?”

“Oh. Oh, of course, Mr Birch,” Kraft replied, bruised, “We’ll… we’ll get all that over to her… to you… first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Not necessary,” Pine snapped. “I’ll send someone to pick it up. Just tell me where.”

“Erm,” Kraft hemmed, “It’s… it’s already out with the courier, I… I just have to tell them where to deliver it.”

Pine paused for a long moment. He sighed loudly and cleared his throat with a loud, tearing sound of annoyance. “Fine then,” he said, “phone your… courier… and have it brought to the Covent Garden Hotel. Leave it with Mr Pine at the front desk. He will ensure its delivery to me.”

And before the quote unquote Spenser could speak again, Pine depressed the round red button on the screen, terminating the call. He nodded with finality, set the phone on the breakfast bar, and wrapped his arm back around Kristiane’s back.

He felt her sigh against him, heard her slight whimper.

“Hey,” Pine whispered, “it’s going to be okay.” He touched the side of his finger beneath her chin, lifting her face to his. “Whoever is doing this, whoever is behind this, they now know you’ve got help. You have someone standing behind you.” He smiled, his eyes gone uncharacteristically soft. “You’re not alone anymore.”

“I’m not, am I.” It wasn’t a question.

“No, you’re not. Not in the least bit alone.” He stroked her back with the broad, warm flat of his hands, one brushing up to cup her occiput, the other roaming down to cover her broad, round arse. He squeezed, pressing her naked flesh closer to his, giving her his warmth, his comfort, his protection… his… his….


“Who’s Andrew Birch? You came up with that name awfully quickly. Like you’d used it before.” Kristiane smiled against his chest, her breath stirring the small hairs there as she spoke.

“Someone I was, long ago.”
“With Richard Roper?”

“Mm-hmm.” He nodded.

“Who else were you?” She looked up at him, her cheek still pressed to his shoulder.

Pine chuckled. “Lots of people, but… no one that matters anymore.”

“Every role an actor plays matters, Jonathan.” She splayed her fingers into the back of his hair, curling her fingernails back down. “Every role becomes a part of them, teaches something new.”

“You wouldn’t like who I was, and frankly, I learnt nothing other than the deep-seated knowledge of who I didn’t want to be.”

Kristiane gave a wan, breathy smile, pursing her lips in resignation. “Maybe you’ll tell me about them one day. The people you were.”

“Maybe I will.”

“Let me ask you this. Who do you want to be, Jonathan?”

Pine took a deep, long breath, releasing it shakily. “Myself,” he swallowed hard. “Just… myself.”

_I want… to be yours._

**“People make mistakes**
_Holding to their own_
_Thinking they’re alone_
_Honor their mistakes_
_Fight for their mistakes_
_Everybody makes_
_One another’s terrible mistakes_
_Someone is on your side,”**

Inspired by Jonathan’s off-the-cuff pledge to her, Kristiane meandered over to the piano, singing accapella as she did. The first chance she had in twenty-four hours to do so and she seized it while she could. Restless energy pumped through her to get a song out of her body and the want to sprint back into Jonathan’s bed. Errant emotions… her heart and mind were at odds.

A week ago, Kristiane knew for a fact that real, true love only existed in fairy tales. Five days ago, she could sing and act the Hollywood, happy ending love. She’d earned her Tony nomination acting one half of history’s most famous couples, playing Bonnie in Bonnie and Clyde. Then her entire life and belief had been turned upside down, upended, shoved about, rearranged, and scrambled in a manner of hours!

She couldn’t even say that she minded. The uncertainty of her future and her career bothered her, sent her reeling, but knowing Jonathan, being with him somehow made it bearable.

Using Kristiane’s mobile, Jonathan rang The Covent Garden Hotel, leaving curt instructions with Carl that a courier was expected sometime between then and morning. “If I’m not there on time—Detain, stall, lie, bribe, check him in… whatever you have to do. That courier must not leave until I talk to him. Is that clear, Carl?”

“Of course, Johnny. Is this about the pretty lady?”
It is, but that’s between you and me. Keep that courier there,” he reiterated for emphasis. An almost solid lead on this thing surrounding Kristiane, and Jonathan was preparing to work every angle of it. If he could clear her of all the shit, the terrorist plot and the shady disorganized clusterfuck of her next job, he could… he could… what? Win her, woo her, romance her… what?

Naturally, he couldn’t ignore the possibility that the two were connected, the bombing and the mysterious musical. Presently, he couldn’t link them but he couldn’t separate the fact that both seemed to encompass her. He wanted her all to himself without all the messy details forcing her to rely on him. Conversely, he wanted her to rely on him because she wanted him.

“Will do, boss,” reliable Carl confirmed.

Covering every angle he had at his disposal, Jonathan rung up Angela for a cursory directive. “Andrew Birch is back in play. The hotel, tomorrow morning.”

*****

A flick of Jonathan’s wrist against the wall behind the door illuminated a small desk lamp in the middle of the room, throwing a glow of light to each corner. In sharp contrast to the grandness of the rest of the Kensington flat, the private study seemed almost cramped by comparison. The walls were a handsome and richly oiled oak to which the desk matched. The floor, covered in a plush graphic rug, lightened up the mood with sky blues, whites and neutrals. Despite the smaller space, the cozy room screamed money as did the rest of the flat.

Hastily clad in linen sleep trousers from the master bedroom closet, Pine pull-led Kristiane in after him and closed the door. He wouldn’t admit it to her, but he couldn’t take any chances with her safety by leaving a door open or having her stand by a window. He also couldn’t keep his mind from wondering what she wore under the oversized Manchester Utd t-shirt she found after refusing another of Angela’s Disney Princess get-ups.

Her feet and legs were bare and the tease of more or something else he’d have to get her out of when he had her again vied for all his attention. Clutching a piece of scratch paper that she’d scrolled a note on, Kristiane hovered at his side until he sat at the desk. She surveyed the small office for another computer chair or an ottoman, something to sit upon.

Before she wandered off to get something, she found herself propped on one of his legs. “Oh! Well, I suppose that works too!” she grinned opening the laptop upon the desk. Kristiane hunched towards the computer monitor, using the username and password from her scrap piece of paper, info she got from Angela over the phone.

Jonathan reached around her and launched the Google Chrome application from the desktop before placing that arm around her. “Do you think that we’ll find anything this way?”

Starting with the first name in this new production plot that she’d been introduced, Kristiane muttered to herself, “Dylan Childs.” Her fingers spelled out her search and then she pressed enter with her brand of dramatics. “I don’t know. I want to try something, anything, maybe gain some insight to all that’s going on.” Until you take me back to bed, she thought hopefully. Her fingers hovered over the touchpad, poised to scroll or click-choose a headline. Quietly in a soft mumble, she read under her breath snippets of the teaser blurbs under each webpage.

Jonathan anchored her to him, arm all the way around her waist while he read over her shoulder. The loose and relaxed cotton of her t-shirt revealed that his feisty woman had also refused the knickers with balloons on them that Angela left for her.
Task at hand, Jonathan…

But then Kristiane breathed in, his arm expanded with her inhale and he was lost. The scent of her, rose perfume, honeysuckle shampoo and sex hypnotized him, the blatant aroma of himself on her skin and he hungered to make her wear more.

“I’m not seeing anything here. You?”

The dazed man cleared his throat at the question, his head in other situations. He looked at her for indication of what she was asking. “Hmmm,” he hedged at her pointing. “Not at all,” the succinct truth. Reigning in his libido, he suggested another search. “Try it with theatre or production-producer? Director?”

Kristiane crossed her left leg over her right, rotating towards the computer. The movement drew Jonathan’s gaze down, capturing him with the lift of the material of her t-shirt up her thigh. While Kristiane’s fingers brushed over the keys, narrowing her search, his hand went to her leg.

The revitalized parameters brought her closer to the screen, and he knew he’d found her, the galvanized Kristiane. This was the woman who first tickled his interest and struck his fancy, taking up some responsibility in saving herself with him beside her. When this search brought up nothing of interest after searching a few topics, she attempted another angle. Training camp, for her, as it were, in gaining some semblance of control in her situation.

His hand snuck up from her knee to her thigh, along the silky skin, a paved path. With just the slightest bit of pressure, he got her to uncross of legs again and he could roam free where he wanted. Momentarily, it brought her attention back to him when his rogue hand almost touched her intimately.

“We should search this up,” she argued weakly, hands cupping his face.

“We should…,” he agreed. His lustful gaze slipped to her lips when she licked them subconsciously. His arm around her waist encouraged her to twist back in his direction, away from the computer, and her body followed direction.

“Tomorrow morning…” she began. “Will it be safe for you to–?”

He insinuated his hand between her thighs to widen them, just enough to reach his goal. His fingertips passed a teasing graze over her, a barely there touch but it was enough to get her full attention.

She gasped, a pressing ache formed at her core within the flap of a hummingbird’s wing.

His eyebrows shot up in question, so much as to ask, ‘Will you have me again? Is this what you want?’

Kristiane slowly nodded, granting permission, postponing more of her search for more Jonathan. Her Jonathan.
At Kristiane’s nod, Pine let his breath, one that he didn’t even realise he’d been holding, out. With a low, rumbling moan he cupped the back of her thigh and shifted her, spreading her legs over his lap. His hands cradled her, high up on her back as he leaned into her, burying his face into the crook of her neck.

She, in turn, let her head fall back, her own hands clasped about the back of his head. She worked her fingers over him, nails digging hard into his scalp, clutching to him almost in fear that he would disappear from beneath her touch.

“Kristiane,” he whispered as he pulled back, staring bleary-eyed and glassy up at her, his mouth slack with want, his face awash in a deep crimson flush. He saw the same upon her face, upon her skin - and the sight of it made the air stick in his chest, made his hips buck into the triangle of space between her thighs, made him lose his mind with the want of her.

He rose from the chair, tottering awkwardly at first until he could hitch her body around his, her legs wrapped tightly around his waist, her warm, soft bare bottom perched securely upon his folded arms.

“Where are you taking me?” she murmured, her lips at his ear.

“Question is,” he growled, “where will you take me?” He gave a small, distant laugh, grunting as he set her down upon the sofa on the other side of the study and pulled the Manchester Utd shirt over her head, tossing it aside. The leather hissed in protest beneath their combined weight, but after a moment, welcomed them as he stretched her out beneath him, insinuating a knee between her legs.

“Where do you want me to take you?” Kristiane sat up, rose up on her knees, captured him by the back of the neck and pulled him to her, her lips ensnaring his in an open, heated kiss. He hummed excitedly at the touch of her, at the taste of her tongue upon his, at the feel of her fingers as they traced down the length of his chest, to curl inward and insinuate themselves beneath the loose waistband of is pyjamas.

“Ahhhhh… w-wherever y-you like,” his voice rose in pitch, a reedy, breathy whisper as she brushed her fingertips over the tip of his sex. He fell back upon the sofa, carrying her with him in a heap and tumble of flesh and hands and legs and arms and skin. “I’ll follow… you anywhere. Just… just lead
the way.”

“I think,” Kristiane intoned, “we’ll start right… here.” Her eyes danced, reflecting the soft, blue glow of the computer screen’s reflection. Mirth, mischief, desire, and need showed brightly upon her face — especially when her tongue snaked out to wet her lips, when she bit down upon her lower one, her mouth curled in a wicked, wicked grin — when she twisted her arm, pressed her bare breasts against his waiting chest, and took him in hand.

“Christ!” he hissed. He threw his head back, one hand clutching hard at her shoulder, the fingers of the other bent at the first knuckle, digging into the leather of the sofa. He looked down, then, finding it suddenly quite hard to breathe, the sight of her hand in his trousers stealing the breath right from his lungs.

“Kristiane,” he huffed. “Kristiane, I… oh, God. That’s… oh. That’s my… aah! Where are you….? You… I…. Oh, Jesus, what are you doing…? Ohhhhh.”

She had slithered down off his body to kneel between his legs. Her hands had pressed against his thighs, spreading him wide with a gentle, yet insistent pressure, her eyes focused, intent upon his suddenly mobile face. With a lick of her lips, she’d hooked her fingers once again into his waistband, and pulled, shimmying the linen down over his hips.

And she wrapped her fingers around his length.

And she leaned forward.

And she opened her mouth.

And she took him.

“Ohhhhh!”

Drunk on the flavor of him, high on the masculine musk of him (birch wood, Chablis and English tea), intoxicated on all of him, Kristiane passed her lips down over the solid flesh of Jonathan Pine. In the past, she didn’t look forward to giving, but she craved this man in her mouth to taste him, to make him crumble, to please him with every breath in her body. The flat of her tongue curled around the underside of his stiffened length, keen to hum around him but not giving into the temptation just yet. Her normally full lips stretched to cradle him in her mouth below, forming the vowels that poured from his mouth above.

“Ohhh…” But Christ, he wanted to watch, wanted to enjoy the sight of his Disney Princess pleasuring him with her lips, her tongue… and Oh, God … her teeth. The very slightest of graze of her teeth expertly applied as a tease to get his attention. She only did it once, and it tantalized him enough to squeeze his eyes shut and throw his head back, giving in to the pleasure of it. He exhaled until all the air had left his body, allowing her to give him life with the erotic suction.

“Christ… ohhhhh…”

Her hair veiled down covering her cheeks and spilling over the killer v that his hips and pelvis formed. The feathery tickle of her tresses and the smooth dance of her fingertips added to his already skyrocketing stimulation. Confident, she took him in, released him, and then used her tongue along the head to change up the sensation. Relaxing her jaw, she slid down until before she gagged and drew back gently.

“K-kristiane…” he coughed as the pleasure of her mouth engulfed him again, the spongy inside of her cheek brushed over the tip of his cock. And he grunted at the incitement. He lifted his head
back up, snaking his fingers into her hair, to gather the thick mane in his fists. “Oh, Kristiane,” a guttural praying oath.

Her smiling, bright, let-me-entertain-you eyes rose to meet him, admiring his use of her name. She’d been with four other men this way, and none of them ever truly brought her into it. Her main source of appreciation when she got a man off were ridiculous exclamations, but Jonathan called out to her in his arousal. Having a man in her mouth and in her hands who connected with her boosted her fun tenfold.

The sound of sweat-slicked skin and leather made a loud squishing-squeaking through the enclosed space when Jonathan attempted to move closer to her. The abrupt and unexpected noise brought them both out of the moment in the aftermath of it. The pair burst into peals of laughter at the discordant sound with how much they were savoring in each other.

The mood effectively changed, Kristiane cuffed his elbows as he led her into a kiss full of guffaws of more laughter. He crouched over her, guiding her backwards to lie on the floor, his body following. “I… stick … to leather,” he chuckled into her mouth, his hands still tangled in her hair.

One eyebrow shot up her forehead in a beautiful arc as she unrolled beneath him. “Are you injured?” She nipped at his chin, giggling in the back of her throat.

“Dreadfully,” he growled, reveling in the press of his body into hers, gravity anchoring them together.

Spreading her legs, Kristiane lifted her hips to telegraph exactly what she wanted… what she needed. “Tell me, soldier, what I can do to tend to you.”

“Should I number them?” Jonathan reached between them to line his cock with her opening, sheathing his sex into hers. Taking in her enraptured expression, he moaned as honeyed warm female flesh molded around his penetrating press.

She really was the most stunning woman, her hair nested in his hands, her neck showing his mark, her arms locked around him and her legs circled about his waist for fear he’d leave her. She clung because she cared. Cared more than she thought possible. Determined to show him just how much, she kissed him, a searing reflection of how deeply he’d touched her in their time together.

It was an emotion, a thing, a living, live and lithe thing that grew and blossomed and thrived within him; something he hadn’t felt for… for… for he couldn’t even remember how long. Maybe forever. Maybe never.

What it was that bubbled up in his heart and coated his flesh… was joy. Pure, unadulterated, organic and free joy. And that joy rest, her back on the floor beneath him, pressed under the weight of his body, her legs wrapped tight around his waist, her passion, her heat engulfing his sex.

Her kisses, the roam of her hands, her demanding moans, the thrust of her hips cultivated that joy within him. And the more happiness he felt, the more he wanted of it, and the more he wanted of it, the more his body demanded of her. He couldn’t help it. He’d given over to it.

He let go of everything that Jonathan Pine was. He let go of the lifetime of anger, the loneliness, the despair, the self-hatred, the deep-seated fury at the horrors he’d seen, the things he’d done, the people he’d been, the disappointment in humanity, the thick layer of hard, green jade that comprised his protective shell.

It all seemed to float above him, shed from his spirit, to hover there as a massive purple and blue and
green cloud, one that could be wafted away with the mere wash of a hand.

And in that letting go, Pine’s freedom settled in his hips. His moans became loud, keening wails of happiness as his thrusts became harder, as his pace became faster, as he prepared himself to fall over that precipice and fly, to float upon the wings of Kristiane Taylor.

His breaths came harsher, and harsher still, exhalations upon sharp, staccato grunts as he opened his mouth over Kristiane’s, as he brushed his lips upon hers in time with the pistoning of his hips below.

And that joy, that freedom, it coalesced and entwined and coiled deep within his gut, so much that he could feel it for the thing it was, dammed up inside him, a lake of pleasure fit to release, if only he could break down the wall.

Either that, or if Kristiane had the key.

And so, he tensed up all of his muscles, wrapped his arms firmly around Kristiane’s shoulders, arched his back, and hammered her. He dropped his head to the floor beside her, his forehead pressed hard into the carpet, his teeth grit, his skin hot and sweating, slick and sliding over Kristiane’s flesh.

Her own low-pitched, pleasured moans drove him on, the dig of her fingernails into his neck, the pounding of her heels against his flanks, the heat and pulse and wave of her sex around his –

“Jonathan!”

And, with a breathy, rough-throated scream, the dam burst, exploded, crumbled… and Pine fell.

And then there was quiet.

After the metronome of her heart decrescendoed to normal and the scorching acid burn of breath rushing in and out of her lungs slowed, Kristiane noticed the quiet. Like a warm summer day in Central Park without a wisp of wind or cloud, without the constant blaring of car horns, and cab driver obscenities and city traffic, there was peace. Just peace.

She didn’t feel the incessant need to fill it with prattle or song. Instead Kristie allowed Jonathan’s tranquil disposition seep into hers. At least she could enjoy the hushed hum of the laptop idle on the desk, while she rested with Jonathan. The screensaver display bounced a white light against the oak shelves and following the jump of it from one point to another seemed enough to pass the time.

Yet, she waited for the other shoe to drop, the ‘Next!’ call on the conveyer belt, or the ‘I’m sorry, we’ve gone another way’ that usually came from her one night stands. That fear that Jonathan would ask her to leave or order her to another room. That inevitable sickening dread that she’d be forced to do the walk of shame to the library, to sleep in that cavern-like space alone because he was done with her. She didn’t want to regret being with him.

Suddenly, quite suddenly, she wanted to believe in those cheesy, lovey-dovey, clichéd, romantic songs she’d been singing for years, the ones that she performed but never felt firsthand. Lyrics of hundreds Broadway ballads flooded her memory, and she didn’t mind the noise in her head nor feel the need to spew it, for once. He wouldn’t get it, and as shocking and shameful that would’ve been for her once upon a time, she accepted it.

Kristie liked quiet, reserved Jonathan who didn’t share her penchant for dramatics, her passion for musicals, or her reactive personality. Steady, practical, logical, all traits she thought boring, but in her current situation, her equilibrium, and she liked him.
Feeling the way she did kept bringing her staple audition song to the front of her mind.

But if someone like you found someone like me
Then suddenly nothing would ever be the same
My heart would take wing and I’d feel so alive
If someone like you found me

So many secrets I long to share
All I have needed is someone there
To help me see a world I’ve never seen before
A love to open every door
To set me free so I can soar

If someone like you loved me.

With a mere breathy grunt, Jonathan lifted himself from her and collapsed to the floor on his back. Smoothly, he cradled her into his arms to continue listening to their bodies and the gratifying song of blood through veins, sated, deliciously spent. Weightless glowing. Heedless of the unforgiving floor beneath them, they stayed on like that. Unhurried, soaking in their time.

“Back to the search, I think,” he informed her sometime later with a kiss on the crown of her head. He helped her sit up and handed her the discarded football t-shirt. He restored his soft cotton trousers before offering her a hand to stand.

“Must we?” she pouted, allowing Jonathan to lift her to her feet.

“You haven’t tried every search yet. There may be a stone left to unturn.” She lifted her trusting gaze to his, the wide-eyed, open expression very nearly undid him again. His authority wavered and his resolve weakened by that look. “A few more searches before I take you back to bed.”

Her innocent face melted into a sultry grin, her elation and relief palpable when he circled her shoulders with his arm.

They returned to the search, plugging all the names into Google, hoping to find a clue, a hint of what was going on. With Kristie perched upon his knee, Jonathan tapped into his focus and considered alternate phrases and name combinations to try. “Maybe Nilton Productions is the key. Is that a real production company?”

Kristie typed it in, but Google only came up a few music videos and a corn grower in Nebraska. She sighed, disappointed that their cyber-surfing hadn’t turned anything up yet.

Jonathan rubbed a hand up and down her back, for solidarity and comfort, giving her some of his strength. He hadn’t given up yet, and he wouldn’t let her either. “Let’s try this Kraft bloke… Spencer Kraft. Google him.”

“I don’t think he’s someone important, posing as the stage manager. The stage manager manages the entire vision, but it’s given to him from the director and the producer.”

He pressed a kiss into her shoulder and pointed towards the computer. “Try it. I don’t trust his entitled attitude… that he somehow owned you because they paid for your room.”

It was another empty search, with a radio host in Chicago and an animal rancher in Australia. “I don’t like this, Jonathan.”
“I know, but we’ll sort it.”

She shook her head, glancing over her shoulder. “I’m worried. I don’t want you to meet that courier tomorrow – the guy’s looking for Pine. Do you think it’s safe?”

“Is any of this really safe, Kristiane?”

That was the question that hung over them for the rest of the night, as they ran search after search, coming up frustratingly empty. Pine had texted Angela, giving her a list of the names they’d searched, practically begging her to use whatever inside information she could access to find… anything.

At least Burr’s response was encouraging. “I’ll have Singhal see to it in the morning. Go to sleep. It’s late. Get some rest.”

The question still floated above their heads as Pine tucked Kristiane into the small bed in the safe room, as he padded across the wood floor to lock the door from the inside, as he returned to her and folded himself beneath the covers…

… as he quietly, gently made love to her, his body curved around hers, cupping her within in his flesh, holding her like the blessed, holy Host in a battered pewter chalice.

And finally, as they slept.

Or at least, as she slept. Pine couldn’t sleep. Yet, Kristiane’s slumber, the regular up and down rhythm of her breath, the slight, quiet snore through her nose, gave Pine some semblance of peace. Just a bit, not much, but… it was enough.

“Stay in the car,” Pine clipped. “Wait ten minutes, and then come round the front and walk into the lobby like the diva you are. If you see me, acknowledge me, that’s fine, but only professionally. I’m your agent, remember?”

“Not my lover?” Kristiane’s lip quirked. Bravado, yes, but Pine couldn’t help but hear that shake in her voice, the terror hidden behind her bright chorus girl eyes.

Because he felt it, too.

“That’ll be later, if all goes well.” Pine winked. He inhaled deep and let it out upon puffed cheeks. He rest his hand on the top of the car and leaned over, peering intently at the woman in the passenger seat. “And it will go well.”

“Promise?”

He laughed. “I wish I could promise. But if you do as I say and as we discussed…. ” he let the rest of it hang. “But, bide here for a few, let me get in there, change, and get into place.”

“And then?”

Pine straightened and smiled. “Showtime.”

Jonathan Pine knew every in and out, every nook and cranny, every secret place of the Covent Garden Hotel. Thus, he used that knowledge to sneak into his office, through the back way, down a corridor, up a flight of stairs, down another, and through a door hidden by a rather heavy chair. He pushed against the door, cringing through grit teeth as the chair’s legs scraped against the flagstone floor.
So much for stealth. But, it didn’t matter. Not yet.

He opened his wardrobe, chose a three piece bespoke suit of a somber grey wool, a blue shirt, and matching tie. He changed quickly in the small powder room, and tamed his hair into a wet slick against his scalp, looking up into the mirror and practicing his most slithering smile. “Andrew Birch,” he said jauntily to his reflection. “Pleasure’s all mine.”

And, thus equipped, he wriggled his way back through the narrow opening of the chair-laden door, back up the staircase, down the other, through the dank, smelly corridor, and out the back door into the alley. Once outside, he straightened his jacket, tugged at his cuffs, fiddled his tie, and stepped confidently - like an important, powerful impresario – to the front door of his own hotel.

As he did so, he heard a voice say his name. “Pine,” the man said. “I’ve a package. S’posed to be askin’ for a cove named John Pine or summat. Is ‘e here, then?”

And Carl, bless him, answered. “I am Pine. How may I be of service?”

Kristiane stayed.

Jonathan crossed the street away from her, behind a white commercial van advertising hauling services. He stealthily disappeared into an alley a few doors down from The Covent Garden Hotel, sidestepping a pair of women in business suits.

Kristiane worried for him, getting involved in this mess, standing up for her, becoming a target in her place, or with her as bullseye. Nibbling on the corner of her lower lip, she gave a cursory glance at the dashboard digital clock.

Only two minutes had passed since Jonathan told her to wait ten.

Fidgeting with the MI6 bandage film stuff over her wound, Kristiane wondered just how long the healing would take as a way of distracting herself from the present situation. As she sat in the black Audi (left by Angela and her crew) with tinted windows and Jonathan out of sight, her healing process scooted to the front of her mind. She’d been assured ‘shortly’ by the tending doctor when he applied the gignanobusiness.

He’ll be fine. He’s an adult. He can take care of himself. He’s seen far worse than this and survived. This is nothing. Kristiane repeated the mantra over and over to drown out the wild staccato of her beating heart and the obsessive worry over her injury, his wellbeing, her wellbeing. The core of her restlessness was nervous excitement about playing herself in this game where she didn’t know the rules or the variables or the players! She didn’t know if Jonathan would be fine. She didn’t know if she’d be fine. Her arms. This new car in their possession. None of it.

She huffed an exaggerated sigh into the enclosed space of the cabin. The air grew thicker and warmer with the car closed up tight, under the pleasant London sun. People milled about their lives, unaware of her or her slowly crumbling sanity in the unknown.

Four minutes had passed.

Smoothing her damp palms on her jeans, Kristiane rehearsed the plan in her head, the ‘as we discussed’ objective if this all went right. The Broadway star had a scheduled breakfast meeting with her agent in the hotel’s restaurant to review her new job. If anything or anyone approached her, Jonathan instructed her to throw the biggest fit, he didn’t care how she chose to do it, anything to draw as much attention to herself as possible. Pull in as many people around her that she could.

The primary aim for these elusive bastards had been discretion and isolating her for… fuck knows
what.

She knew that she could act the part, but waiting for her cue and which role she’d be improvising felt endless.

Six minutes had passed, and Jonathan reappeared in a suit that hung on him impeccably. He strode swiftly with purpose into the hotel lobby, ready for a business meeting. Kristiane’s eyes jumped from his broad back to a lanky sort of young man in a yellow cap that turned the corner towards the hotel. He caught her attention for his walk. He hobbled as if one leg was shorter than the other, his right swung out instead of straight forward.

The new arrival carried a thick manila envelope and nothing else. He hightailed it into the hotel after Pine as Birch had.

Eight minutes.

Checking her makeup and hair in the visor mirror, Kristiane took her time to hone her appearance. She climbed from the car and smoothed out the frilly white short sleeved blouse, one of Angela’s choices. Flicking her hair over her shoulder, she rescued her rehearsal bag from the backseat to sling, if the need arose again. She closed the door and sashayed across the street in diva mode.

The air shifted, a seagull in flight changed direction, the sun darkened perceptively, and the street noise hushed. The atmosphere changed around her, and it made her skin pucker in nervous anticipation. She focused her gaze on the glass doors of the Covent Garden Hotel, knowing that she’d be close to Jonathan soon enough. Out of the corner of her sunglasses, she saw a black SUV pull in at the end of the block.

Her black high heeled boots clacked along the asphalt, the beat of her parade into her meeting unaffected by the feeling that she was being watched. Another car sped in and screeched to a halt behind her, but she ignored it, pulling the door open.

In a split second, she saw Jonathan standing stoically half way between the concierge desk and the restaurant, pretending to check his watch. She took in the lanky envelope man standing oddly at the front desk. And then she saw Carl. She saw Carl just in time to see him collapse to floor behind the desk.

Pain. Raw, excruciating, piercing pain stabbed her when someone grabbed her injured arm with a hard clutch. Kristiane screamed, bending into the pressure, tears stinging her eyes.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Chaos.

Chaos and battle and terror were nothing new to Jonathan Pine. In fact, in the right situations, he reveled in it. Two tours in Iraq and the Army trained him up right. Battle bright, battle calm. The soldier's mindless mind descended upon him like a suit of armour at the threat, sheathing his humanity deep within.

The first thing he heard, the first thing that set the red-misted mantle of war upon his shoulders was the quiet *thwap* of a silenced gun. Not just any gun, but a Smith & Wesson SW22. The killer’s mind in him knew it immediately by the very sound; and if it were in any other situation it would have been music to his ears.

But no, there was no joy about it this time. Not when his friend, not when Carl had crumpled to the floor in its wake. “No!” Pine screamed, but no words came from his mouth. Instead, the sentiment erupted as a deep, rumbling growl; one that rolled within his chest as his legs pumped, propelling him beneath.

Pine spared a quick glance at Carl through the side of the desk, and satisfied that the man was still alive, joyous at the sound of Carl’s loud and angered cursing, his grunted “Ah! Bastard! Me fookin’ arm!”’, he threw himself forward, taking the skinny-arsed courier by surprise.

And this courier lifted his gun - it was a Smith & Wesson – and aimed the long barrel of it at Pine’s chest.

“And don’t think so, fucker!” Pine bellowed, and in a swift, almost blinding series of moves, Pine disarmed the courier, turning the tables, the gun - *oh, but it feels so very good in the hand* - aimed back at the man’s head. “Who the hell are you?” He demanded.

“Who the hell’re you, then?” the man countered, lifting his chin, eyeing Pine critically from head to foot. His hands were in the air, but he was backing away, taking slow steps toward the door.

“No move!”

The man froze at the command, yet his face was placid, calm... almost, resigned. Yet, there was a touch of sarcasm there, a maddening defiance that Pine had seen before.
Kamikaze. Suicide bomber. A man, like I once was, with nothing to lose.

The face split into a wide smile, showing off snaggly, yellowed teeth. The man pulled his lower lip in, licking it like a hungry tiger beneath narrowed, beady eyes. “You Andrew Birch, then? You gotta be Andrew Birch. Or, are you Pine? Yer awfully good at fightin’ to be just some actor’s agent.”

“Who I am is not your concern.” Pine gnarled, tightening his grip on the gun. His finger shook on the trigger, wanting so badly to pull it that his knuckle ached with it.

“Oh, but see it is though,” the man made a nonchalant gesture with one of his raised hands. “Cos if you are Birch, then I’m s’posed t’tell yer not to bovver with meetin’ yer bird this mornin’. She’s wif’ us now.”

My bird. Kristiane. Oh, Christ. Where is she? She should be here, she should be…. Jesus!

Pine kept his face forward, toward the man, but his eyes swiveled side to side, scanning from one edge of his peripheral vision to the other, across the crowded breakfast area where a smattering of patrons had ducked for cover, to the elevator lobby, to the check in desk… and back. “What’ve you done with her?” Pine squeezed harder on the weapon, lifting his arms higher, reaching closer, widening his stance, and letting his face show every dram of anger that distilled within his blood. “Tell me!”

“Sorry mate,” the man said, shrugging. “No can do. She’s long gone by now.”

And with that, the man closed his mouth, His lips pulled vertically, he worked his jaw and tongue, wet and smacking as if he were chewing on a particularly large chunk of taffy. After a moment, the man closed his teeth together, his masseter muscles bulging out on both sides of his homely, thin face. There was a snap of dentition and then an audible crack.

And then, once again, the smell… the smell. **Oh, Christ, not that smell.**

Bitter almonds.

* Cyanide *

“No! No! No, you fucker, no!” Pine threw the gun to the side and dashed forward, just in time to catch the spindly man as he fell, as the man’s eyes rolled up into his head, as he convulsed wildly in Pine’s arms…

… as he, like the one before him, like the one who had attacked Kristiane, died.

Pine dropped the body like a sack of turnips, not even hearing the sickening thud of the lifeless cranium as it hit the hardwood floor. He stood, panting, staring out the front window of the hotel. **She’s wif’ us now…**

He swallowed, licking his lips. His mouth was desert dry, but his eyes were soaking wet from the deluge of saline that forced him to blink. His breath came hard and painful in his chest. He screwed up his face against the welling of fury and desperate fear and failure that overtook him, that made his torso go stiff beneath his crumpled suit, made his legs jitter and shake with the desire to run and rendered his hands utterly numb.

“Jonathan? Jonny boy, that you?”

Pine whipped his head in the direction of the voice, a name… whose name? **Oh yes. My name.**
Jonathan. That’s my name. He sighed, letting his breath out in a long purse-lipped stream as his rational brain re-engaged with a nearly audible click, allowing him the sense of recognition… of a friend. “Yeah, Carl, it’s me.”

“Is it over, mate?”

“Yes, for now.”

“Is ‘e dead?”

“Quite. Unfortunately.” Pine bent to retrieve the gun, and stepped toward the desk. He leaned over to find Carl, sitting splay-legged against the wall, panting, but alive, his eyes dulled with pain yet bright with determination. “You okay, Carl?”

“I will be,” Carl hissed, teeth grit. “Got me in the arm, e’ did.”


“It’s no matter,” Carl waved his other hand. “I phoned up the cold lady whilst I was down ‘ere. She said they’d be comin’ round quick-like.”

“Did you tell her…,” his voice cracked. He cleared his throat, and spoke again. “Did you tell her about… about Kristiane?”

“The pretty lady, yeah. I told her. I told her that some fuckers in a black SUV with a tan stripe cross it came and grabbed her off the street, tuggin’ at her arms like she was some Christmas cracker, I did.”

“You saw it?” Pine leaned further against the desk. “How?”

Carl peered up at Pine, twisting his lips and squinching up his nose in a ‘are you daft, man?’ look. He pointed with his good hand to a bank of monitors mounted beneath the desk. “CCTV,” he said, cringing with a wave of pain. “Those cameras you had put in last year. They… caught all of it. I watched the whole thing sittin’ right here, on those screens.”

Jonathan!

Oh, how she wanted to call out to him, just beyond the glass. She saw him! Kristiane had him as her goal. And how she wanted to scream for him… as Jonathan, as Andrew, as the only element in her life that made any sense anymore. She couldn’t expose him like that, she couldn’t risk him, and she wouldn’t.

Not as Jonathan.

Not as Andrew.

Not as Jonathan Pine or as Andrew Birch.

Not as her Jonathan.

But then the pain came. Horrendous, horrible, overpowering pain. The clamp of a fist around her arm crushed the damaged skin and tissue below and ripped a sobbing cry from her instead. A wordless screech, a wail for mercy, a yowl of protest. Her body twisted and bent awkwardly into the source of the pulsating, throbbing unearthly pain, giving in to it to make it—please, God!—stop!

Instead of her pain ceasing, it was the noise that emanated from her. Her scream muted by a gag, a
vile taste of stale terry cloth shoved against her tongue between her maxilla and her mandible. The fuckers anticipated the singer’s breathing and vocal projection, and cut it off at the pass. The blinding, disorienting pain chipped away at her energy and her ability to think. No self-defense class had ever prepared her for three attackers at the same time, not that she could react with her wits about her to fight back.

Kristiane fell prey to the very people she’d been avoiding, incapacitated and brought down to nothing more than a sniveling girl. In self-defense, her limbs locked up to make it that much harder for her attackers to take her away. Hot angry tears from pain, from unadulterated torture, from unmitigated terror and incredulous disbelief – the motherfuckers actually got me, HOW DARE THEY?! – But her tears were also masked by a blindfold.

Within twenty seconds, no more than a blink of an eyes, she was tossed like a bean bag into the open bed of a van or truck or SUV. She couldn’t know for sure, only that her knees hit the back bumper. Two men, one at each arm, threw her into a motoring vehicle. She landed with a solid thunk on her stomach, the wind knocked from her body, her chin clunked against the coarsely carpeted surface, her teeth gnashed together on impact.

She counted four distinct door closures even as her head swam with disjointed confusion, pain and a long litany of obscenities for the gall of these assholes taking her against her will. Against her fucking wishes!

Thrashing about didn’t help when the vehicle lurched forward. Her assailants hastily secured her hands behind her back and bound her feet together. When she thought it couldn’t possibly get any more appallingly vicious, her head was cloaked in a hood or sack.

The pain. The sensory deprivation. The shortness of breath. The effort it took just to be. The bruises forming all over her body. Kristiane gave into it. She couldn’t fight it anymore, and she didn’t want to. She’d already lost track of turns, not that she could get a message to anyone that she’d been taken. She lost her bag in the struggle. She surrendered to it. She relented, she submitted and fell into the darkness until she felt no more.

*****

Muffled laughing.

Fuzzy directives.

Solid pressure against her palpitating wound.

Smothering oppressive heat.

Sweat had formed at every pore on her face and skull and soaked into her hair – she could feel the weight of it pressing her down, down, ever down – and the hood.

Her deprived world of just her had stopped moving. She attempted to concentrate over her trepidation, logically think of what these fuckers could want from her, and find a clue as to where she was.

Kristiane knew she was slumped, leaning into something, something solid, something stiff. Her neck ached from odd angle, and the immobility of unconsciousness. She couldn’t bring herself to move it yet, the rest of her hurt too much. She knew that she was sitting, and had been for a long while, her legs screamed in agony, her ass numbed from the decrease of blood flowing through her.

She couldn’t smell beyond the terry cloth in her mouth and salt from her own sweat. Breathing felt
like a massive undertaking under the heat and the low amounts of oxygen seeping in through the material over her. Her throat, parched and dry, revolted against a swallow from the lack of use and the lack of water. She gagged against the rough dryness.

A poke along her injured arm jerked her against her restraints, her arms protested, her legs went on strike. Cackling sounded close to her ear, and she tried to move away from it. “Seems the princess is awake,” a twenty year Scottish smoker drawled at her. The menacing, latent threat woven into those five words sent a chill down her spine despite the sweat pouring off her.

“Boss!” the filthy beast was some distance away, but she couldn’t tell from the acoustics where he or she was. “She’s awake!”

“Get her gag out, and get her wagging that tongue of hers. We’re short on time.” Another British voice, this one posh, arrogant, pretentious, and very much in charge. Kristiane didn’t recognize this voice either, but the fear increased a few notches, hearing it. This one was powerful and had called all the shots. She didn’t know how she knew that, she just did.

Pine stood just outside the front doors of the hotel, watching the ambulance take Carl away at the same time a nondescript black sedan pulled up, turned a ‘u’ in the street and parked in the spot just vacated by Carl’s rescuers.

He stared, swallowing down his fear as Angela Burr and Joel Steadman lit from the car and strode toward him.

Pine wanted to scream. He wanted to grab Burr by the shoulders and shake her, rail at her, beg her to find Kristiane, to let the tears and fury he’d held back for the past ten minutes free, to bellow his guilt out to anyone who would hear it, and help him, and save her.

But as always, he didn’t. He’d let his calm settle upon him, the calm that came almost preternaturally easy in times of danger, of high stress, of abject out and out fear that he’d finally found… someone… and that someone was about to be slaughtered out from under him… because of him.

Again.

“What the hell happened, Jonathan?” Angela had wrapped her arms around him in comfort, and then peered up into his face, her own stoicism showing cracks and crumbles.

“They… they took her,” he replied. He hadn’t returned Angela’s embrace; only stood there, tight as a board, staring ahead into Steadman’s concerned dark eyes.

“Did they see you?” Steadman queried.

“I don’t think so,” he replied. “I… I don’t know. They may have seen me come in to the hotel, but as far as I know, they left before… before….”

“Before this asswipe here engaged you?” Steadman pointed to the body that still rest upon the floor, covered under one of the hotel’s Egyptian cotton King-sized sheets.

“Yeah,” Pine clipped. “Before that.” He breathed hard through his nose, struggling to keep himself bundled beneath the proverbial blanket of his calm. He felt it slip down off of his shoulders, starting to pool at the floor under his feet. He shrugged, shuddering, wondering if the loss of it showed on his face.

It did.
Angela cocked her head and frowned, her brow and her eyes softening into that look... that motherly, matronly look of sheer unadulterated pity. *Oh, you poor, poor dear.* That look that Pine had seen so many times as a child, that look that had fixed itself upon foster mother after foster mother upon first meeting the young Jonathan – only to be replaced by something more sincere - something more *sinister* - later. “Come on, then,” Burr said, finally. “Let’s ‘ave a look-see at those videos.”

His office was vacant; or so it had felt.

In spite of the spartan furniture and the quiet hangings on the wall, the wardrobe at the far side of the room, it seemed to Pine as if he were sitting in a blank, empty cell. White padded walls. Even the desk before him was ethereal; unreal, as if it were not even there.

As if the world didn’t exist.

Because he feared that she wasn’t in it.

Burr and Steadman had left, taking the CCTV footage with them, vowing to contact him as soon as they’d any leads. There were number plates to run and footprints on the pavement; scuff marks from the tyres, and photographs of the black Range Rover to be distributed across MI6, the CIA and beyond. There was more CCTV to review, camera by camera, to possibly follow the path of the mysterious SUV to its final destination.

But it wasn’t enough.

Pine’s body rippled with the need to run… to do… to do something. *Something*. Fucking something in the here and now. To simply go. He had no idea where, but just to get out there and hit the pavement and… and find her. Somehow.

But, he knew… his efforts would be useless. Wasted energy. Energy necessary for other things - for using his mind, not his body to find her. Not to run or to scour the whole of London for her on his feet; but to use his resources.

To make a plan.

Pine sucked in his cheeks and bit down, summoning forth his logical mind along with the pain. His eyes, at first merely scanning, unseeing, lit upon the thick brown paper parcel that now lay on his desk. It was the parcel that had been in the hand of the dead courier.

*Delivery for Andrew Birch.*

Pine frowned, reached across his desk and lifted it, weighing it in his hand. He sat back in his chair, loosened his tie, and flipped the parcel over, surprised that neither Burr nor Steadman had thought to open it.

Or himself for that matter.

Nodding, determined, he leaned forward and took up his letter opener, making a neat slit in the top. He pulled out the contents and let them fall onto his desk.

A binder. Vinyl, aubergine in colour, three-ringed with pockets on either side. No note, no instructions, nothing. The binder looked amazingly familiar, similar in size and brand and hue and even, in a way, content to the one that Kristiane had left back at the safe house. Her script for *Carousel*. 

Now, this one carried a packet of contract documents that rest loosely in the binder. Pine picked this up and set it aside. The rest of the binder contained a script and a score, but this time for a musical called *The Queen of Egypt*, the title role of Nefertiti highlighted with yellow marking pen on the frontispiece.

Pine leaned forward and rest his hand on the open side of the binder, and as he flipped through the pages, his fingers stroked the vinyl absently, until…

… until he felt it.

“The hell?” Pine ran his fingertips over the vinyl again, making sure he wasn’t having some sort of sensory hallucination. But, no. There it was. Something. Something rest beneath the vinyl that didn’t belong there.

Pine gasped, turning quickly to wrench his desk drawer open. He thrust his hand inside, blindly groping, and finally came out with his Army folding knife. This, he set between his teeth and pulled, yanking the blade out of its housing, and he thrust the knife down into the sheathing, cutting the edge of it with abandon.

He all but threw the precious knife aside, not even bothering to reseat it. He stood and dug his fingers in between the plastic and the cardboard, desperately feeling around, until he found it.

A chip. A single, flat chip. Golden in colour and traced with black lines of circuitry. Small, only about the size of his thumbnail, but there it was. He let the small bit of technology rest in his palm, flipping it back and forth with the forefinger of his other hand, studying it.

And the thought came to him. “The other script,” he mouthed to himself. He froze, gripped for a moment by the realisation of it… before he found himself thrust into action. He thrust the chip into his pocket, dashed from his office, pelted out the front door, and hurled himself into the black Audi.

Heading for the Kensington flat.

Like so many young girls, Kristiane once held the wish that she was a princess held captive by monstrous parents, kept away from her one true love, a dashing brave prince who would save her. The proverbial happy ever after. She held that fantasy close to her heart as a young child until she was bitten by the theatre bug, and the need to sing, the need to perform pushed aside the fairy tale. As years slipped by, layers of that once held wish waned with reality, stripped away bit by bit until all that was left wasn’t a glimmer of its former shape or size.

The truth was Kristiane’s parents weren’t monstrous at all. Absent and disinterested, yes, but abusive, not in the slightest. Hardly the loving and doting parents, but they weren’t vile ogres either. The only love they held in their hearts was for their business, small town USA’s local bakery. When their one and only daughter showed no enthusiasm or interest in learning and carrying on their pride and joy, they lost interest in her.

Kristiane failed to recognize how similar her ambitions were to her parents, and the apple hadn’t fallen far from the tree. Confections and pastries were their passion while scales and jazz hands became hers. Her parents didn’t support her choice, but they didn’t stand in her way either.

The dashing brave prince that she’d been waiting for wanted a prince of his own. Terry has been her one love, or so she thought. The naive eighteen year old Kristie had fallen hard for her gay best friend during freshman year at school. The sexual attraction had worn off fast after a night during sophomore year when Terry attempted to go straight and never rose to the occasion. He experimented with Kristie because he did love her, in his way.
Neither one of them could face the truth that he couldn’t love her like a mate or a husband, and he
would never be her prince for her. Until ten years too late, and their friendship barely survived the
fallout. They both clung and held onto each other for far too long.

The want to be rescued and taken to her happily ever after faded too. Kristiane used her looks and
her voice to her advantage in her career, rescuing herself from poverty and homelessness and
unhappiness. She maintained the good girl image to get cast as the innocent ingénue, but she had no
misconceptions about being a princess. There were no castles with her name on the door or the deed.
Sadly, in fact, she had a lease with her and Terry’s name on it, for an apartment on 48th Street in
Manhattan that sat vacant. They both continued to pay half the rent on a space that they no longer
occupied and probably never would again – not at the same time at least.

However whatever shreds of hope or layers of that original wish that still existed in her heart of
hearts or in the back of her mind were entirely forgotten when she was taken. Tied to a chair,
blindfolded, bruised and tortured, Kristiane wanted only one person, Jonathan. She didn’t expect him
to rescue her, she only wanted to feel his calming and soothing presence again. She felt a shred of
happiness with him, and she craved that more than however much time she had left.

The hood came off with a flourish of a matador, enticing its bull into a game of life and death. The
cloth whipped through the air on the follow through, and she winced at the crack it made near her
ear. The expectancy that they – whoever they were – would hurt her again put her on edge, jittery
from pain overload. Kristiane knew she was the bull, and she was entering the game for her life. The
material scraped and scratched at her rug burned chin. She voiced a grunt of pain into the gag in her
mouth, her throat chocked from the lack of water.

The cooler air of the outside world skittered and prickled along her sweat soaked skin. An
uncomfortable inhospitable relief. Her skin puckered and complained while her nose flared to life to
draw fresh air into her lungs, into her body. Her lungs expanded until her chest fought again the too-
much-of a good thing feeling struck. Waterlogged, too long without the thing to an abundance and
she couldn’t take the swing from famine to feast.

She choked, her body wracked with the contained coughs. She fell into a hunch, air wheezing and
heaving from her nose.

Her head was whipped back with a fist in her hair. At the abrupt movement, Kristiane whimpered at
the intense pain that shot through her sore neck.

From somewhere else in the room, she heard a warning tone, “Jocky, careful… we still need her.” It
was the voice of ‘the boss’, she knew that much.

Jocky grunted in disappointed acknowledgment of his given order. But didn’t quite take it easy on
her when he dipped a finger in under her blindfold at her temple and tore that too from her head. The
swift removal pulled at strands of her hair, having been caught in the hastily tied knot at the back.

Blinking wildly, Kristiane cleared her vision of dried tears to take in what she could of her
surroundings. The bright white of the room stabbed at her sensitive eyes, causing her to squint. It was
an open gallery, and she was propped against a column. She had the only chair from what she could
tell, and she sat quite close to a back wall. It was a private gallery, in a posh place, but it didn’t quite
have the feel of an actual museum.

From where she sat, she couldn’t see any windows or doors, just massive nine foot tall murals of
battle and war and death. Murals of soldiers marching across a desert in dark camouflage, tanks
leaving tracks in the light sand, explosions of burning vehicles billowing black smoke. The contrast
between that and the white walls behind the painted murals and the floor below upset her.
Jocky, a stocky Scottish man with yellow teeth from too much beer and cigarettes, came to stand before her. He bent at the waist with his hands on his knees. “You, lass…” his breath reeked of stale tobacco and rotting flesh. “You cause alotta trouble, ya’hav. I’ll not be hav’n ya scream like a banshee when I git yer gag.” He went to reach for her and caught her steely gaze. He stopped. “—And no bitin’”

Kristiane sat perfectly still while this goon with stubby massive sausage-like fingers pulled her gag free. She wouldn’t bite him for her freedom, the caked-in dirt had hardened his skin. No amount of soap would scrape that grimy appearance. She didn’t want to talk or sing or share anything, and she wouldn’t. If the bossman’s words were anything to go by, that they needed her, she’d stay silent in order to stay alive.

“Who’s help’n ya?”

And she certainly wouldn’t answer that!

*Over my dead body*, she thought defiantly, but didn’t speak it. Instead she fixed her steely gaze on him and pressed her dried lips together.
Chapter Summary

Pine clutched the steering wheel with one hand, the other sweating, gripping, and pounding in turns upon the gear shift, such that a nasty ache began to pulse in his left hand. “Come on, come on, come on, damn you.”

The car in front of him wouldn’t move fast enough. His own car felt sluggish and weak compared to the thousand horsepower of energy that revved through his muscles, the strange engine of his own heart.

It took everything he had not to gun the gas, slam the clutch, carom up onto the kerb, and shoot down the sidewalk. But it was crowded. Too crowded. If it’d been the middle of the night, Pine’d have chanced it but, no. Not when it was mid-day. Not in Kensington. Not on the High Street.

And so, he cursed, and hissed and slammed the heel of his hand into the Audi’s horn, over and over and over, his teeth grit, lips splitting painfully with his grimace, until he stopped. He stopped and panted, his heart hammering in his chest until his breath eased. Until he realised the sheer futility of his temper, his anger, of that red beastly haze that had descended to veil over his eyes.
And so, he let his hands go loose, his body sink into the plush leather of the seat, his lungs regulate
the air in and out of his body, until the red, rabid dog in his mind was replaced by his calm. His calm.
That calm. That glorious calm. The calm that brought focus, that brought his mind back to a place
where it could not only fight but function. That place in which, in the psyche of Jonathan Pine,
things got done.

Before he knew it, he found himself back at the Kensington flat. He didn’t really recall parking the
Audi, or lighting from the car, or entering the lift; but there he was.

And there it was.

He dashed toward the kitchen island, tugging roughly at his tie, shrugging like a wet dog out of his
Armani jacket; tossing both pricey items of clothing to the floor like so much dross. He ran so
quickly he nearly bashed his body into the counter’s corner, stopping himself with the spring of his
arms, elbows and shoulders. He once again caught his breath, turned on the spot, and slammed open
the binder.

The Carousel binder.

Kristiane’s binder.

Her binder.

And the opening of it brought a waft of scent to his nose that made him want to cry. Greasepaint.

And her .

He sniffed, swallowing down the anger and guilt and fear that threatened to burst forth from his chest
and constrict him like the deadly serpents they were. With another harsh pump of his throat, he
turned the binder on its side, and ran his fingers gently over the inside of the cover. Searching.
Searching….

“Yes!” Pine shouted. He fumbled in his trouser pocket, hissing with irritation when his fingers did
not encounter his knife. He palmed his chest, the other pocket, the back pocket, and finally, with a
patter of shoes on marble, he scurried around to the other side of the island and wrenched open the
drawer, heedless of the crash and clishmaclaver as the utensils and wood fell to the floor. He had what he needed.

He drew the blade of the boning knife across the vinyl, and tossing the knife aside, dug his fingers in and ripped.

The chip popped out of the opening and clattered to the countertop. This one was larger than the other, more the size of an old SIM card. Pine lifted it with forefinger and thumb, brought it to the light and studied it.

There was a small, white dot-shaped label on it.

And on that label, one word.

Pine gasped. “What the….”

No, not a word, a name. A name. A goddamn name.

And that name….

*Alekan*.

Pine stared, long and hard at it under the light. He didn’t move, he couldn’t move, frozen as he was, rooted to the spot by the power of just a name. A name written in thin, scrawling letters, black ink on a white dot, a white dot on a computer chip card.

A computer chip card that someone was willing to kill for. Not just someone. Many.

And Pine couldn’t help but wonder if one of those so willing to kill…

… was Richard Roper.
“God sodding damn it all to hell.”

Decided, Pine swept the chip into his palm and clutched it. He retrieved his jacket from the floor, his phone from his jacket, and ran out the door of the flat. On the way to the car, he dialed Angela Burr.

“Pine!” Burr all but yelled down the line at him. “Pine, I think we’ve a line on your girl.”

“Good,” Pine breathed. “And I think I’ve a line on who has her.”

Never one to hold her tongue or keep quiet, stubborn, strong-willed Kristiane wouldn’t do anything she didn’t want. Eager to please and obedient with the right director, but she could dig in her character shoe heels in like an anchor and stick it out for the duration. The Jockey man, the burly Scottish bully, with his bad teeth and even worst breath, tried to get her to talk. She wouldn’t. There was no earthly endorsement or persuasion that coax her into saying anything of substance.

“Who’s help’n ya, lass?” he repeated, a touch of impatience in that gargled, roughened growl.

She wanted to call it a slur, a hurried demand for information, but the goon stared her down as much as she did him. She defiant, he greedy. To escape her current situation for a glimmer of a moment, she allowed herself to think of Jonathan. His calm, his collected disposition. The memory of him hardened her resolve and steeled her gaze at Jockey.

“Yer gon’ tell us what we wanna know. We’re not ‘fraid ta hurt ya.”

Her ears prickled to whatever other sounds that she could decipher in the room while she kept the horrible excuse for a human leer at her as if she were his next hit of nicotine. His threatening didn’t scare her as much as the unknown behind her, the clinking of ice in a tumbler glass. The distinctive stubbed slide of ice to mouth followed by the circling around the bottom.

After a few tense minutes of Jockey’s interrogation and Kristiane’s silence, a rumble of frustration sounded behind her as he alighted to his feet. Her musician’s ear caught the tone and locked in on it as Mr. Suave boss man. With no either identifier, boss man he would be, as Jockey obediently referred to him. Kristiane could assign a name and recognize when he made a move, without any visual cues.

There were other noises off in the distance, the smacking of lips and laughter and elevated voices wafted her way. She couldn’t lend it anymore focus beyond the unease and pain occupying her body. She could only follow the two men in her immediate presence.

“Jockey, we know who’s helping her and we know why.” The voice behind her filled the room to the brim. Her vision was still filled with Jockey and very little else. She could only guess at the size of the room.

Kristiane’s shoulder ticked involuntarily at his shrewd assessment of her situation, the event that led to her being shackled to a chair, propped against a column like a rag doll. How could they know who was helping her? Jonathan had made up the name, a fictional (?) version of himself. How could they know why this fictional version of Jonathan, Andrew Birch, was helping her.
“That’s right, Kristiane, darling,” Boss man sighed in an annoyed yet resigned confirmation. “We know about Jonathan Pine or Andrew Birch, whichever he prefers.” Boss man’s words purred venomously at her back to intimidate her more, she knew that. Finally he stepped into her periphery, and she could finally see the man in charge of her abduction and humiliation. “That doesn’t get us to the root of problem.”

The easily six foot something posh man, the very look of highbrow sophistication that looked too good for petty crime, elbowed Jockey aside to become her new visual. Boss man had a long face, the picture of pale English skin that spent too many hours in the Mediterranean sun, wide worldly eyes and overly full pink bow lips. He looked older than she, but she couldn’t place his age. The leathery skin of his face made him look older than he probably was. But his dress shirt tucked into finely pressed trousers made him look fine enough to be in a clothing catalogue.

“I see you assessing me, Ms. Taylor. Would it be trite to quote Edward Rochester? ‘Do you find me handsome?’” He asked rhetorically, trying to provoke a rise in her, feeling out some kind of verbal response.

The corner of her mouth folded into itself in a grimacing frown, pressing her lips together all the more.

“Fair enough. We can skip the literary references, though from my understanding, you’re a scholar as well as a singer.” Reaching behind her, he grew impossibly close to her face.

Kristiane twitched, squeezed her eyes shut and prepared for more violence against her, holding her breath until it happened.

“Oh, Ms. Taylor,” he chuckled ironically pulling back, “I’m not going to hurt you yet. I’ll have Jockey do that.”

She wanted to spit in his face or cackle maniacally if she had the strength. She was already hurt, undoubtedly ordered by him, bleeding from the reopened wound on her arm, the burn on her chin, and the ache in her jaw.

“I thought that I might offer you some water. After all, you are the star of The Queen of Egypt.”

Confusion rolled over her, tensing her cheeks into a squint, her shoulders pulled in.

Boss man held a newly opened plastic water bottle to her lips, poised to help her.

She refused with nothing more than the piercing of her eyes in a haughty look of disgust. She couldn’t trust anything the man said or did. Although she was parched from the gag and her sweating buckets, she wasn’t dying for it. She couldn’t trust that it wasn’t laced with poison or something that would kill her.

“Oh, come now, Ms. Taylor. You wound me.” Understanding her refusal, he tipped his head back, pouring some water into his mouth and swallowing for example. He kept the plastic away from his lips to cater to her as well. “Right as rain, it is… come now. We can be friends straight away.” When he placed the bottle at her cracked lips, he patiently helped her drink.

Hesitant and skittish, she finally conceded, letting the refreshingly cool liquid into her deprived mouth.

“That’s it… the Queen of Egypt…”

As she gulped, Kristiane ignored his muddled almost affectionate words. She wouldn’t ask, she
wouldn’t say anything at all. That didn’t matter to her. Only surviving.

“I should refer to you as the new Queen of Egypt… that’s what you are, isn’t it?”

She sat back, allowing breath into her lungs after swallowing nearly half the water bottle in one huge gulp. Her throat protested, though the water had soothed the roughness. Her neck muscles were sore and bruised, but it felt enormously gratifying to hydrate. Her head spun slightly from the high of it. She surveyed him again with a critical eye, wondering what he was spewing about.

An evil grin pulled at his lips, the leathery skin wrinkling in distress. “You are, aren’t you? His new queen of Egypt? His new Nefertiti? His new Sophie Alekan.”

The name dripped from his mouth triumphantly and Kristiane jerked in revulsion. Not from the reminder of her, only the comparison to her. Kristiane’s entire body revolted at the name and the recognition that they knew so much.

“Fuck you!” she croaked out.

Pleased as a pig in shit, boss man got the rise out of her that he wanted. Anger had massive motivational effect and he’d found a soft spot to exploit in her. “No, but thank you for the offer, Ms. Taylor.” He lowered again until their faces were inches apart again. “If I can avoid sloppy seconds, I do, and certainly from the likes of Jonathan Pine.” He let the name wash over her, let whatever history they had seep into her consciousness.

“I really must ask, did you throw yourself at him in exchange for help, like a desperate whore? Or did you just fall for his charm like so many do… Jed, Marilyn, Corky… Sophie?”

If she didn’t feel so weak, Kristiane would’ve vomited from the physical and psychological torture she’d been subjected to. Tied to a chair, robbed of her dignity, her show, her voice, she was tortured more for the man she’d grown close to, fond of… loved? Used against her for what?

Could this be… Richard Roper?

“You know,” he replied with false afterthought, “the fate of half… wonder where you’ll land. I suppose you have a 50/50 chance of surviving this…”

***

“Alekan? Why the fuck’s this say, ‘Alekan’?” Burr crinkled her nose in rat-like incredulity.

Pine sighed, his eyes fluttering in an attempt to hold back an irritated eye-roll. “Can’t be sure now, can I?” Pine snapped. “But it’s a bit of a coincidence, don’t you think? That I’m working this… this…” he gestured wildly, “case, whatever it is, with you, when whoever’s behind it invokes the name of… the name of….”

“You’re dead lover?”

“Yes, God damnit!” Pine whirled, nearly knocking over the mug of tea perched precariously on the end of Burr’s desk. He pointed an accusatory finger at Burr’s chest. “You knew, didn’t you? You knew all along, didn’t you? Maybe you ought to tell me why it says what it says!”

Burr lifted her hands, palms outward. “I’ve no idea, Pine, I swear it. I had no idea this had anything to do with Sophie –”

“Don’t you say her name.” Pine growled. “Don’t you dare say it.”
Burr narrowed her eyes. “Sophie Alekan.”

Pine’s entire body tensed, and an instant later, relaxed. Maybe it wasn’t so bad, hearing her name. Hearing that name… Sophie’s name.

*Let me go, Jonathan. Find Kristiane. She’s where your heart rests. Not with me.*

“All right,” Pine huffed, his fingers working at his tie, straightening the knot back into place, fixing his armor tightly again around his body. “You said you had a line on where she is. So, where is she?”

Burr’s fearful countenance morphed almost instantly into one of satisfied pride. “Your friend there at the Covent Garden, the bloke’s a ruddy genius, he is.” She strode toward her desk and tapped a few keys, bringing up an image on her computer screen, one which she transferred to the large monitor hanging from the opposite wall. She pointed. “There,” she said, “that’s the SUV there, with the tan pinstripe long the edge.”

Pine looked up at the image, fighting the urge to cry out at the sight of Kristiane being bundled against her will into the dark vehicle. “I see it,” Pine said stiffly.

Burr called up another image, and then another, and another, each superimposing one upon the other. “We followed it, followed it for a good half mile in heavy traffic up to Oxford Street,” she pointed a green laser dot at the intersection on the map beside the overlarge monitor, “right about here, near Charing Cross Road. And that’s where we lost ‘em, it seems. Turned off somewhere in between camera images, the bastards.”

“She could be anywhere,” Pine shoved his hand through his hair. “Fitzrovia, St. Pancras, Soho, Mayfair…. Damn. She could be all the way to Cambridge by now for all we know.”

Burr made a pouting moue, bobbing her head back and forth. “She could be,” she said, “but the thing is, I suspect they’re still close by. I suspect they know the thing they’re looking for isn’t with your songbird… and I suspect as well that they’ll realise they’re not going to get the information they need from her, and they’ll learn that fast.”

“She doesn’t even know she had this.” Pine hefted the chip in his hand, pushing it around with his other finger. “This or the other chip.”

“Makes you wonder if they know that yet.”

Pine took a heavy, shaking breath. “God, I hope they don’t. For her sake.”

…. *And mine.*

Burr cleared her throat, breaking Pine out of his worried reverie. “Pine,” she said, “don’t you even want to know what’s on those things?”

He blinked. “What… what things?”

“Those chips. Don’t you want to know what’s on those chips?”

Pine’s lips curled in wry, resigned smile. “I don’t need to know. I don’t want to know.” He continued toying with the seemingly priceless bits of plastic -- the price for them being Kristiane’s life at the moment. “All I know is that whatever is on these… whatever information they have, as soon as I get Kristiane back, I’m going to destroy them.”

“Them meaning the chips, or them meaning the bastards who took her?”
Pine lifted his head, his blue gaze dark and intent and burning. “Both.”

***

“Send her a text, Jonathan,” Joel Steadman pointed toward Pine’s phone, resting in the centre console of the black Audi. “They’ll be monitoring her messages. Watching to see who contacts her.”

“But aren’t I supposed to be undercover?” Pine leaned against the door as Steadman took the curve onto Howland Street rather sharply.

“With a thing like that, with Sophie’s name on it,” the American nodded sagely toward the envelope sticking out of Pine’s breast pocket - the chip tucked neatly inside - “I’d say your cover’s blown, my friend. Best be yourself from here on out.”

“What do I text her?” Pine picked up his mobile, considering it.

“Tell her… say something about meeting her at the Tower, or at Piccadilly, or somewhere public. Say something about finding something strange in her binder. Give the dogs something to sniff on.”

“But what if it is Roper behind all this?” Pine frowned as he typed out the text, concentrating on choosing the proper words.

Joel Steadman’s wide, nimble mouth lifted at the corners, slowly revealing his full, set of perfect, pearly American teeth. “All the better, isn’t it? Take the bastard down face to face -- again.”

“Maybe this time for good.” Pine whispered, before hitting ‘send’.

“Better be. I’m sick of that asshole.” Steadman pulled the car into a small carpark just beside a chemist’s shop. He pointed at the end of the street. “This is where the imagery last picked up the SUV.” He tilted his chin toward the passenger side door. “I’ll wait here.” Steadman instructed. “Keep constant contact through the earpiece. Don’t hesitate to call for back up if you need it.”

Pine nodded, and opened the door.

Don’t respond. Don’t let him goad you. He fished and you chomped at the bait like a ravenous glutton. Don’t give him anything to feed into or off of, and you’ll be better off that way.

Kristiane schooled her expression into one of nonchalant, unbothered ennui. Even if Jonathan or MI6 knew how to find her, she knew better than to expect it to happen. They wouldn’t come and get her. Overall, the bigger picture, in the grand scheme of life or crime warfare, the kidnapping of an actress featured low on their radar.

The only way out of this was to look for an opportunity, if she ever got uncuffed, and run. Rational, quick thinking, improvisation, and fast legs. She had a brain and she’d been a quick study all her life. She had powerful legs too. Praise for all the dance classes and not only for workouts and strength, but for the sake of her career.

Mentally she put Jonathan back in the hotel behind the front desk, checking tourists into her old room and handing them their key without a fleeting thought for her. He could have his life back. He’d said to her himself that he didn’t work for MI6 anymore, he hadn’t for years, and he didn’t want to work for them either. Kristiane asked Angela to keep Jonathan with her while they were investigating this thing. With Kristiane out of the way, his life could return to the way it was.
But, she knew, Jonathan was also driven by doing the right thing, his moral compass always pointed straight and true. Would that put him on the trail after her to try and rescue her?

Boss man sneered at her blank expression, realizing that he might lose her to her acting. “He’ll make some desperate attempt to come rescue you. That’s his MO.”

Kristiane read him like a book, the villain grasping at the one thing that he could to get a rise out of her. She vowed not to give into it anymore.

“I saw the tapes on Sophie Alekan’s death on the telly. Your Jonathan hung around, he was in the background during the ‘investigation’ like her lost puppy. Both he and her dog were covered in her blood. They didn’t look too hard for her killer.” He taunted her with a look full of malice, enjoying too much that there wouldn’t be much investigation should Kristiane not survive this. International actresses weren’t exactly high priority. “How hard do you think they will look for your killer?”

Suddenly, quite suddenly, she, in a rash decision of worry and panic, needed to move, to not be in this place, wherever it was. She hadn’t seen more than one wall, depicting war and destruction, certain death. Her fate?

Possibly… but she couldn’t stay in that place, in that spot any longer. If she knew Jonathan as well as she thought she did, judging from the story he’d tried not to tell her, he would come for her.

The boss man clearly believed that Jonathan would make the heroic choice as well. He wouldn’t do it because he cared for her, if he did. No, it wouldn’t be personal. It wouldn’t be about Kristiane. It would be his monumental need to do the right thing, to strike out against evil.

Kristiane couldn’t have it, couldn’t put Jonathan in danger. She didn’t want that for him, not because of her. Only days ago, he was fine, doing his calling, the profession that chose him, much like her career had her. She couldn’t see him hurt or sacrificing himself for her. Jonathan Pine meant more to her than her own life.

“You are Richard Roper, aren’t you?” she asked confidently. She needed out and she was going to use this man’s motivation to her advantage.

“My name doesn’t matter,” the contemptuous smirk curled on his lips. “Not really.”

“So very much like him…” she cherry picked from memory the bits of what Jonathan had told her to speak up, despite her throat’s protestation, “Your arrogance, your need to know more than every other person in the room, your master plan and your disregard for other people in your greed for power.”

His slate gray eyes flared with irritation.

Either she was entirely right or massively wrong, but this thug wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of knowing which. “Don’t speak to me of ambition, Ms. Taylor. What of yours?”

Testing the handcuffs at her back, she growled to cover the sound. “Mine never killed anyone, or permanently damaged anyone. Can you say the same?” That was one of the points that Kristiane remembered most about Jonathan’s involvement with Angela, the impetus that compelled the female officer into action.

“You’ve made up your mind as to who I am already,” he said noncommittally. “Why the need to know my name then?”

“Because I’m going to make you a deal. You can have what you want. But I want something in
He laughed cynically. The son of a bitch laughed at her, a barking guffaw that grated on her musical ear. “Are you in a position to negotiate?”

“Of course I am. I still have the upper hand. I still have what you want, and I know how to get it. That’s why you’ve taken me against my will, isn’t it? Tied me to this chair, threatened me, taunted me, and un unsuccessfully interrogated me. I have something you want… and in turn, you have something I want.”

Her words forced the smile from his face and the laughter from his throat. Instead he stood back, against the backdrop of opposing armies, and surveyed the woman held in captivity. If she didn’t stand between him and his glory, he might admire her. If he didn’t hate her so much, he might like her.

Crossing his arms over his chest, he stood to his full height, he nodded. “Go on then. Wha—“

“BOSS!!” Jockey broke through, entering back into the room. Where had he gone? He brought with him a chirping phone.

Kristiane recognized the sound as her very own phone, the notification for an incoming message. Her throbbing arm jerked against the column next to her, and she groaned against the pain. She didn’t have anything truly incriminating on her phone, only embarrassing pictures of her vacations with Terry or drinking at their bar in Manhattan or funny faces backstage with any of her friends. But it didn’t stop her instinct from wanting to protect it, from her vulnerability ripped to shreds at someone reading her messages. And the audacity to read them before she did!!!

“Issa incomin’ from Pine,” Jockey slurred, handing the device to the arrogant bastard.

No, Jonathan, no! Don’t—just don’t! Please stay away from this!

“That’s my phone!” A weak argument, but it was the selfish part of her that didn’t want every inch of her life scrutinized by these assholes.

“Shall we see what your lover has to say?” The well-dressed man straightened his shirt, and shook out his arms, to settle into a stance of reader.

Oh God! Jonathan! What are you doing?

Did he know? Of course he knew that she’d been taken. She was supposed to meet him. He had to know that she wouldn’t be the only one to get her messages. “That’s mine!” she blurted. She jiggled back and forth, testing her bonds to get free. Fruitless. It only irritated her panic. She couldn’t get free, she couldn’t see Jonathan’s message to her, and she couldn’t read his thoughts to know what he was after.

Cackling at her discomfort and squirm, the could-be Richard Roper held her phone at arm’s length. The device mockingly went off again to alert her that there was an unread message. “We’ll get back to your negotiation, but let’s see what your Jonathan offers and what terms he has first. It may change your offer, yes?”

Her blood turned cold and she felt the sensation cascade down her, from her shoulder through her back and arms into her legs. She wanted to cry from frustration, from helplessness, from the unknown, but no tears came. Stubbornly she held her composure, but she could feel the hairline fracture that threatened to give way and engulf her.
Reading from the display, boss adopted a voice for Jonathan and recited the text. “‘Your new script, The Queen of Egypt, arrived.’”

The courier, of course… but was the script real? Was the message for her or for her attackers? Both?

“‘I put it with your Carousel score…’” The man’s voice trailed off and hesitated over the words, recognizing the underlying meaning, the code that Jonathan created for him.

Kristiane slowly picked up on the clues for her. She and Jonathan examined her Carousel score looking for the reason that these people targeted her. Whatever she ‘had’ must be in her script and Jonathan figured that much. He was using it to get their attention. The Queen of Egypt… the could-be Richard Roper called her that… was that for her? Or a reference to Sophie? Maybe both…

“‘I can’t wait to see you take the stage,’” boss continued reading. “‘I’ll be there.’ Signed Jonathan. Isn’t that sweet?” Boss addressed Kristiane, looking to her for explanation, clarification, the hidden meeting beneath. “What does this mean then, Princess?”

Her mind raced, trying to read beyond the few words into something else. But she didn’t want to figure out to meet him, she wanted to figure it out to lead her attackers away from what they were hell-bent on getting back. She answered as quickly as she could, twisting fact with fiction, “He has what you’re looking for. And he wants me to meet him to get it back.”

_I am the new Queen of Egypt._
Chapter 16

Pine pressed his back against the whitewashed wall, the brick’s sharp edges cutting a painful pattern though his jacket and shirt and into his shoulder. He watched, his gaze slicing through the London smog, as Steadman pulled away in the black Audi - away, but not far. Never far. Pine knew it.

But still, he couldn’t help but feel left behind, alone - abandoned.

As always .

He shook his head, grunting out his frustration.

“Problem, Pine?” Steadman’s voice in the tiny earpiece seemed to echo through his head. “You got something?”
“Negative,” Pine clipped, the whisper rasping within his already tight throat. He swallowed. “Nothing.”

“I’m about one hundred metres away. You know the signal if you need me.”

“Acknowledged. Other backup?”

“None, Pine,” Steadman replied gravely. “Just you and me and Angela on the wire. You ok with that?”

“Affirmative,” he hissed, and then added, “suppose I’ll have to be. I’m going in.”

Pine palmed his breast pocket, satisfied to feel the soft crinkle of paper against the distinct hardness of a small folding knife. It wasn’t much, Pine knew, against the possibility of pistols and semi-automatic weapons, but it was enough.

It would have to be enough.

He pushed himself off the wall and strode, head held high, toward the chemist’s shop just on the other side of the alleyway -- the only public building off the carpark, the rest being private residences, gated homes, walkup flats. He was not about to hunker down or cower, or go in like some raiding commando, no. He was presentable, well-dressed still in his Armani suit and powerful red tie.

Like a man who meant business.

Pine palmed the door, his fingers warm against the cool glass, and pushed. A soft chime echoed from somewhere within the shop, reaching his ears just as the scents of cheap perfume and liniment and medicaments hit his nose. He felt the schuss of the closing door behind him as his eyes took in the stark white of the walls, the contrasting royal blue of the signs and logos, the neat, geometric shapes of the boxes and bottles on the shelves.

Nothing seemed out of order. Nothing seemed out of place. It was perfect.
He picked up a basket as he walked with feigned purpose down the main aisle of the store toward the apothecary’s counter in the back.

Which was deserted. Not a soul behind the desk, not a single person counting pills or mixing elixirs - no one. He looked over his shoulder, a nonchalant gesture, toward the check outs. Empty. Vacant. No customers, no workers… nobody.

*No one here. Where is everyone?*

Pine cocked his head, his eyes narrowed in confusion, speculation… fear. Fear. A frisson of it ran in a sharp slice down his spine, splintering out across his back, down his arms and legs to his feet. The terrible mantle of war, of battle, of fight cloaked about his body and carried him, his dress-shoed feet slipping and sliding on the lino, back down the shop’s main aisle to the glass door.

The glass door which, before his eyes seemed to crackle and shatter as he shoved it open, and flew out onto the pavement. He threw himself down behind a parked cab, burying himself between the cab and the crawling traffic behind him, sheltering… hiding… bunkering….

First he smelled it. Then he felt it. Then he heard it.

And all of it, every sense of it was frighteningly familiar. So like it. So incredibly and terrifyingly like the explosives on display at The Haven, so much like the powerful whoosh and boom of six hundred million dollars’ worth of weapons going up in flames in Cairo. There was a wash of intense heat, a concussive burst of flame, and a cascade cloud of smoke and debris and tinkling glass that rained down upon, over, and around him.

“Pine!”

He shook his head, groaning with the ache of his unwinding muscles as he stood, Glass shards cut his hands as he brushed them from his hair. His brow throbbed from the singe of heat and the impact of the shockwave’s edge. Like a child, he rubbed soot from his eyes. He bent over, pressing his hands against his ears, ringing from the blast, the sounds of car alarms and screams echoing in his head as if he were being pummeled by the cacophony from somewhere underwater.
“Pine! Come in, Pine!”

And there was Steadman’s voice -- breathy, thick with odd echoes, jolting with the rhythm of the big man’s footfalls. Steadman was running, running toward him.

“Pine, are you….”

“Fine,” he clipped in response, lifting a dismissive hand. “Fine. I’m… I’m fine… but… but what the hell was that?”

Steadman loped up beside him and bent over, hands on knees, huffing and puffing. “That,” Steadman hissed, “was an explosion, and a fucking big one, too. What did you do?”

“Me?” Pine pointed at his own chest. “Nothing! What do you take me for, I… oh. Oh, Christ!” His head spun and he blinked away a rush of tears and held back the growing sensation of nausea. “Jesus….”

Steadman took Pine roughly by the arm, pulling him away, tucking his shoulder beneath Pine’s oxter, bolstering the other man’s weight. “Come on, we can’t be seen here. The cops will be coming down on this place.”

Pine allowed himself to be led, carried, the shock of the explosion still coursing through his mind and his body. As he did so, as he shuffled away, he saw two things.

First, as the smoke cleared from the back of the building, he saw what appeared to be an immense mural on the remaining, standing wall of the back of the shop. A mural against a formerly pristine, white coat of paint of what seemed to be a back room of some sort. And that mural depicted a landscape scene.

A familiar scene. A very familiar scene.

The Haven. That patch of land to the south of that particular encampment -- the hot, golden sand laden with khaki tanks and olive green Jeeps and hard steel mobile armaments, painted against a black night sky backdrop slashed with TNT red and napalm yellow.
“Steadman… wait… Steadman… stop! Stop… I…..” Pine slurred his words. He felt sick. Faint. Fatigue and renewed pain and disbelief lifted the warrior’s crown from his head, leaving him bare, stupid, senseless. “Steadman, she… she’s… she’s here.”

“No! Damn it!” Steadman barked. He lurched forward like a dog pointing on a wing, nearly dropping Pine. “She’s not here anymore!”

And that is when Pine saw the second thing. The thing that had so sharply caught Joel’s attention.

Kristiane, or what looked like the shadow of Kristiane’s face through a glass window. Lightly tinted. Tinted glass on the back seat of an SUV. A black SUV with a tan pinstripe.

A black SUV with a tan pinstripe which, with a loud, piercing squeal of tyres, shot off down the road… and away.

“How did they know that? How could they know where Jonathan was? How was he so close?”

Empty threats followed by empty promises, since Kristiane also heard the confirmation from Jockey that ‘Pine’s on foot, ‘bout five minutes out.’

Reading her thoughts, boss man said to her, “He may be five minutes away, but we’ll be gone in three.”

A yell from behind her struck her heart with terror, “Boss! It’s armed! Move out!”

And like a quick tempo waltz that she learned for a King and I audition in high school, she was hustled out. Shackled in handcuffs and ankle restraints, she was moved from the wooden chair into the backseat of a motoring vehicle, humming at the curb. Jockey held her right side while one of the other henchmen took her left, and no one on the street noticed her limitation.

The fantastically destructive explosion flared and shook the SUV, vibrating the framework of the vehicle and the teeth of the four passengers within. A whoop of success reverberated through the
small confine from her three captors, while Kristiane recoiled in her seat behind the driver. Smoke bellowed in a large coil of rolling black clouds above the orange fireball that had been an alchemist shop.

The 400 horsepower engine gunned to the floor lurched forward and burst like a rocket into traffic. Swerving to the left to avoid a Volkswagen, the overwhelming scent of petrol, burned rubber and man sweat filled the cab of the SUV. Kristiane could still feel the heat shimmering and pulsing on her face from the explosion, supposedly timed with Jonathan’s arrival.

The devastating idea of Jonathan… NO!

She shook it off. Instead watched the old buildings and fascinating architecture of old London blur by. A flash of color. A fuzz of windows and people and nothing at all.

She couldn’t believe that Jonathan was gone. She wouldn’t.

The SUV pealed through a red light. The melody of blaring car horns rightly pissed at the dastardly move clashed in her ear. The getaway vehicle weaved around a cyclist. Would-be Roper sat beside her barked directions at Jockey in the driver’s seat in front of her. The other henchman, Stupid or Foolish or Dopey – she couldn’t be sure which dwarf he was named for – rode shotgun pointing out obstacles between them and their getaway. Each of the three involved in the drive more than their prisoner, considering a way of her own.

In the nick of time, the blessing of blind denial somehow cleared her vision at precisely the right moment. Kristiane saw a friend in the race past a Lloyd’s Bank on the corner. The pedestrian foot traffic along the street parted and she spotted Angela, her gun leveled at the tires. Although Kristiane was strapped in by the seatbelt and handcuffed, she suddenly threw her body forward.

Thigh muscles bulged and propelled her up against the belt across her lap.

Her connected wrists hooked over the driver’s head.

In a movement so swift, sudden and unexpected, Kristiane yanked her arms back against Jockey’s triple chin and thick neck.

She didn’t dare think about the act of cutting off someone’s air supply because it would paralyze her.

The only thought in her head was get out or die trying.

And Jonathan. For Jonathan, she followed through with it.

Jockey choked against the crushing weight of a 5’2” Broadway singer using her entire body to distract him from driving. It worked. His hands twitched on the wheel, to the left then to the right. They left to claw at the chokehold she created. His legs lifted, mimicking a rock climber, desperate to get higher than the chokehold. With his foot off the pedal, the vehicle began to slow.

The passenger in the front, beside the reddening man, caught wise to the perilous situation and grabbed the wheel. Would-be Roper, clutching a satchel to his chest like a get-out-of-jail-free card, let the events unfold. His mind calculated how to flee when the opportunity presented itself, confident it would. He didn’t dare get his hands dirty by touching his prisoner, that wasn’t his style.

Kristiane propped her knees against the back of the driver’s seat, giving herself more leverage to pull against Jockey’s neck…

Heedless of the band cutting and slicing across her midsection, human nature versus a locked
Heedless of the pressure pain radiating from her splayed arm.

She took out all her frustration, taken against her will, made a helpless victim, tormented by the new emotions she felt. Her ferocious anger manifested itself in this one act.

Then she heard it.

The sudden slap and release over the grunts emanating from the man losing consciousness and her own screams of exertion and pain. The burn across her lap and the pulsating bite through her arm bellowed from her throat.

A car backfire but sharper, more precise, direct.

A gun fired.

The SUV veered at the sound, Dopey jerked the wheel. The impact of a bullet into the tire, pulled to the left but the vehicle kept the forward momentum facing the wrong direction.

Another gunshot and the forward momentum slowed greatly, but not in time to miss a sports car that rammed into the front left flank of the SUV. The two colliding vehicles bumped and bounced away from each other, the car pancaked against a streetlamp and the SUV bluntly popped into the brick face of a solicitor’s office.

In the screams and gapes and gasps of onlookers and wailing sirens in the distance, Kristiane realized she’d stopped moving. She was alone in the cab with an unconscious Jockey slumped against the driver’s side door. She, too, in the mayhem, had been slammed against the back door.

Shock. Kristiane was crumbled and pinned immobile against Jockey’s neck, her wrists buried in rolls of skin and sweat. Her shoulders ached from the angle and pressure. Her entire body pulsed with pain, from the rug burn under her chin, the day old knife wound on her arm, the bruise across her middle from the seatbelt, and the abused knees. Her head ached under the weight of all that happened, in the past few minutes, in the past twenty-four hours, in the past week.

The storm of emotion clogged her throat and her eyes. Kristiane pressed her forehead against the leather of the driver’s seat, and cried. For the fear, for the anger, for the frustration, for the pain, for the unknown. And for the longing.

The bare, vulnerable need for quiet, to silence the percussive dissonance in her head.

And chaos reigned outside the crumpled walls of the SUV.

Jonathan shook his head and coughed in a weak attempt to dispel the incessantly buzzing whine in his ears and to sluice away the grit and smoke-filled tears that flooded his closed eyes. He found himself sat on the pavement, back against a brick wall, aching legs in tattered trousers splayed child-like before him.

He wasn’t sure just how he’d gotten there, and couldn’t precisely remember what had happened. He’d thought himself fine, but it was becoming more and more apparent to the astute observer that he most certainly was not fine. Not fine at all. Quite the opposite of fine. Not fine in the least.

He’d been in that once fine but not quite fine state before; and that feeling, that detached sensation of being in the moment but at the same time absent overtook him within its familiar cloak. Last time it happened, he recalled with a vague haze, he was in Tikrit. In Tikrit where he’d somehow managed
to run pell-mell half a mile or more after his unit’s caravan had come under RPG fire. A half a mile or more after a slab of Humvee shrapnel the size of a utility bill had been blown deep into in his right thigh -- without him even knowing it.

That is, until he heard the clink of his sidearm against the piece of metal. That is, until he looked down. It was then that his leg gave out utterly and he collapsed, falling headlong, useless, bleeding, and crippled into the hot fug of the desert night sand.

Strangely now, Pine found the first thing he saw as he opened his eyes rather -- funny. He chuckled - - a low, burbling, wet noise in his razor torn throat - chuckled at the sight of his feet.

One shoe off, one shoe on.

_Deedle, deedle, dumpling, my son Jon. Went to bed with his… with his… with his…._

“Trousers,” Pine murmured, still shaking with pained laughter.

“Come again?” The voice was muffled, dark and deep, as if the speaker were singing a slow, lumbering contrabass to the soprano of the fire brigade siren-songs. “What’s that you said, man?”

“With his… trousers on… aah! Oh, God!” Pine cried out as a bolt of pain shot across his chest, curling around to his back and down his left leg. He hissed and panted, each movement sending waves of agony through his body as he was lifted to his feet, his weight supported from beneath. “….with his t-trousers on.”

“Yeah, man, don’t worry. Your trousers are on. One of the only things left on you, though. Now come on. Time to move out.”

“Steadman? Issat you?”

“Yeah, Pine.” Joel grunted. “’S’me. Come on. We need to go.”

“Go… where?” Pine’s own voice sounded tinny and muffled in his head, as if he were speaking through layers of cotton batting. “Where am I, anyway?”

“Sorry, man,” Steadman said sheepishly. “Had to leave you for a sec -- prop you up there while I took care of some other things.”

“Other… things?”

“Car wreck up ahead,” Steadman pointed with his gaze as he continued to walk Pine, shifting the other man’s weight from one shoulder to the other. “Well, not so much a car wreck for its own sake, but a rescue.”

“Rescue….?” Pine repeated. His mind churned sluggishly, the word penetrating but the meaning dissolving into the ether as soon as it reached his lips. Steadman’s footing slipped, and he lurched forward, grunting. Pine screamed in agony with the unwelcome sensation of ribs grating one against the other under the pressure of Steadman’s elbow. “Jesus Christ! What… where? Where are you taking me?”

“Medics -- for starters.” Steadman bent forward, lowering Pine into the back seat of a vehicle. Pine felt the leather seat give and hiss under his weight as he lay back across the bench. The comfort of the cushioning and the scent of new car around him gave Pine a sense of anchoring, of safety in spite of the increasing pain as the nerve-numbing brain chemicals rapidly wore off.
“But,” Pine lifted his head and eyed Steadman blearily, blinking as his gaze roved over the other man’s body. “But you’re not hurt.”

“No, I’m not,” Steadman smiled, resting his hand on Pine’s knee. “But you are. You’re the one going to the hospital, my friend.” Joel lifted his head, tipped his chin, and barked his orders to the driver, “Get him to MI-6, now. Quickly. Burr and I will be close behind with the other one.” He curled his hand around the top of the door and began to push it closed.

“Other… one?” Pine shuffled his foot out, blocking the path of the door. “What… other one? Who… who else is… is… hurt?”

Steadman gave a quiet, knowing smile, his eyes sympathetic, soft. “You’ll see when you get there.” He gave Pine’s foot a gentle nudge with his own, pushing it back into the passenger compartment.

“Kristi--- Kristiane?” Pine felt suddenly awake. Aware. Fright and adrenaline coursed through his body as he sat bolt upright, sending every slumbering nerve on its wakeful edge. “Is she… is… is she….?”

“She’s alive, Pine. And whole. Just a little bit banged up, like you.”

“Where…?”

“She’s with Angela,” Steadman assured.

“But… but what about… what about Roper? Where’s…. Where’s Roper?”


And with that, the American shut the door and tapped twice on the roof, signaling for the driver to take off toward River House.

***

The pain wasn’t such a bad thing anymore.

What was torture, rather, was the waiting.

Pine took a deep breath, the air catching in his throat upon a sharp moan as he felt the tightness of the bandage around his chest, the constricting barrier to a full respiration. He groaned, swallowed hard, and smacked his parched lips.

“Thirsty, Pine?”

“Yes, very, thank you,” he croaked. “Didn’t… didn’t know you were there. How long’ve you been there?”

“Not long. You were sulking,” Burr clipped. She stood from her chair, stepped to the opposite side of his bed and lifted a styro cup. She aimed the straw at Pine’s lips. “Been starin’ out the window like some lovesick Romeo, you were.”

Pine lifted his head, sipped gratefully at the water, and then, with a hiss, fell back to the pillow. “Not… lovesick, just… just….” He sighed.

“Just what?”

“How is she? How is Kristiane? Can I see her?”
“Ah, you’re worried. I see.”


Burr sighed, set the cup down, and lowered herself back into the wingchair. “What if it weren’t Roper what did that to the songbird?”

Pine blinked, nonplussed. “Had to be. Who else?”

Burr shrugged. “Dunno yet. No sign of anyone but what two goons were at the scene. One we arrested but he ain’t talkin’ no matter what we do to ‘im. Other one been carted off to the undertaker all dead like.”


“Not directly from the car crash,” Burr interjected, her voice steady, yet reedy. She leaned forward, and rest her hand upon Pine’s bandaged one -- matronly, comforting, before laying her burden upon Jonathan’s chest. “Kristiane… we think… we think….”

Pine pushed himself up, nearly roaring with the effort of it. He shoved Burr’s hand from his chest and glared at her, his gaze thunderous. “You… think… what?”

“We think she did the goon in,” Burr shifted her own eyes away, as if she couldn’t stand the searing, flashing heat of Pine’s stare. “We think she strangled him with the… with the handcuffs ‘round her wrists. In self-defence like.”

Pine blinked as hateful, invasive tears welled in his eyes, as his stomach lurched with a wave of sudden nausea. “She killed… she had to kill a man?”

Burr nodded. “Seems like,” she said. “Found the girl with her hands ‘round the cove’s throat from behind, just hanging there, dangling like a marionette on a string, and she… she was crying, she was. Inconsolable. Crying all the way from Tottenham Court Road to here in the car once we managed to fetch her out.”

“Dear God. She should never have had to -- if I hadn’t -- ” Pine stuttered. “Tell me. Does she… does she remember doing it?”

Please, God, don’t let her remember. You know what it is to kill, Pine. You’re a soldier. She’s not. She didn’t -- she didn’t ask for this. Any of this. She should never know what it is to take the life of another human being. She should be innocent, but now she isn’t. Now she’s tasted blood, and it’s your fault, Pine. All your fault.

And now she can never go back.

Now she’s just like you.

Burr shrugged. “Not sure,” she said. “She’s been sleepin’ it off ever since the doctors finished with her. Got her patched up like, bumps and bruises and her arm torn up again, gave her some sedatives much needed as they were… but she’s been cryin’ out in her sleep now and then.”

“How long?”

“Ten hours as it goes.”
Pine swallowed, once again groaning with the ache of tight bandages around his torso. “You said she’s been crying out?”

“She has.”

“What’s she… has she been saying things?”

“Not… nothing much, just… just a bit of bibbledy-babble now and again, but….”

“Don’t you dare sodding lie to me, Angela,” Pine spat. “Tell me.”

Burr lifted her head to face him. “She’s been callin’ your name, Pine. Jonathan, Jonathan, over and over…. She thinks you’re dead. She’s mourning you. No matter what I say to her, or how much I reassure her that you’re right as rain, she’s convinced she saw you blown to smithereens.”
A dull oppressive tarp cloaked her conscious mind with a confusion of shapes, colors and not-quite musical notes. Kristiane formed her present like an artist with a brush in hand, realizing for the first time that her passion was in sculpting rather than painting. The inspiration to create more immediate than her impatience, driving her to put the brush to canvas, though her fingers longed for clay, to mold, to manipulate, to work.

To ‘grasp the nettle’ as Jonathan called it.

But Kristiane’s paint was too thick, her bristles tangled with dust, pet hair, clumps of dried paint, the surface with which to work crumpled. Her surface wasn’t straight enough to create any more than a blob with shards of imperfections. Her inability to improve her situation, to laterally move to another concentration caused no end of frustration so much that her teeth ground against each other in sleep and in wakefulness.


Time supposedly healed all wounds and all she had now sitting in the bland, sterile MI6 infirmary was time. Just how long would Kristiane have to spend in this room to heal her wounds, both physical, emotional and psychological?

Her career derailed with the explosion of her theatre. Her temporary home, a London hotel room, ransacked so that all she had was her rehearsal bag, also lost in the mayhem. Her permanent home back in New York shackled under years of hurt and her estrangement from Terry. Her personal life… her personal relationships…

“Princess,” the voice was neither condescending nor demeaning, only motherly and respectful, “Jonathan’s alive. No worries there.”

Kristiane wanted to let the words douse her in relief, but there was no comfort in it until she saw him for herself, until she could touch him for herself, tactiley confirm Angela’s statement. The explosion happened before her eyes, right in front of her, and it was meant for Jonathan. “Please let me see him.”

Nodding to placate the girl, Angela began her informal debrief, “D’ya want to try telling me summat
what happened?”

Reluctantly, Kristiane pulled her gaze from the cloudy London day overlooking the Thames to the woman she’d known all of three days and been used as a dress-up doll for. “They took me. I didn’t like it. What more can I tell you?” The singer’s clear as a bell, melodic voice ravaged by dehydration and roughened raw from screaming through some of her captivity. She sounded hoarse, a mere echo of her previous pleasing tone.

Angela nodded at the crass clipped statement, empathizing with the girl’s vague recollection of the events. These people weren’t her world, except perhaps one… “Jonathan… he’s told me that you aren’t passive, he has. I’ve seen that you’re not. That was a courageous thing you did to get free.”

Kristiane scoffed. “Courageous,” a roll of her eyes accompanied the word. “And look where that got me,” the banged up girl winced as she lifted her splayed arm, her weakened and sore muscles protesting against any movement.

Judging the slight pout on the girl’s quivering lower lip and the broken sigh, Angela knew that Kristiane confirmed Jonathan’s fear that she remembered ending a man’s life. “He’s alive, he is,” Angela confirmed again. For the fourth time since Kristiane rejoined the land of the conscious. “Jonathan’s alive, cut up and bandaged, he is, but alive.”

“Then let me see him.”

“Give me something to work on, a lead… a hit of summat… then I’ll take you to him.” It was a subtle ultimatum, an angle that Angela used before. Only this time, it was friendly fire, a guide in the direction of justice. Kristiane had feelings for Jonathan, and it wasn’t Angela’s way to get between them. But her investigation came before… personal affections, even in her own life. “This isn’t over. We haven’t got the culprits. Help me,” she appealed to the heartsick, injured actress. “Help me and I’ll see that this doesn’t happen again.”

The melancholy watered Kristiane’s tone and flooded her timber. “I saw it…” Almost a whisper, almost a sob, a desperate clutch at serenity. “I… I heard them… Jonathan was close…and then that’s when the explosion happened. That’s…” she took a shaky breath and her eyes fell to her fingers, inspecting them for the blood that should be there, “That’s… I saw… the flames…”

Gingerly, Angela patted Kristiane’s hospital-issued blanket covered calf in comfort, warding off another onslaught of anguish and grief. “The building only, not Jonathan. He’s alright, he is.”

“Please… let me see him.”

“I will,” Angela tenderly promised. “But first, tell me anything, any detail, any clues however unimportant you may think… anything that might help…”

A single tear coursed down Kristiane’s cheek as she shifted her eyes back to the window overlooking the Thames. “I didn’t even know where I was, Angela. The fuckers took me, corded me up like an animal to be taken out for slaughter. I offered up whatever it is that they want, a thing I have but I… I don’t have anything.” Her speech rose with her emotion as she relived the incident. “They knew about Jonathan, they knew about Andrew Birch, that… Jonathan was helping me, that we… we were… involved. The main one—educated, dapper, moneyed—“

“How do you know that he was educated and from money?” Angela sat forward, picking up on vocal cues from Kristiane.

“He was well-dressed, perfectly pressed and… those weren’t clothes from Marks and Spencer. He
almost quoted Jane Eyre, talked of Edward Rochester.”

Angela silently catalogued all the information into the notepad in her head, like a waiter taking an order at a restaurant. She tried not to disrupt the stream of consciousness, since she got Kristiane talking freely.

“The main one—is it Roper?—he called me the new queen of Egypt—“

“The Queen of Egypt? What does that mean then?”

“I don’t know, but he kept calling me that… and then, he talked of Sophie Alekan.” Why did she feel guilty pronouncing the woman’s name? Why did she feel shame and responsibility for mentioning her? As if she weren’t worthy enough to speak her name…

A pained expression, a cross between a wince and grimace, fell over Angela’s face, a twinge twisted knot in her heart at the burden of guilt that she still felt for that death.

“I’m sorry,” Kristiane croaked. Her eyes trudged up slowly, as though she were watching a child crawl a set of stairs, back to Angela’s. The mountain of denial she’d built wasn’t strong enough against the agent’s earnestness, her crusade to see the law breakers behind bars, and her need to resolve this thing. Kristiane whispered, “It’s… it’s not about—me. They took me to get to Jonathan. I think they’re after him.” She didn’t want to say it, didn’t want to admit it, for it would make it true.

Angela felt for Kristiane, saw her reluctance, her want to protect him. The detective felt that Kristiane carried deep pocket of emotion and sympathy for those she cared about, and by extension wanted to keep them safe. “What makes you think that?”

“They knew… they knew where Jonathan was, Angela. They knew how to trap him and where and when…” The tears the girl had been fighting welled up again in her wide frightened eyes. “I don’t know why… I… He’s in danger.”

“They knew? How did they know?”

“I don’t know. But they knew he was five minutes away. The explosion was set up for him, for his arrival. To take him out.”

“Remotely or a trip wire?” Angela assigned Joel to running down the particulars for the explosion at the theatre and the apothecary for any similarities, to narrow who or what they were looking for.

Unhelpfully, Kristiane shrugged and shook her head.

Angela sat back to consider what she knew, to figure out precisely what was happening or had happened. “They were tracking him… And they wanted your item… Because Jonathan helped you, he had the item.” She talked it out for herself, to logic it, her fingers counting out all angles. Finally Angela got to her feet to lay a firm comforting hand on Kristiane’s uninjured arm when the patient got impatient. “He’s not in danger here, princess. You’re not in danger here. We’ve got him… and you. You’re safe, both. Let’s get you to him, shall we?”

*~*~*~*~*

“How do I look?” Kristiane patted down her shapeless hospital gown self-consciously, well aware that she’d been through hell and looked like it. She’d been unhooked from the hydration and sedative drip only moments before. Her sense of humor made a reappearance, though Angela read more truth than irony in the question.
Angela saw the patient’s sluggish and unsteady gate in her walk from one hospital room to the other, having lost some of her grace to her sore and abused muscles. “Like you’ve taken on the uni wrestling team alone…”

Kristiane’s face fell from hopeful to disappointment.

“I might schedule a round with ‘em if I come out looking a fraction of what you do.”

The actress offered a pensive but grateful grin. “Thank you, Angela. You saved me, as cheesy as that sounds. But you did. I saw you down the block, on the street, through the car window.”

“You, princess, didn’t need me. You’ve a spirit all your own.”

Dropping her chin to her chest, Kristiane asked, “Am I… am I in trouble?” Her meaning clear, her guilt apparent, her worry glaring.

“There will be an investigation and a deposition, but don’t worry on it straight away.”

*~*~*~*

Faint and dizzy from the effort of getting to Jonathan’s room, Kristiane sank into a seat beside his hospital bed. She went to reach for him, to make sure that he was real, that she hadn’t conjured him for wanting him. She smoothed her hands along the thin blue material of the hospital gown nervously. She saw his discomfort, his pain, even in his quiet stillness, but she couldn’t peel her eyes off him.

Jonathan was alive. She was reunited with him, and the knowledge of it overwhelmed, let alone experiencing it. When she was taken, she assumed she’d never see him again.

Angela hovered at the doorway, “I’ll leave you two alone, shall I?”

Kristiane’s human fragility took her off her feet and suppressed the tears of relief at seeing his restricted sigh. Her voice was no more than a whisper, “Jonathan.”

*~*~*~*

Jonathan Pine knew two types of hell. He’d lived through the long lasting effects; they haunted him each and every minute of every day. His lungs remembered the burning, aching sensation of dry heat and sand and oppressive, inevitable death. His ears recalled the deafening quiet that rang after hours of gunfire. His nose knew the charred, smoky stench of rotting flesh and used gunpowder. The backs of his eyelids played in cinematic clarity the horror of his friend and comrade, Mike’s mutilated flesh, after a grenade dropped in the middle of their conversation about the perfect meal, baked mushroom risotto.

Iraq, the war-torn country, had been his home for two tours, but his memory lived on there. He carried his fellow soldiers, fallen and survived, with him now. Like he did then when he rushed them to safety under raining shrapnel from the sky. The atrocities stung his memory, just as Sophie’s tragic end did.

He could still feel the cold damp wetness of her blood when he rubbed the pads of his fingers together. The firm embrace of death hardened and cooled her skin to the point of unrecognizably human. In those moments of discovering her lifeless body, checking for a pulse only to find none, and the inability to tell her that he loved her, Jonathan found hell – again.
"Let me go, Jonathan. Kristiane’s where your heart rests now."

Involuntarily, the voice of his dead lover (and new conscience) whispered to him as he watched Kristiane hobble unsteadily away from him. His fingers clutched the blanket, choking back the desire to call out to her, to stop her from walking out of his life. But he’d made the impossible decision to free her, to save her – from him.

Kristiane glanced over her shoulder, smiled weakly, and wiggled her fingers as a cutesy goodbye. The whole ordeal of threats, abduction and mysterious job offers weighed on her shoulders. Her usual expected flare and spark dulled under the stress of the unknown.

Jonathan suspected that his bad luck and toxicity rubbed off on Kristiane in their time together. His heart rested with her but his bad luck overshadowed any hope of happiness or glimpse of happiness he’d found with her. However brief… He cared enough to save her from whatever fate had in store for him.

Be with her, Jonathan. Follow your heart.

He stared at the rough blue blanket covering his legs long after Angela escorted Kristiane back to her own room. His fingers pulsated with the memory of her touch when she sat beside him. His gut twisted in agonizing knots at the damp sad eyes of the woman he dared to save. His arms felt leaden without her in them; he longed to hold her again, to be her reprieve from the vulnerability she’d been exposed – because of him, because of his bad luck.

He didn’t work for MI6 anymore, but Kristiane herself trusted in him to keep her safe. He’d let her down. Not a job responsibility as an employee but as her lover, as a man.

“You…” she cleared her roughened throat to no avail. “You have that look to you again, Jonathan. That look of guilt, that one I told you about…” Her eyes roved over him, never landing on one spot for long. The listless longing and unspoken pain glued her to the chair beside his hospital bed, though he could feel her need. Her need for comfort, for intimacy, for rationality. Her need for comfort.

She deserved all that after being trundled off like a ragdoll, imprisoned against her will and involved in a car accident. In the horror of that, she inadvertently took a man’s life in attempting to regain her own freedom. A living nightmare, and she dealt with the guilt of it.

Tenderly he held her hand, avoiding the chaffed and bruised cuff marks tattooed into her wrists. “That night,” he muttered letting the utterance die. He’d provided that comfort for her while they shared a bed together, but he couldn’t be that for her again. Proven too dangerous to be around her, he made the decision to let her go. To live without her because he had to, not because he wanted to. He didn’t want to….

"I didn't want that for you, Jonathan. I told you that I don't hold you responsible for... this." She shrugged, hesitating over her words. She stared down at her wrists and her wounded arm before gazing at the gauze bandaged covering his chest. "Are you terribly hurt?” Her eyes lingered over his heavily bandaged chest.

“Just a gash…” he laid his right hand over the stinging in his chest. “A couple of days, I’ll be right as rain.”

Without warning, Kristiane’s tears formed again at the corners of her eyes. She sniffed pathetically, the fear consuming her, a hangover from being bound and gagged. “I’m-I’m sorry.” She shook her head, the emotions bubbling up. “I-I never meant for this to happen.”
Despite the verge of tears, her lifeless hair, her lack of makeup, the scabbing mark on her chin and the unattractive smock, she’d never looked so beautiful to him. He lowered his voice to a near whisper to calm her. “You don’t need to apologize to me.”

*I should apologize to you for my bad luck and the poisonous mark that invariably left on you. I only… I only wanted to know you.*

“I came to you as a friend, and it’s just… it all became so… I don’t know… messy…” She lifted her watery eyes to his. “I didn’t expect you to come for me.”

It took everything in him not to pull her into that tiny hospital bed and kiss the fears and the remorse she felt. His injuries and his regret meant nothing when she hurt. But undoubtedly even wanting to do that, let alone acting on it, would carry its own price, its own punishment. “Of course I tried to come for you. The bad guys don’t get a win.”

“But they blew you up!” Her tremulous voice shook at her mind’s eye visual of the angry flames engulfing the apothecary.

A thin smile pulled at his mouth at her flare for dramatics. “They tried… but I’m resilient.” He tried to force a bigger smile in another attempt to calm her. When she didn’t respond, he studied her face. “Are you…”

Their hands shushed over one another, and he knew he shouldn’t encourage any type of intimacy between them… but she felt so… heavenly. In that small touch, he felt her influence on him.

“Are you hurt? Did they…” he couldn’t consider the possibilities; it pained him too much. He promised to protect her as a friend, as an agent for hire, as a man, as her lover.

Kristiane shook her head in attempt to comfort and quiet the rise and fall of his chest. “All things considered… Jonathan, I’m sore and bruised, but I’m alive. They only tried to scare me.”

Their strained conversation continued for only a few minutes, neither outwardly addressing what happened nor how they felt. Angela strong-armed Kristiane back to her own recovery room and bed, her body too fatigued for a long visit with Jonathan.

That sad weak wave and hopeful expression were his last visual of her – except his memories: the nightly arrival or her to collect her key.

Carl’s elbow in his ribs when she stepped through the automatic doors.

The tip of Carl’s head and chin jut with the familiar moniker: the pretty lady.

Her nightly reminder to refer to her as anything but Miss Taylor

The night that he decided to take a night off against his nature because of her.

A montage of their moments together played through his mind during his quiet time and would each and every infuriating day. His life already felt hollow and his bed empty without her.

Jonathan Pine knew two types of hell, and he’d found it again when the door clicked closed behind Kristiane.

*~*~*~*~*
When Kristiane was released from medical care, Angela snatched the singer to a different safe house, in Camden, a small two bedroom flat near the High Street. The luxury Kensington flat overlooking Hyde Park had been swapped out for a more modest setting. And Jonathan replaced by a different agent, a married man who resented Kristiane for being in presumed danger and keeping him from his wife. She agreed to stay on in London to help Angela with the theatre investigation.

Kristiane dismally discovered Jonathan didn’t want to see her again. That first afternoon in her new home, Angela stopped in for a visit, with news. She hoarded a manilla folder containing the details that brought her to call. “We know more about the chips, the ones Jonathan found in your scripts…”

Kristiane covered her grimace of pain at the mention of his name by sipping her water. The ice did nothing to cool the heat of disappointment and ache that Jonathan didn’t come to see her.

“The Carousel chip,” Angela cut to the point of her visit, “in your script… sophisticated bit of technology, that. It could extract data from nearby wifi networks.”

“What was it in my script?”

“Dunno… dunno… Still working that bit up. But it also had GPS capability… broadcast locations to…”

“To?” Kristiane asked when Angela trailed off.

The agent shifted through her folder and produced an eight by ten glossy of a handsome gentleman dressed like a professor. He stood by a podium in front of a chalkboard. “Is this the man who took you?”

Kristiane stared at the picture, wondering why Angela would ask about this particular man. Pointing, she cocked her head to the side, “Is that Roper?”

“Yeah… yeah it is,” the realization dawned like the sun descending behind a mountain at sunset. “… And… this isn’t the man that held you at the apothecary.”

Kristiane couldn’t help but study the still photograph, matching his visage with the nightmare that Jonathan described living that night in the library. That night in the library had been the first time Jonathan kissed her, and the crack in her heart crumbled with a deeper hurt. She shook her head, answering Angela’s question while reaching for the picture. Too engrossed in the tale that Jonathan told, Kristiane’s blue eyes tried to memorize this new face.

The actress missed the sigh from Angela, a defeated and lost sound. “I had a theory…”

“I’m sorry.”

“A Roper theory. That he’d gotten free and targeted you to get... to, to… exact his revenge.” She tiptoed since the young woman’s eyes had filled with grief and mourning for the absent man.

“I was… I thought—assumed it was Roper.” Kristiane swallowed visibly, burying the anguish knot in her throat. “It should’ve been Roper for... because, because… well, it made sense for it to be Roper… especially what he said—to me.” She danced around the subject so she wouldn’t fall apart in front of Angela. The MI6 agent had seen and witnessed, even comforted enough of her outbursts.

Angela patted the girl’s hand unconsciously, passing her some sympathy.

“So if it wasn’t Roper, who then?” Kristiane gathered her loose curls into her fist and clutched it to one side of her neck. A nervous gesture, a tenuous hold on herself. It gave her something to hold
onto. She looked younger in her unease as she sat forward.

Angela brazenly stated, “Wish I knew, princess… wish I knew.” She shoved all her collected information on Roper back into the manilla folder, loathing the wasted effort of a dead-end lead. “Back to the drawing board.” Tucking the garbage research under her arm, Angela stood from the table to leave.

Kristiane stopped her with a steady hand on the other woman’s arm. “I’ll stay… in, in London, if you think it will help.”

“You’re due to fly back to the states.”

“I am,” she nodded, her voice quiet and soft. “I am, but I could stay. If you think it will help.”

“That’s a brave and courageous offer, princess… but I think foolish too.”

Kristiane didn’t make the decision lightly or without thought. Since her release from the MI6 infirmary with more bruises and emotional scars than she cared for, her mind raced with possibility after ludicrous possible explanation for the series of events that landed her in another safe house. She couldn’t know if the threat against her had died. She couldn’t know that her captors had given up on her and moved on. “Those people… those guys are still out there. I don’t know if I’m safe going back to New York. So… use me. Use me, Angela. Use me to get to the bottom of this. I don’t want this hanging over my head. I don’t want to check my back at every turn. Use me.”

“And what of Jonathan?”

Hearing his name doused the singer in cold water, she shivered at the blow. “He made his choice.” *And I didn’t make the cut,* she thought regretfully. She folded her arms across her chest and her voice turned defensive. “He didn’t want me—after what I did.” Her eyes betrayed the guilt she felt, that tore her up at night. She’d killed a man. However unintentional, she’d ended a man’s life. “That’s… that’s something I have to deal with.”

Angela stared into the wide damp eyes of the woman she’d taken responsibility for. “And you still want to help him? You said so yourself, this is about him.”

The jilted lover sighed, hugging her arms closer, hunching her shoulders. “He’s rejected me, but I don’t want him dead.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Life and routine didn’t stall or slowdown in London, Jonathan noted as he took his first few steps outside away from the MI6 building. Holed up inside for five full days, restlessness strummed through his aching but healing body. The early morning sun burned into his pale complexion, the smog cocooned around him. The hard concrete beneath his feet firmed up his legs after so much rest. The wound over his chest pricked uncomfortably as a reminder to take it easy at first. Jonathan smoothed his hand over the hidden bandage beneath his Henley.

Sniffing in the scent of dank, old city, he squinted against the sunlight after too long under the dull fluorescents of the MI6 infirmary. Jonathan made a beeline for the tube. After the ordeal he’d survived, any sane person would’ve taken another day or two to adjust, but he had work to do. The hotel called to him like a neglected siren, drawing him in, reeling, tugging, nagging at him to return. Since Jonathan put himself back in hiding from life, the hotel and his duties there gave him focus and purpose, and cover.

He breathed in sharply through his nose, tipping his head back as the moist, exhaust-fumed air of home cleared his head. He ducked down the stairs to the underground and blended in with the day traffic. Students ditching school, lost tourists, and late to the office workers littered the tube. He kept himself to himself, avoiding any body contact with another living soul to protect his injuries. Dressed down in civilian clothes to integrate, he made little eye contact either.

When he emerged from the underground across town, the black-faced façade of the Covent Garden Hotel loomed ahead. Though boutique in nature, the place glittered invitingly with gold accents and taller than most windows. Between breaks in traffic, Pine jogged across the street and let himself in through the main lobby doors.

“Jonny, hey Jonny!” Carl called from the front desk, his voice rough with fatigue.

“Hey, old friend,” Jonathan greeted on his approach. The stark lobby held an elderly couple helping themselves to complimentary morning coffee. A young man in running shorts scoured over the discount fliers and advertisements to tourist traps. One young woman hovered at the front window watching the traffic and whispering into her mobile. “You’re back on?” he asked eyeing up Carl’s arm in a sling.

“Yeah, boss. A clean through and through is all. They fixed me up.” The older man would play
through the pain and without complaint.

“Glue and tape, yeah?” Jonathan half-grinned, slipping in through the employee only door to behind the reception desk.

“Stapler and a prayer, boss."

“So,” Pine leaned into the computer terminal, slapping a few keys to see the current occupancy and expected arrival numbers for the day. “What am I in for?”

“Ninety-three percent full, dropping maybe two percent with checkout and check-ins.”

“Staff?”

“All in.”

“Brilliant,” the former night manager turned day manager muttered, reviewing a few key reports that hadn’t been done in his absence. Nothing a few hours wouldn’t cure and the hotel stood proud and ran well without them, just the same.

“A few messages for you, Jonny.” Carl passed him a small stack of pieces of paper without pomp or circumstance. His attention focused on closing up night jobs before his shift ended within the hour. “When you’re back on.”

Jonathan shifted through the scraps of paper, and learned that only one person of importance had tried to reach him while he was out. “Thanks, Carl. I’m going to take these to my office.”

Angela had been on him for days that the hotel could be compromised or bugged, but his office wasn’t accessible unless he was there. He gained access with his key and closed the door behind him. He sat in the leather-bound, highbacked chair behind the desk and reached into a hidden drawer within. He retrieved a secure mobile that only one other person alive knew the existence of, his solicitor.

“Fairbanks and Stanley. How may I direct your call?” A bored receptionist on the other end answered at once.

“Connect me to Geller, please.”

With a few clicks and one ring, a familiar voice came on the line. Smell may be a powerful force behind memory recollection and déjà vu, but Jonathan relived so much based on sound. The gruff nasal of his solicitor and former comrade in Afghanistan brought him back to his first tour out. Toby Geller, known as Gells, recent graduate with a law degree, joined Pine regime. In fact, they were seat companions on the flight out of base camp in England.

“Gells, it’s Pine.”

“Tall-as-a-Pine, as I live and breathe! Thought you were dead, man… checked out.”

“Rumor, you know me.”

A chuckle ripped through the other end of the connection. “Like a cockroach. I’m sure that gets you many dates.”

Despite the cruel reminder and twinge of pain behind his eyes, Jonathan ignored the signs that he missed Kristiane beyond words. “Ah, I scurry when they ask.” He rubbed his forehead with his
fingertips, scrubbing the memory of her away.

“Did you get my phone messages?”

“I did, I did. I decoded them straightaway.” He flipped through the shorthand messages for J. Pine. A Colonel G called on Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday, all random times. “Carl took them all. He won’t ask questions. If it’s his business, a bloke would tell him so. He doesn’t go looking.”

Geller grunted in agreement and sat back in his chair, opening a file upon his lap. “Good to know. If I go looking for you again…” He took a long sobering breath, “Listen, I had some bits for you, ‘bout the hotel.”

“Brilliant. Tell me.”

“You’re now the major shareholder by a wide margin for the Covent Garden Hotel.”

When last looked with Geller, Jonathan’s foreign cover businesses held fifty-five percent. “Who sold?”

“A liquidation of an estate by the Digory children. Never thought they’d relinquish but number five’s health is failing. The sisters couldn’t be buggered to compromise on terms of settlement. They sold instead.”

Flipping open his laptop, Jonathan depressed the power button. “That’s another fifteen percent, yes? When did that finalize?”

“Last month. The twenty-fifth. The Gupta Brand.”

Jonathan navigated through his secret personal laptop to his portfolio that he kept about all his corporations. All founded with Roper’s money, used for covert investments that he’d hoped would maintain his cover. He secured his position as the night manager at the hotel by owning parts of it. No one would suspect that he owned anything at all, and it kept his name out of it should Roper or his cohorts ever resurface.

Geller reminded, “Jun Company secured eight percent in the beginning of the year. That was a coup in itself, pried from the grips of Cameron.”

“Cameron Fairfax?” The Covent Garden Hotel built in 1856 by the Fairfax family, and operated by the descendants. After World War II, Charles Fairfax sold pieces off to help with expenses to help rebuild. He had the intelligence to draw up contracts that prevented anyone from gaining a major hold. The more recent generations hadn’t been as careful.

Jonathan’s selfish interest was only to cover his ass. He could go underground and live on a beach in Hawaii on the interest alone from his investment in the business aspect. He’d slowly been picking up what the money players had for sale when the older generation began buying up farms instead of real estate.

“One and the same. He’s showing interest in regaining the family name… and the family hotel. That’s the reason for my calls,” Geller explained.

“Right.”

“The reinvestment of some funds? Back into hospitality?”

Jonathan racked his brain, tried to recall… after… Kristiane’s troubles, Angela’s recruitment and his
own health. “Remind me.”

“The secure fax, from the twenty-sixth. You earmarked twenty thousand pounds for a potential reinvestment opportunity at the hotel.”

Jonathan searched the wall as if it would reveal what he couldn’t remember. His eyes scanned the fireplace across from his desk, jumping from one imperfection to another knot in the wood mantle. He chewed the inside of his cheek in concentration, digging the depths of his memory, his life before Kristiane.

“From the Escher holding. The Swiss bank account,” Geller continued, filling in Jonathan’s silence. “Account number, CH93 0076…”

At the same moment, the hotelier opened his list of accounts and read off at the same time, “CH93 0076 2011 6238 5295 7.”

_Pine knew he hadn’t authorized anything from that account, but it suddenly jogged his memory of a previous conversation in his office._

“I checked your financials as you asked. Playful Productions has been paying your expenses through the end of this week when Carousel closes. But you’re booked in for another month…” his younger self echoed in his head.

“That’s what I want to know! Who’s paying that bill?”

“It’s a private bank account, CH93 0076 2011 6238 5295 7, direct withdrawals. CH. That’s the first two digits of a Swiss IBAN.”

“The fax came from me.” He had to confirm it once more for himself.

Geller didn’t notice the change in his client. “The fax ending 1268 in your office and your signature.”

Jonathan didn’t say anything more. He hadn’t faxed anything to his solicitor since late December, the last acquisition that Jonathan had been actively involved in. But he’d solved the mystery of who would pay for Kristiane to stay in England. He had been the benefactor.

He didn’t know why or who had impersonated him. Who knew enough about him to fax his solicitor using one of his many accounts, forging his signature? From within his office?

He’d known at the time that the account looked _personally familiar_. He hadn’t been wrong. He hadn’t realized how personally familiar.

*~*~*~*

Like clockwork, Angela stopped by Kristiane’s safe house every afternoon on her lunch hour with tidbits of the investigation and treats from the outside world. The farthest Kristiane ventured outside since hospital was the fence in the back garden. She cooled her heels, reading most of the day, singing to herself (as her agent hated that too) and waiting for word that she’d be safe again.

The distinctive triple knock and low kick on the door alerted Kristiane of Angela’s arrival on the third day. Agent Stoffer pouted deeper in his corner of the lounge, scowling out the window. He despised each minute of this assignment, watching over an American singer whom he’d never heard
of. Not quite the VIP he’d anticipated when he was first approached about the assignment. His wife fancied that he was off the streets, but hated that he was sequestered to a safe house away from her. He much preferred patrolling Trafalgar Square or even one of the lesser travelled stops on the underground than be shut up with this woman he didn’t know.

Kristiane padded to the door on bare feet, sparing Stoffer the briefest of glances before opening the door. Unbolting and unchaining the door, she let her friend in and secured the entrance as she’d been taught to do.

“Oh, Angela.”

“Princess,” the agent address. She adjusted a bag from one hip to the other like she did with her young son and glared at Mr. Unwilling in the lounge. “Foot broken, is it? Sprained wrist?”

He grunted from his corner of the room and hid his face behind his laptop.

“You shouldn’t be opening the door, princess. Make him do it,” she emphasized the latter part and barked it at the apple logo staring back at her. She then directed Kristiane through the flat to the kitchen.

To distract the detective from the inactive officer, Kristiane played host. “Want a cuppa?”

“Impressive. You got the lingo down.”

Kristiane made the most of her new situation and new temporary home. She’d rearranged the tiny-yet-workable kitchen for optimal baking potential to pass some of her down time. She’d baked daily with a hidden agenda of sweeting her roommate to her, at least to friendly acquaintance rather than stubborn obstacle keeping him from his happiness. It’d gone over as well as a book of matches in a hurricane.

As hostess, Kristiane waved Angela into a chair at the small café-sized table and served two teacups on saucers. Flicking the switch to boil the kettle, she then opened the oven. The sweet inviting aroma of baked chocolate filled the room. “I made chocolate chip cookies,” she announced proudly producing a tray full with a flourish.

The agent smirked at the visual, feeling more and more like the woman embodied a Disney princess. “Dunno why I’m surprised you bake. I shouldn’t be.”

Doling the cookies onto a plate at the center of the table, Kristiane smiled at the underestimation. “My parents… my family really, owned a bakery. I know sugar and flour before I knew singing.”

“And the conversions?” Angela mimed the use of measuring cups and turning the knobs on an oven.

“Like scales on a piano. Those were drilled into my head before I could talk. Kristiane then poured a cup of tea each before sitting at the table with her friend. “If the singing and the acting and the dancing never panned out, I had a backup.”

Angela shoved a small piece of cookie into her mouth and nodded in approval. Without preamble, she said, “There’s been… a development.”

Kristiane appreciated the hesitation and matronly tone in her friend’s voice. She believed she’s made a friend for life in the no-nonsense, straight-shooter Angela. Breathing deeply, Kristiane coiled her hands around the scalding teacup as long as she could stand. “It was only a matter of time.”

“Searching up the names you told me… the ones offering your ‘new job,’” Angela air quoted. “The
queen of Egypt had led to nothing, but we did learn one thing.”

Kristiane steadied herself, preparing for the inevitable reminder of Jonathan and how much she ached for his calming presence. She missed his friendship and his dedication to see her safe after living with Agent Stoffer. “And?”

“We sourced the account funding your stay in the hotel after Carousel ended.”

“Oh!” She expected more on the chips or the CCTV footage of the accident or the explosion of the apothecary. She’d forgotten about the beginning.

“Did… did… Jonathan tell you about the money trail after the Tradepass affair?”

Kristiane covered the butterflies that took wing in her belly at the mention of his name. Her blood surged in a moment and the room spun. She bit her lower lip, quelling the swell of grief. “Yes,” she swallowed. “Yes, briefly. He owns the company that runs the hotel?”

Angela nodded, breaking off another piece of cookie and shoveling it into her mouth. “It’s a little more complicated than that, but that’s mostly true.”

Studying her friend’s face, Kristiane recognized that there was more that she didn’t know about the man she’d grown to care for. “Mostly true means somewhat false. What’s this have to do with me?”

Angela sat forward in her chair, laying her hands on the table’s surface. “That money—Roper’s money—is Jonathan’s safety net.” Her forefinger made a circular motion to demonstrate her words. “In case he ever needs to hide again, he’s got an income, an overhead. A fund to draw from. But it’s also an insurance policy… so the money doesn’t end up on the wrong side of the law.”

Kristiane pursed her lips, considering the possibility. Finance and money escaped her. Flying under the radar baffled her as well.

Angela noticed her friend’s confusion in the widening of her eyes. “The commerce and community of London profits indirectly by having that money in Jonathan’s possession, in his control. No use locking it up in a vault when it helps drive tourism back into London. The Covent Garden Hotel is an institution in the city.” She noted that Kristiane’s eyes glazed over and made a snap judgement not to explain the intricacies, just highlights. “The government turned a blind-eye when Jonathan kept the money. He could be trusted. He proved that by taking on Roper.”

The jilted lover covered her personal hurt by burying her face in the cup of tea. Taking deep swallows of the hot drink hid her embarrassment; she still cared for the man who left her and she missed him. Her teacup clattered against the saucer when she dropped it. As she pushed the dish towards the center away from her, her voice waivered, “What’s this got to do with me?”

Angela tilted her head in sympathy for the pain she saw on her friend. “The account used to pay your future at the hotel – it was one of Jonathan’s.”

The wooden chair legs scraped along the floor when Kristian pushed away from the table and rose from her seat. “He paid that bill?”

Angela stood just as quickly and wrapped her fingers around her friend’s uninjured arm to stop her from leaving. “Not quite, princess, not quite.”

“What are you telling me?” A myriad of emotions played over her as she tried to reason this new bit of information into the actions she took over the past month. Her mind worked backwards through her memories to fit this piece into the puzzle.
“Sit, princess. Just sit your ass back down and I’ll tell ya.” Angela nodded to the seat and urged Kristiane with a tug at her arms, the one she’d grabbed in her haste.

Cutting a sideways glance at the agent, Kristiane sunk back into her chair, but slowly.

“It wasn’t Jonathan,” Angela stated for clarification as she lowered back down. She spoke evenly to dissipate the tension in the room. “Someone—we don’t know who—someone directed that money to get you to stay. Where they wanted you,” she added as an afterthought.

Kristiane repeated lowly, “Where they wanted me.”

Angela rung her hands together in a knot. “They needed you there,” she emphasized with a shake of her clasped hands. “They needed you in the hotel.”

“They needed me in the hotel or near Jonathan?” Kristiane pieced together some of the information she’d learned from her abduction to the new pieced that Angela brought to her.

“That’s the rub, princess. I think they’re one and the same for whoever’s pullin’ the strings on this one.”

Kristiane turned to silence as she built up what little she knew in her head. Bars of music strung together to create a song, she played the number over in her mind, finding the tune and the melody and the key. She shivered when the realization came to her. She’d been used, a mere pawn in someone else’s chess game, played from the start. “I was meant to go to him.”

With another apologetic tip of her head and a sympathetic tone, Angela confirmed it. “It appears that way, princess.”

Kristiane nodded once, crossed her arms under her breasts and sat back in her chair. Something inside her broke, but she couldn’t cry, she couldn’t feel. The numb, empty feeling of betrayal sat in the pit of her stomach and she flipped a switch on all emotion. Denial set in.

With measured and precise movements, Kristiane pushed to her feet and went to the sink, turning her back to the conversation and hiding her face. She poured the rest of her tea down the drain, feeling just as discarded and unwanted. “What do you need from me, Angela? I know you have a plan.”

The monotone delivery chilled the room and told Angela everything she needed to know. Kristiane resigned herself to being played. No amount of support or comfort or reassurance would reach her until this thing finished. The only thing that could help her would be to include her in the resolution.

“Kristi—“

“—I’m fine. Tell me what you want me to do.” Kristiane turned around to plead, but she wasn’t entirely sure which to plead for: an escape, a reprieve, or a plan. Instead, she delivered flatly. “Whatever you want me to do, I’ll do. I just want out of it.” She took a sobering breath, her eyes never leaving Angela’s in her determination. “I want out. If playing this thing out till the end will get me there, so be it. I want my life back.”

_I want to go home._

The trouble was she no longer knew who or where that was anymore.

*~*~*~*~*
“Tell me you put her on a plane home.” Jonathan’s harsh tone cut across the empty Covent Garden Hotel lobby. The mid-morning tourist crowd scattered in the hour before Angela arrived. Jonathan, alone, minded the front desk. After the MI6 doctors stitched him up, he traded his nightly duties for the day shift. He refused to stay on the second shift, knowing he’d wait for her arrival each night, a call she’d never make, his American Broadway star.

“And a good day to you, sir,” Angela mocked sarcastically. The irony of the situation clear as the crystalline windows of the lobby. She herself shot from the hip and never beat around the bush. “She’s safe… for the time being.”

“Angela,” Jonathan warned from his station behind the keyboard terminal, the guest satisfaction reports swirling before his eyes in a scrambled mess of letters, numbers and symbols. He’d been lost in it for hours, deafened by the noise in his head.

Angela stepped up to the check-in counter and heaved her shoulder bag upon it. Her forefinger landed in front of him on top of his monitor in a gesture of authority. “You don’t’ want anything to happen to that girl, so she’s now on my watch.”

“Get her back to New York.” The agony split him in two to even say it. He loathed the necessity of living with her, but he wanted her safe. He cut ties with her in the hopes she’d go back to her real life, away from his influence, his bad luck and his misfortune.

Angela cocked her head, studying his tortured expression, the flex of his jaw, the knit of his brow. “That girl ain’t any safer in New York. You know it and I know it. Don’t sweat it, Jonathan. I’ll see to her.”

The impulse to beg Angela to keep Kristiane safe stood on the tip of his tongue, but his pride… his prudence held it on the brink.

“I can take you to her,” Angela tested with a glint of mischief in her eye. “See for yourself?”

Jonathan’s eyes swept over the deserted lobby of the hotel that he’d searched high and low for bugs. He’d scoured the lobby, his office, Kristiane’s vacated room on the fifth floor and both of the restrooms on the main floor for any signs of spy equipment. He’d come up empty with every sweep. “I can’t,” he admitted on a swallow.

“This thing ain’t over, Jonathan. I won’t send her off until this thing is over, got that?” Angela’s conviction firmed stronger with each day this mystery remained unresolved, as steadfast and die-hard as her dedication to see Roper meet his sordid end. Losing another civilian while she led the case was simply impossible. She’d lost Sofie, but she still had Kristiane. No loss would be accepted for justice. Angela worked until the bad guys met justice and the innocent bystanders lived to tell the tale.

Jonathan saw her determination, her dedication, her life’s work. He tipped his head to acknowledge her question. He’d trust in Angela; she didn’t let him down in Cairo. “What do you know?”

Angela rifled through her bag to produce a dossier she’d kept on Roper and threw it on the countertop like so much trash. “I came from seeing your girl. Just now. It wasn’t Roper that took her. Not Roper.”

Flipping through the folder, Jonathan flashed back over the driving force of his life from a year ago. The ammunition, the weapons, the Napalm, the stolen pictures taken on a confiscated mobile, Richard Roper. Jonathan lived in the shadow of an explosion of his own making. He agreed to Angela’s plan, to be the human hand grenade, to be the psychopath. To live as these things, he
became it. He stole for it and he killed for it. “It had to be Roper. It must be!”

“Your girl—”

“—she’s not my girl!”

Angela scoffed at Pine’s snap denial. “Very well, Casanova.” Mockingly she held her hands up in a defensive pose. “The Disney princess got an eyeful of her captors out there.” Pointing to the glossy photo of Roper, Angela indicated, “She didn’t recognize our man Roper there.”

“What the hell is going on then?” His frustration boiled over. He gave up his life and his happiness in sacrificing Kristiane, shoving her away to save her.

“You’ve another enemy, haven’t ya?” Angela’s no-holds-barred approach cut to the core of their case. “We’ve another angle to consider.”

The lack of privacy gave him pause. Jonathan didn’t feel comfortable debating his enemies in the open area. But Angela wouldn’t give up until she found justice for the wrongs done. “You know me, Angela… what you see is what you get. Before Sophie, I didn’t do anything but serve people. Since Cairo, I worked for you and for Roper. After that, I disappeared again because of the target on my back.”

Angela waved her finger in the air as he mentioned the crux of the issue. “I’m considering that very target now, Jonathan. Someone’s returned to the shooting range and they’ve their sight on you.”

“But not Roper…” he led with more annoyance for repeating the name.

“Need I remind you… you rode off into the sunset with not only the woman, but a shit ton of money. The British government, MI6 and I – all turned a blind eye to it. But,” she slammed the countertop with her palm to accentuate her point, “Not when it becomes my new case.”

Jonathan stood back on his heal, contemplating this angle. Ever since Angela crashed back into his world as she did, he’d been swept up in the wake of her urgency and Kristiane’s allure. In her not-so-subtle way, Angela presented him with evidence that his time bomb exploded, and the backdraft ensnared Kristiane. “Angela, you told me that she was the target.”

“Even I make mistakes… Kristiane was the diversion that led us to you. All the crumbs lead back to you and x marks the spot.”

“The chips? The ones in her scripts?”

Angela pursed her lips and shrugged. “To find you.”

“The bomb at the theatre.”

“I’ll be blunt,” Angela prepped.

“You were never anything but.”

“You have a type, Pine,” she said without softening the offending statement. “Everyone’s attracted to you. People come to trust you. You brought Kristiane to you. That bomb… meant for you.”

The phone on the desk sliced through the silence of the lobby, the quiet that settled between Jonathan and Angela after her unapologetic explanation. His concern over the development etched in the lines of his forehead for the target on his back. Distractedly, he picked up on the second ring. “Good
morning. Thank you for your interest in The Covent Garden Hotel. Jonathan Pine, the ni,—, the manager speaking. How may I help?"

“Jonathan, issat you, mate?” The voice on the other end of the line sounded tiny, distant, almost canned.

“Speaking,” Jonathan repeated, almost recognizing the voice without nailing it for certain. The shift clouded his memory. His eyes darted about the lobby, avoiding Angela, listening for the next clue to jog his memory.

“Jonathan, mate, tis Cameron. How’s my hotel? Still standing?”

Unconsciously, Jonathan straightened his stance to full attention and respect. “Sir, Mr. Fairfax, it’s an honor.” He counted the number of times he’d spoken to the part owner of The Covent Garden Hotel at four in the past year.

“Stuff it, Jonathan. How’s the business? Getting used to the day schedule?” The man never minced words. When he rung, he phoned with a purpose.

“Uh, yes of course, sir. After the doctor cleared me for work, I returned to day shifts until I’m tip top.” His fingers flew over the computer terminal, retrieving an occupancy report from the first two quarters and a projected profits rundown.

Cameron acted as the main holder in the hotel business shares. In truth, his night manager turned day manager held more than fifty percent of the stock through private trusts, a silent partner through trust companies. The transition had been gradual; Cameron never let on that his greed led him to sell a majority of the vested interest.

“Brilliant, brilliant…” the younger man muttered. “Listen, Jonathan, that corporate account I landed earlier this month…”

Jonathan’s fingers stalled on the keyboard, arrested by the unexpected reminder. The corporate account, Playful Productions, brought Kristiane into the hotel as a guest and into his life. The fifth floor consisted of eight rooms and two suites that the production company paid a per diem rate to reserve at a moment’s notice for talent and business associates. At last check, two actors from the burned down production of Carousel occupied two of these rooms, hired to take roles in the next musical already in rehearsals. Kristiane’s suite, the Williams room remained vacant since Jonathan himself relocated her and her effects to the Kensington safe house… with him.

Clearing his throat, Jonathan pushed past the knot of regretful nausea in his gut. “Playful Productions, yes, sir.” His voice betrayed none of the turmoil he’s survived since the theatre company placed Kristiane in his hotel.

“Do me a solid, won’t ya? Give ‘em a jingle—their number’s in the client roster. Give ‘em a ring and ask about possible occupancies, yeah?”

“Yes sir.”

“We can double dip on those rooms, Jonathan, book ‘em up and collect the per diem.” A common practice in the hotel industry with corporate accounts. Overbook those rooms, bank on the fact that those rooms usually sat unused. “Wimbledon money’s coming in. I want that money. Shame to lose it to some silly song and dance show.”

Jonathan rubbed his temple with his free hand, resenting this man’s reminders of Kristiane. Silly summed her up, but a loss… his most shameful. He missed her sorely, beyond the constant reminders
from random people and the place he first met her. “Sure, sure… I’ll give them a ring.”

“Thanks. How about that little starlet in the Williams suite? She still there?”

Jonathan stared straight at Angela. The hotel lobby blurred as air hissed like a deflating balloon. How did Cameron know the details of any guest in the hotel from a boat in the south of France? Why question the whereabouts of this single occupant? Jonathan didn’t ask; he knew his place. A stilted reply tumbled from his mouth, “Checked out, no forwarding information.”

Cameron tsked at the other end of the line. “Pity. She was a draw. She did have the best suite – the Williams, yes?”

The fresh interest in the day to day operations by the absentee acting owner got Jonathan’s heckles up. He didn’t dare question it directly. Rather he’d call in a few favors about Cameron Fairfax, his whereabouts, his business interests, where his money flowed, and what entities he owed.

“Yes, sir… until four days ago, I reckon.” Another bold and bland lie.

“See that the Rochesters get that room if Playful doesn’t fill it. Theodore and Shirley must be due in for Wimbledon.”

Jonathan slapped another button on his monitor keeping pace with the young not-so-successful entrepreneur. Cameron had aspirations, but squandered it with his greed and short-sighted ways. Immaturity played a defining role in losing his share of the hotel.

The phone call ended abruptly once Cameron got his fill of the comings and goings of the hotel. Jonathan cradled the phone delicately, like a bomb with a pulled pin, and stared gravely at Angela.

The woman read the hotelier’s body language like one of her dossiers. He stood, stiff, stiffer than his at attention for hotel clients, stoic and tense. “A late delivery then, Pine?” she joked, fanning a pen from the desk between her fingers.

“This thing isn’t over.” The statement came out quietly calm, but Jonathan didn’t feel that. A call to arms trumpeted through his blood, climbing up his spine. The heat of battle flared and flexed through his fingers.

“And Santa visited seven months ago, Pine. Shall we take a look at this week’s news? Form a plan?”

He loathed her sarcasm, but she had a point. He needed to get in front of this thing, for his sake, and for Kristiane’s sake.

“Let me getchu into a safe—“

“No!” he interrupted without a second thought. “That’s not the right play.”
Chapter 19

Chapter by TheOtherCourse (kanevixen)

Chapter Summary

Jonathan hung back in the shadows in a deserted corner of the corridor and watched. Agent after plain clothed agent filtered into the backstage area. The behind the curtain intersecting hallways of the Covent Garden Hotel held a mystery about them, but he knew the crevices and imperfections. An air of anticipation soured into one of unease. As the hour grew closer and the number of people filed in, the sense of foreboding grew. He’d staged, planned and directed everyone perfectly for the strike of disaster.

Angela allowed Jonathan to call the shots to resolve the letter-writing, theatre bomber and Disney Princess kidnapper. The night manager remained on duty during the day, masquerading as a dedicated worker. He intended to bait the perpetrator with his availability and unprotected position. But that seemed too obvious, so he hatched the next best thing when no one came for him or made a move against him.

To his shame and utter regret, Jonathan was forced to use Kristiane as bait. A one night only concert with her as star would strong-arm the responsible party out of hiding. All the action and threats surrounded her, he couldn’t leave her out of it in the end.

And then she entered. Kristiane wafted in with Angela and a dresser laden with wardrobe bags and makeup satchels in tow. None of them saw him in his secluded corner, but it was better that way.

She… she looked majestic.

She looked… aloof.

Infuriating.

And beautiful.

Kristiane tucked a strand of her loose hair behind her ear and leaned into Angela. The older woman whispered something and the trio of women veered when Angela pointed in the direction of the temporary dressing room. Although the concert hall had been a part of the hotel since the early 1920s, the venue had been built specifically for musicians to play, rather than performers.
Jonathan quartered off a fair bit of space for Kristiane to dress in privacy from a recently abandoned supply closet. He’d relocated all the stock of paper products and guest toiletries and linens to another part of the hotel. He’d never fess up to it, but he’d spent more time making that room comfortable than anything else in preparation for this night. He’d even hung a painting of Brighton Beach houses on one wall to lighten up the dull gray walls. The subject of the painting could easily be mistaken for Kensington unless studied. He couldn’t give away that he thought about that afternoon as much as he did. That afternoon he discovered – or found for the first time – happiness with Kristiane in the trees outside the Royal Pavilion.

When Kristiane and Angela turned out of sight, Jonathan crossed to the door into the concert hall to take his post in the back of the house. He turned his earpiece into the correct frequency and waited. Through Angela’s earpiece, he heard Kristiane singing scales to warm her voice. The sound faded in and out depending on the proximity of Angela to the singer. No amount of preparation braced him for the intense twist in his gut. He missed her. He felt a hollow shell without her in his life. He hated having her mixed up in this mess… his mess. She didn’t deserve that.

*~*~*~*

“Put it on,” Angela ordered the half-dressed woman with her arms crossed under her breasts. Sagely, the agent had turned off the output audio to mute. She knew, she anticipated, she suspected that Kristiane would give her a hard time about this part. “You liked it so much the last time.”

Kristiane pursed her lips in a moue of stubborn defiance at the familiar proffered box, as small as an engagement ring. What lay within the confines was something far more dangerous than marriage in her opinion. “I don’t want to put that thing on.”

“What not?”

“I know who you put on the other end, and I have nothing to say to him.” She didn’t care that she sounded like a spoiled petulant child who didn’t get her way. She hated that Jonathan told Angela of the affinity she had for the device. She hated that he’d talked of her. After a month of isolation, living inside her head, her baked goods, and her performance songs, Kristiane was annoyed.

No, hurt.

Angry.

Appalled.

Incredulous.

Hurt. Definitely hurt.

And confused.

Kristiane put her life on the line for Jonathan Pine, and she’d agreed to do it again. To beef up her karma, she’d convinced herself. After the ordeal in the apothecary, the assumption had been that her situation would improve, being free of immediate danger. But Jonathan didn’t look at her the same, no longer as a lover, no longer as a friend.

The confusion and puzzlement came when Angela confirmed that she’d been used as a pawn. She was meant to turn to Jonathan. She was meant to spend time with him. Someone else made all that happened happen. She put Jonathan in danger by turning to him.
Poised before her vanity mirror in a makeshift dressing room, Kristiane prepped her hair and makeup for her upcoming performance with the help of her mute dresser. Leaving modesty back in her safe house, she wore nothing more than a white strapless bra and matching knickers, the bare minimum for the gown she’d chosen for the concert.

Imagined scenarios of Jonathan kissing or dressing those wounds died shortly after their stay in the MI6 hospital bay. Of course, he’d suffered more serious wounds than she, but that hope of healing together died before it truly began.

“I need you fitted up in this,” Angela reasoned. “To make sure it works.” She held the box at the end of her outstretched arm in offering. “We need to monitor,” Angela explained to the woman acting the wounded lover, “while you’re performing. If anything happens…”

Arms crossed under her breast again, Kristiane read the agent’s concern about the fate of this night. Reluctantly she took the proffered box. “I’ll talk to you, but don’t make me talk to him.”

*~*~*~*

For all the fuss and protestations Kristiane threw in front of Angela, the entertainer appeared cool as a cucumber when she finally fitted the earpiece in place.

Stepping into her sweetheart neckline blush colored gown, the singer ignored the fading bruises and scrapes that peppered her skin from those fuckers that took her. Kristiane pulled a face of disgust at the earpiece even as she slipped the straps over her shoulders. The dresser fussed behind her, straightening the material of the skirt, zipping her up the back and checking that all manner of undergarment were hidden. The woman was a mousy little thing who rarely spoke, if ever, and had been Kristiane’s dresser for Carousel. Angela put a call into the British Equity and the costume trade union to find this woman. After offering her this opportunity, the woman arrived on the doorstep of her office without so much as a hello.

No expense spared for this masquerade concert that could easily become a real deal if the intended didn’t show. Kristiane treated it as real, as did everyone working it, even the MI6 agents dressed to the sixes and sevens should the bad guy skip out on his own trap. Weeks papered with advertisement after announcement of Kristiane’s one-night only concert. If she was still the bait, the one time and place she would be was nothing more than an invitation for her attacker to make another move.

‘Come and get her!’

‘She’s right here!’

If this man didn’t chomp at the obvious trap, Kristiane would take the stage and sing for the sold out crowd. The tickets sold out within hours of going on sale: the one night only engagement of Kristiane Taylor. Her name frequented the news as the West End star without a show after her theatre had been bombed. The sensationalist media lauded her as brave American unfairly unemploy ed by destruction.

Relaxed and in control, Kristiane prepared to take the stage again.

Angela kept the nature of speculation out of the media in regards to the bombing. Minimizing the panic only kept people from harassing her with questions while she spent her time investigating and solving it for good. Cleaner that way, she thought, especially when the news hit of yet another
explosion in an apothecary within miles of the theatre.

The car accident barely registered in the news, thankfully. The names of victims and details of that pile up were kept under wraps. The general public knew nothing of the fact that these crimes were related, only that they all happened in Covent Garden. The old neighborhood had a run of bad luck.

*~*~*~*

It had been one month, five days, nineteen hours and six minutes since Kristiane had last spoken with Jonathan. Her heart still ached from his rejection. Her voice steeled and affected calm, “Songbird to the night manager.” Hiding behind her sense of humor and her snark seemed the best plan for the circumstances.

“The night manager here,” Jonathan confirmed, minimizing how much hearing her voice addressing him after so long melted his brain in his head. He couldn’t recall all the inane, stupid and ridiculous reasons that kept him from her. Foolish. Ludicrous. He’d missed her more powerfully than he thought. Her voice in his ear was good, all too good.

Clearing his throat, Jonathan reached for something to say. “How… how’ve you been, Kristie?”

“How…” her voice waivered on a nervous chuckle. “Ready to sing if y’all let me.” She rolled her eyes in her head at her stupidity. Never in her life had she used that phrase, only in character.

Even Angela gave her a wide-eyed, eyebrows half-mooned look that could only be interpreted as ‘are you mad?’

Kristiane looked down at her Dolce and Gabbana crystal covered glass slipper-like heels. She wished that she didn’t feel so conflicted around him, about him, that she could be breezy and natural, but she allowed him to become part of her.

In his mania of missing her, Jonathan didn’t hear the vocal cue. Swallowing his pain, he stiffly spoke, “We’ll see what we can do. It’s a sold out show.”

Kristiane squeaked in her excitement, the pitch higher than usual in her nervousness of speaking with Jonathan again. “That’s encouraging.”

Angela patted Kristiane’s bare arm with her hand, proud that the woman played nice after all the resistance. She tapped her earpiece and nodded to Kristiane, signaling to stay on it. The agent then angled her way out of the dressing room to get into position by a backdoor entrance.

“Can you—“

“I’ll go—“

The estranged lovers began at the same time awkwardly, and apologized to each other just as quickly. After a nervous laughter bubbled out of her, Kristiane said, “Please. Go on.”

Jonathan admired how smooth and calm she sounded given the imminent performance and possible danger, especially given their history. To him, she sounded no different than that night he went to her Carousel performance and she thanked him so graciously for being there for her. Maybe she didn’t care and their time together remained a fling to her. Aloof and beautiful, irresistible and infuriating woman!
He cleared his throat again. “I was only going to say, I’ll be on if you need me.” There was no other way to express it, and it was true.

Kristiane closed her eyes, feeling slightly faint from the emotional rush of his devotion, even if just for one evening. “I should… I… Just whistle?” Those were the same words they’d used at her Carousel performance. She remembered them as vividly as if they’d been the night before.

“Yeah,” he breathed more than spoke. “Yeah, something like that.”

Making her way to the door and the hallway to get into places, Kristiane signaled to her dresser to follow behind her. “Are you… Will you—are you in the audience?”

“I am,” he told her soberly. “I’m here.”

*~*~*~*

“Was it real?” Three words flew from her mouth without a filter of time, place, diplomacy, prudence or emotion. Her whispered question punched him in the gut and howled in his head, ricocheted about like shrapnel along a steel hull. She pretended for long enough and her head (and possibly her heart) needed an explanation.

Of all the dishonest things and identities he created, Jonathan dedicated himself to seducing Kristiane for no other reason than he wanted to. The man he’d become in his exile from living knew one thing. In her presence, he found himself, his true self. The lost soul with no purpose outside of a mission found a kindred spirit. He adopted her zest for life, her passion, and her charisma, internally. He internalized every new emotion she’d awakened in him, and only allowed her to see his joy, his smile, his happiness. Only with her. He could only trust Kristiane with that part of himself.

Of course it had been real. From that first hidden smile he dared crack at her, that moment he first acknowledged that he liked her. That night in the Covent Garden Hotel when his friend Carl thrust him into spending time with the pretty lady.

The pretty lady… The gorgeous woman… his luminous joy.

What he felt with her, what he did with her and everything he did to get her out of whatever it was he stirred up, all of it was true affection. He convinced himself that she was free of it since he let her go.

Jonathan released her, believing she’d be free, away from danger, away from his toxic influence, his three hundred million of stolen blood money, away from London and his Roper connection.

Silence met her question, and she couldn’t claim that response as a shock. Jonathan, ever the stoic, proper, polite watcher, hadn’t graduated to a man of words since he left her. She liked him for his quiet, calming and strong nature, but now she wished he would speak.

“Did you… did you like me at all?” she asked, smoothing her hands down along the wispy skirt of her dress along her thighs as she turned a corner. She remembered perfectly how Jonathan had protected her, put himself in danger’s path for her. These sacrifices were difficult to ignore, but he also served as a dedicated host and a proud soldier. Then turned his back on her.

“I didn’t come here to disrupt your world,” she spoke softly with a fateful tone. This was exactly the reason she gave Angela a hard time about the earpiece. She knew her mouth wouldn’t stay shut. “Maybe I shouldn’t have- I shouldn’t have said anything to you.”
He heard her high heels in the wings, just off stage. He flattened himself in his seat at the back of the house where he’d set up his surveillance. Jonathan hadn’t really seen her properly since that day in the MI6 infirmary. He’d chosen to give her up, let her go, so she didn’t end up like him. But she was like him now… Blood soaked her hands like his. She’d killed a man in self-defense, and the guilt of that weighed on her. Just as his kills at his hands dampened his, tormented his life.

Kristiane straightened her back and checked her dress once more. Her hands smoothed down along the flowy material, ironing some imaginary wrinkle in her nervousness. The weeks mounted and separated them, and she’d felt every minute of it. Her hand flew to her stomach to keep the emotional butterflies there and cage them from beating an escape. She inhaled to calm them, her diaphragm expanding under her palm.

Then she stepped into the near empty stage area of the back of the hall. A single microphone stood in the middle, marking her spot. The grand piano had been relocated off stage right for the concert to highlight Kristiane and her soaring voice.

Jonathan couldn’t tear his eyes from the gorgeous woman in the full length champagne colored gown that skimmed her body to a stunning silhouette against the stark red backdrop. Her hair had been swept up in a sophisticated yet playful array of loose curls. Her neck displayed a single petite diamond to accentuate the sparkles on her dress. With one starving, deprived look over her, Jonathan felt spent. His breath whooshed from his body while her force tugged at his heart. He blinked away.

Jonathan had dropped the conversation entirely, gone noticeably silent, no confirmation, no denial, nothing. He considered how best to answer the question in the time they had, in the company they kept. Against his better judgment, he turned to the truth. “I did,” he sighed, answering her second question. “I did, of course I did.” He stared at the solid khaki of his trousers, the bland, neutral color reflected how the month since he last talked to her felt. Empty, flat and uneven.

What was that saying? The truth shall set you free.

_Tell her, Jonathan. Tell her before you lose another chance._

Sophie stood on his shoulder, supporting him, encouraging him, playing good angel.

“I do,” he corrected softly.

But his answer was lost in the struggle—

All of it lost in the scuffle—

Kristiane clawed at the gloved hand that seized across her mouth. The heels of her glass slippers stomped on the stage, missing the intended target of her assailant’s feet. She squirmed when he captured her arms, gluing them to her chest with his free arm. The human straight jacket around her constricted pressing all the oxygen she stored in her diaphragm. She screamed a muted sound that would’ve pierced glass if she weren’t restrained.

Jonathan missed the initial attack in his musing, his coming to terms with the truth, but he popped to his feet to charge forward.

“Stop there, Pine, you fuck!” Cameron’s icy command boomed through the hall when he saw Jonathan close in. “Any closer, she’ll pay for your mistake.”

Jonathan obeyed. His vision blurred except for Kristiane struggling, the fabric of her dress swaying, her feet forced to dance for her life, her hands tried to scramble for leverage. His heart clanged painfully in his chest.
Save her! Jonathan’s guardian angel, his conscience, the woman he once loved screamed at him to make a move, to rush in, to save the woman he found some semblance of happiness with. No more mistaking, dismissing or denying it, Jonathan had fallen hard for Kristiane.

When Cameron produced a knife from behind his back, Jonathan spat, “What the fuck do you want?!” He stood a good chance at losing her for good.

Cameron.

With a blade.

Kristiane in the balance.

She didn’t dare make a sound though her mouth was free of the glove. Silence seemed her only recourse, her only defense to get out of this alive.

“You’re a right bloomin’ arsehole, you are, Pine,” Cameron mocked from his position of power. He took two steps downstage, Kristiane trussed up unable to wiggle free of him.

“Cameron, let her go. This isn’t about her.”

The man sneered. “So predictable, Pine.” He tightened his grip on the squirming woman, the blade at her throat pressing into her skin.

Pine saw the panic in Kristiane’s eyes when the knife pierced her skin. Mannequin-still she froze after a gasp. Red swelled and bubbled from the slight scratch on her neck.

“Oh, God… DON’T!!” The pleading exclamation tripped from his mouth as desperation pooled at the base of his spine. The harrowing words meant for Cameron but also her smooth, fragile skin… don’t part, don’t bleed, don’t lose what made her his happiness.

“You bastard… no, no no…” He needed her whole, every pore, every hair, every molecule of life that she breathed.

A malicious grin split Cameron’s face with the knowledge that he’d caused some discomfort in his intended target. He planned for worse, but Jonathan’s unease was the perfect beginning to his scheme. The snarl sounded from the depths of the soulless arse with his hands on Kristiane. “Go ahead, fight me, princess,” his tongue stuck and he hissed like the snake he resembled. “The damage will only be more severe than a mere scratch. I’m stronger than you,” he taunted in her ear, dropping his tone to that of a lover’s.

Pine growled in maddening frustration. “Let her go, bastard!” He trained his body from surging forward to throw himself into danger instead of her. But he couldn’t see a clear path to free her without causing more harm. The danger on and to Kristiane too high; he couldn’t risk her. That one thought anchored him to the spot, breathing as evenly as he could through his nose.

Angela will come; she’ll get a clear shot. He could hear her through the earpiece, breathing heavy.

“Say please,” Cameron demanded, haughty and determined to cause more humiliation. “That’s what you hospitality cats do, no? Cowtow? Please the customer, no? Well, this customer,” Cameron landed a sickening slobbery kiss on Kristiane’s cheek, “as fate would have it,” he shifted her, drawing the knife down her neck over her breastbone.

The straightedge indented her skin without piercing or leaving a mark. “You pleased her in an unprofessional manner, Pine.”
Jonathan risked a step toward Cameron and Kristiane.

“I wouldn’t,” Cameron warned well aware of each move Jonathan made. “You determine the amount of damage I do to her.”

Jonathan held his hands up in surrender, retreating that one step he’d gained. “If damage is what you want, put her aside. You involved her to get to me.” He spread his arms out to his sides, “You’ve got me. Let her go.”

Kristiane held her breath, terrified of the all too real threat. The struggling singer tried to elbow the man holding her hostage. Her bone hit something solid…

Then she realized that Cameron wore… a solid piece of armor? A vest? The hard ridge of it dug into her back, across her shoulders, the expanse of her back, from Cameron clutching her so heavily, harder than regular clothing.

Despite the threat, her mind scattered this way and that figuring her predicament. She gasped again, quite suddenly, as the truth hit her squarely. Bomb! A bomb strapped to the fucker’s chest and pressed into her.

In response to her attempt at escape, Cameron flicked his wrist, the blade scraping against her flesh like a razorblade. The point of the knife pressed into her neck, south of her pulse point.

“AH!!!” Kristiane exclaimed and froze. She held Jonathan’s gaze to tether her to the moment, willing him to understand the severity of the situation. She blinked rapidly as the only thing she could. She lived a waking nightmare, her life in danger, but so was Jonathan’s. Her Jonathan. She whimpered in her own useless frustration. Tears of incredulous fear leaked from the corners of her eyes. The pain from the cut dimmed to the fear—the terror—that gripped her.

“You pleased this customer. Didn’t you, Pine? Addressed her every pleasure… so predictable…” Cameron slithered the taunts in his sophisticated accent. Born wealth didn’t equate morals in his current economic standing as the lesser owner of the hotel.

“Let her go, you fuck!” Tension clipped Pine’s command from between clenched teeth.

Surveying the worry that hung on his rival, Cameron felt a thrill scurry up his spine. Sadistic glee lit the fire in his eyes. Revenge tasted sweet. “What’s it… she… what’s she worth to you, Pine? What’s her freedom worth to you?”

The watcher studied the man with the knife, seeing only madness. Whatever his motivation behind this seize, Jonathan had only one priority, free Kristiane.

Cameron’s motivation suddenly became clear, as obvious as the single drop of blood running down Kristiane’s neck.

“You want me to buy her life.” Jonathan’s tone recited monotonously.

Kristiane’s presence in his life had been orchestrated for this moment. Cameron wooed Playful Productions into a corporate account at the hotel after Jonathan became the major shareholder. Cameron sent the letters printed on the back of the Carousel songs. Cameron planted the microchips on Kristiane to trace Jonathan’s whereabouts. Cameron sent men to scare her, to torture her, but ultimately to wear Jonathan down for daring to care for her.

“You can’t get free of this, Cameron. Even if I gave you everything you want… what you crave, any number of agents would—“
The blade of the knife sliced into Kristiane’s chest above her breast with the pressure of Cameron’s wrist. She hissed in pain, the panic blazing in her wide damp eyes. Terror poured over her as the bad guy made good on his threat.

“I know that,” Cameron cursed. He drew the blade across her breastbone, another line of red appearing. “I lost that ages ago.” He delighted in his prisoner’s physical pain and his target’s emotional distress. The gash wasn’t deep but it bled. “It’s not about my gain, but your loss.”

“What the fuck do you WANT?!”

“Pine!” Angela’s raspy wail cut through the intense scene. She effectively stopped Cameron’s assault, Kristiane’s tears and Jonathan’s looming sacrifice to free her.

He heard it first as he couldn’t see Angela through the dark periphery. But he knew she’d passed him a weapon to even the odds. A small black handgun skittered across the planked hardwood floor. Jonathan’s foot stopped it from going further and he stooped to pick it up, his eyes glued to Cameron and the bleeding woman.

The steel felt cool in his hand, the weight—God! – a long lost friend. The relief of reunion was short lived, shortened by a snarky brass chortle. “Don’t be daft, Pine.”

Jonathan leveled the gun barrel in the direction of his enemy.

And the woman he wanted to save.

He couldn’t take that shot. Cameron knew it too; he still held the advantage with Kristiane at the mercy of his knife.

“You can’t risk that shot.” Cameron’s body guided hers at the tip of his knife until she shielded him from Jonathan’s aim.

Jonathan felt himself harden, his entire body taut with tension and outrage. He didn’t understand this suicide mission. He planted his feet and waited patiently for his moment to strike.

Cameron tsked with flicks of his tongue to the ridge of his mouth. “Or are you that desperate to free her?”

“What the fuck do you want, Cameron?” he repeated.

“You cost me the Fairfax legacy… a legacy you stole from me. For that, I want your suffering!! Every step in this hotel – MY HOTEL – will remind you of ME! Every pound you earn from my fucking hotel tainted with me. Every time you look at your tart here you’ll remember me making her suffer for your… your greed!!!”

Cameron’s lunatic entitlement didn’t stop there. He dared grab at Kristiane’s breasts, manhandling her while he had the upper hand.

Kristiane grunted in protest and wiggled to get free, struggled to get this man off her. She gagged, the bile rising as the sick fuck copped a cheap grope.

“You’ll remember this, won’t you, Pine? You’ll never be able to step into this hall without seeing her blood. This building that was once your sanctuary – your fucking sanctuary will be your PRISON, YOUR PUNISHMENT!!” Cameron laughed maniacally as he drew the blade across her chest again, leaving another bleeding gash behind.
“NO, NO, NO, NO… bastard- NOO!!! Let her go!!”

“Not until I see your suffering!!! Look at her bleed, Pine! Watch her life leak away, all because you wanted my hotel. Was it worth it???”

Jonathan clutched the gun until the steel dug into his palm. Saline poured from he corners of his eyes, his helplessness warring as the sight worsened. “You FUCKiNG BASTARD!!!”

“You’ll never look at her without seeing me. I DID THAT!!” Getting off on Jonathan’s very real pain, Cameron’s evil piqued.

Without warning, in sick fashion, he plunged the knife into Kristiane’s side, the sharp point slipping through flesh and muscle, between bones with little resistance. The awful sound of it thud, almost echoed above them in the large hall.

Angela bellowed, “FUCK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!” Jonathan felt as if he himself had been stabbed.

Kristiane screeched, her eyes blown wide in shock. She coughed painfully, and blood spewed down over her bottom lip. She began to crumble to the floor in a heap when Cameron pulled the blade free with the force of anger behind it.

Distantly, the knife clattered to the floor, discarded after doing its dastardly deed.

Pine dove forward to catch Kristiane on her collapse, and laid her on the floor as gently as he could manage.

Angela appeared at his elbow, poking at him, slapping his back, urging toward the perpetrator. “GO! I’ve got her – GOOOO!!!!!”

Although every instinct and every pore in his body wept for him to stay by his heart, Pine propelled himself forward, pushed to the extreme by the need for blood… justice for his Kristiane. He roared an order over his shoulder, “ANGELA, SEE TO HER!!” But even as the demand left his mouth, Angela barked her own orders over coms for the first responders that MI6 had onsite.

Jonathan leapt like a shotgun blast as his hunted withdrew, making a mad dash for a fire exit in the back. The half psychopath Angela asked for to take down Roper graduated to full psychopath.

Jonathan heard Kristiane gasp for breath as he stomped past her in full pursuit, rage driving his pounding steps.

Well aware that his final moments were upon him, Cameron pulled the trigger for the bomb from his pocket. He whipped around, brandishing it like a prize over his head.

In a split second, Jonathan recognized the device at once. Decision made. He’d risk the explosion in the unlikely event that the button would be triggered on the floor instead of in the hand of this lunatic. Without losing momentum, he landed a round kick to Cameron’s fist, sending the trigger in an impressive arc across the hall. Before he could try to plead his case, Jonathan had Cameron round his neck.

The impact of it sent them to the floor in an angry pile of limbs, Pine straddling the terrified former golden child of the Fairfax fortune.

Pine finally – finally – had the upper hand; two hands, one stacked upon the other around the fucker’s neck. He sought his revenge for the weeks of hell he put Kristiane through. He sought to
steal every last breath left in the man’s body for spilling her blood, for torturing her, for laying a
 goddamned finger on her. He squeezed, closed and dug his fingers into flesh, pressing the life out of
 the asshole.

The choking noises stopped from beneath his hands. The muscles of Cameron’s throat tightened with
 the lack of oxygen. Jonathan stared into the dying man’s wide, reddening eyes, long o-shaped
 mouth. There was no fight in Cameron, no clawing to get Jonathan off of him, no kicking to get free.

He’d come to die, and at Jonathan’s very hands. That was his revenge, tainting the hotel, ruining the
 woman, and raping what little joy Jonathan found in life. He’d done his part to bring down the man
 that bested him in management and finance.

The red passion for killing a motherfucker who so richly deserved it blanketed Pine’s brain as he
 watched the life drain from the man’s eyes. Through the com, the soundtrack of Kristiane fighting to
 breathe kept his hands locked upon flesh, until no life remained.
Chapter 20

Chapter by TheOtherCourse (kanevixen)

Chapter Summary

The Guardian

*An exclusive.*

**Broadway and West End Star Falls Ill Just Weeks after Theatre Explosion**

Kristiane Taylor, recent star of Carousel and Tony nominated actress, fell ill the very same evening of her one night only, sold out concert. The concert had been scheduled for Sunday night at 21:00pm. An announcement was made at 19:53pm that the soprano fell ill and would be unable to perform. The venue, The Covent Garden Hotel, issued a statement that the event would be postponed, and most likely relocated to another venue, most likely a West End theatre to allow for additional tickets to be sold.

Current tickets will be honored at the new venue. Please visit your point of sale for more details on refunds, exchanges and updates for further information.

No word on Ms. Taylor’s condition, only that she is under a physician’s care in an undisclosed location. She’s expected to make a full recovery said our anonymous source close to the hotel.

Ms. Taylor most recently appeared as Julie Jordan in the critically acclaimed revival of Carousel at the recently destroyed Cambridge Theatre. Her Broadway credits include Grease, Daddy Long Legs and her Tony nominated performance as Bonnie in Bonnie and Clyde.

We wish her a very speedy recovery and anticipate her return to the stage.

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Angela had bet her husband that Jonathan would up and run again when the hotel clusterfuck resolved itself. She’d been giving him running updates every night over dinner in their cramped kitchen. The baby tried to follow along but couldn’t keep the characters straight; the color of baby food seemed far more entertaining. Mr. Burr, the sentimental of the three, begged his wife to see the
truth that these two kids were crazy about each other despite not saying it. He put all his faith in Jonathan, and that the silent watcher would finally find the words to tell the woman how he felt.

As Angela peered through the small rectangular window into the MI6 infirmary, she feared Mr. Burr bested her yet again. Jonathan remained at Kristiane’s hospital bedside. He hadn’t left since she was admitted. The woman slept on. *Damn!* But Angela owed her husband dinner for the next week for guessing wrong.

Jonathan paced Kristiane’s bedside like a caged tiger. The red-eyed, battle-ready soldier couldn’t find its hiding place inside his head. It was this part of him that Angela recruited to capture Richard Roper at the beginning. The half psychopath, the human hand grenade. After he killed Cameron for hurting Kristiane, he couldn’t put that part of him away until he knew that she was okay, that she’d live.

Angela watched as he stalked up and down the room, massaging the back of his neck with his hand to alleviate the tension knots. He wouldn’t eat or sleep; he only worried for her, occasionally glancing longingly at her still figure asleep in the bed, willing her to wake.

But he stayed, he didn’t run like the last time Kristiane landed herself in the infirmary. Angela felt a sense of encouragement that they’d find their way back to each other, despite the obstacles that threatened to tear them apart.

“Should I bill you or the hotel?” Angela swung through the door, a coffee in each hand, one for her and one for her restless agent. *Should’ve got decaf for him…*

“Huh?” Startled by the intrusion, Pine stopped in his lap and stared her down hard, not truly seeing her through the rage in him. No other woman or person existed while he lapped the floor, questioning Kristiane’s health, wondering when she’d put a stop to his worrying.

“The floor, Pine,” Angela pointed to the shiny linoleum while passing him a coffee. “You’ve worn down to the subfloor with all this pacing.”

Jonathan stared at the cup in his hand, forgetting that Angela handed it to him and wondering what he should do with it, the concept of drinking foreign to him. He ripped the plastic flap back as if to drink it, but then put the thing down. He shoved his empty hands into the denim of his jeans, sparing a look at Kristiane before turning to the window overlooking a bend in the Thames. He said nothing more as he hadn’t really been listening.

“Why don’t you get some rest? You’re both in good hands.” Angela allowed her voice to soften sympathetically, the matronly tone there. She stared at his back, contemplating how hard she should push him. After he’d killed Corky in the dead of night with nothing but his bare hands, his adrenaline kept him going through the whole of the Tradepass deal. After Freddie Hamid’s death, Pine had more of the Roper case to solve. He didn’t have time to ponder like he did while waiting for Kristiane.

She stepped closer, coffee to her lips. “Pine?” When he didn’t respond again, Angela placed a hand on his shoulder.

He whirled around, glancing at the bed before looking at her. He’d almost expected it to be Kristiane, and his face dropped when the realization dawned on him. He sighed, the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“You’re a sight, Pine. Blood-shot eyes, hair askew, rumpled clothes… why don’t you,” she waved towards a visitor chair by the patient’s bed, “rest a bit?”
Defeated, he raised his intense gaze to her, “I can’t.”

Regrettably, Angela looked at the neglected pillow and blanket she left for him after Kristiane’s surgery to fix some of her bleeding. “I know,” she patted his cheek affectionately. “But your pacing like a cat ain’t gonna fix her.”

Combing his fingers through his already mussed and wild hair, he turned to the bed and dragged himself to Kristiane’s side. He sank into the chair and grasped her small pale hand, the one he kissed in the middle of the night in the library, when he first kissed her. He desperately wanted her fingers to flex and move reflexively as they had that night in the dark.

Turning her palm over, he pushed her fingers back, leaned in and buried his mouth in the center. Her scent, so similar to that night, filled his nose as pressed his lips into her skin.

Angela hung back, gave him a bit of privacy. An intimate display of yearning and hopeful outcomes… She never saw how Jonathan was with Sophie, only the grief and mourning he experienced after her death. She witnessed the brief interlude between him and Jeds, but this appeared different. She knew Jonathan to be a passionate and privately romantic person, but this seemed different. Jed had been part of a plan, a grand scheme, but Kristiane…

Kristiane was different.

Angela had seen him smile with Kristiane, seen him relaxed, rejoined the land of the living, rather than hiding in his little corner of the world. Kristiane brought him out into the light.

Lightly stepping in, Angela reverently whispered, “I’ll leave you alone with her. Have some coffee. I’ll bring a scone later on.”

Jonathan resigned himself to that chair beside his lover’s bed. Delicately he held her one hand between his two and stared up into her still features. The perfect portrait of torture. So much to say, to wish for and hope for, yet paralyzed by sleep.

His sleeping beauty.

As Angela stepped from the door, clicking it closed behind her, she didn’t feel the dread that Jonathan did. Kristiane’s injuries were serious, could’ve been fatal if Angela neglected to have first responders on the scene for the hotel trap and showdown. But she’d talked it over with the doctor and he assured her that, granted infection didn’t set in, Kristiane would make a full recovery. Waiting for her to wake up caused an anxiety of what ifs that could bring a man to his knees in uncertainty. She feared her boy, Jonathan, strode that very line.

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A speck of dust floated across a backdrop of gray, from left to right on a downward slant. When her eyes focused on it, that precocious piece of fluff disappeared or bounced to a different location in her periphery. She tried again, to follow that slight movement, but it changed direction before she could. The underlying silence almost hummed – or maybe she heard her own blood coursing through her body. She didn’t know.

She couldn’t quite remember if she could know. Or care.

Consciousness yanked at the fabric of blissful confusion. Like that speck of dust. She should remember something or someone or somewhere. Pain, a dull ache under her ribs tick-tocked through her, ebbing and flowing on a steady pulse. Her body assisted by a machine to keep her breathing. She felt the current of weakness, a hollow empty feeling… exhaustion. The dreamless state tugged at
her, her limbs heavy and weighted down.

A stabbing pain, swift and sharp, twanged at her side. She croaked a moan of discomfort to protest. The effort to make even the slightest movement killed her desire to swim to the other side of the murk.

A muffled, deep sound rumbled through her cotton-filled head. A short sound and then it disappeared. She trained her ear, focusing and concentrating on the act of hearing. The sound repeated itself. She didn’t know what it was, so faint and distant.

She waited and sure enough the sound repeated itself. Somehow it became something to do other than chasing a speck of dust across her field of vision. A rhythmic scratch against the fabric of her world became her focus. As the sound repeated itself, it became clearer, louder, closer – more urgent?

The realization lingered at a simmer, weak small bubbles of awareness until it broke the surface on a boil. Then it rolled and spluttered and pushed through the final reluctant talons of sleep.

The noise, the rasp in her head became her name. Her name called to her, to pull her from stasis. The pain in her side seared, prodding her for attention. “Kristiane, Kristie, please open your eyes, please… Kristie, ple—you’re safe…”

Her mind engaged, she was Kristiane. A name her mother gifted her to get her father to love them. Distant and uncaring, Kristopher Taylor lived for just one thing and one thing only, his bakery. His wife fell a far distant second; she was merely a means to an end: companionship to fuck out his frustration and stress and a pair of hands in the bakery.

Kristiane never blipped on his radar or tipped his scales until she betrayed him. At eighteen, she moved to the city leaving a trail of flour dust behind her. She never looked back. It was just as well, he never sought her out either. The ultimate betrayal to forsake the bakery, the family business, for the outside world.

Kristiane dedicated herself to the life she found away from the fumes of bagel yeast, sugary sprinkles and gooey glaze. She found friends who treasured and cared for her more than her parents ever could manage. That was until she and Terry met their end, and Kristiane ran away to London.

Sore Kristiane awakened and pried her eyes open to the man she hoped…

“Kristiane, petal…” Jonathan’s cautious tone spoke softly. His hands pet her arms, stroked her hair, and caressed her cheek tenderly to wake her. Tears glossed the intensity of his gaze as he searched her.

She groaned, her turmoil piqued after bleak, bland nothingness, blissful ignorance. The doubt swelled in her thought, her glands engorged with confused emotions. She shut her eyes in protest and turned her head away as her brain was consumed with questions. “Please… don’t…” her voice croaked. She sounded as foreign as Jonathan felt to her.

“Don’t? Don’t what, petal?” His thumb traced circles over her temple soothingly. Despite her words, he sat on the edge of the bed beside her.

She tried to swallow, getting a lungful of antiseptic bland hospital room. The water-logged tightness in her chest made her cough violently. A stabbing pain shot through her chest shoving the memory of the hall back into her head. The pain sat her up suddenly and doubled her over her arm, hunching over the blazing sting.
Jonathan jumped to his feet coiling his arm across her shoulders, absorbing some of her pain if only he could. “Sh, sh, sh… try not to cough.” He combed his fingers over her hair, caring for her. “A punctured lung. Surgery fixed you up… except the pain. You’ll be okay. Sh…”

Whimpering helplessly, an overwhelmed Kristiane collapsed again, surrendering to the pain battering her from the inside of her body. The physical torment must be what death felt like. And yet, the anguish in her heart hurt more.

“You’re… you’re safe, petal.” Jonathan leaned in and pressed a kiss to the crown of her head, anticipating that much of her was bruised, broken or in pain.

A doctor appeared from nowhere, signaled by the monitors and machines attached to Kristiane. “She’s in distress,” he said blandly. He flipped the switch and punched up the morphine infusion rate on her med drip. “Keep her calm. The tube will be in for a day or two, depending on how she does.” He turned his attention to his patient, finally addressing her directly. “Moving might hurt. No exacerbation. Breathe evenly.”

“Understood.” Jonathan dismissed him with a tip of his head. He settled back on the bed, focusing on watching Kristiane as she concentrated on breathing.

Inflate.

Deflate.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Rise.

Fall.

The effort paid off as the panic receded. Why did her entire body feel wrecked? What happened from… those moments she recalled from the hall in the Covent Garden Hotel?

She remembered the terror.

She remembered Jonathan with a gun pointed at her.

She remembered the bomb lining her back.

She remembered the laser-point excruciating cuts along her chest.

The tears pushed through as her breathing evened out. That was the moment she felt Jonathan’s hand clasp hers. She’d know his touch even without knowing he was beside her. Despite his sedate effect on her, she gingerly extracted her hand from his. She… shouldn’t… or couldn’t… wouldn’t…

She shouldn’t want him. She shouldn’t crave his sympathy. She shouldn’t… care for him.

When she lifted her hand from his with a tug, Jonathan felt her emotion withdraw too. Her spirit, the grand feeling of it left him bereft and hollow because she pulled away from him.

“Kristiane.”

No. She cracked her eyes open again, letting reality into her tiny little world. Her eyes crashed head on with his worried ones. Her heart pinged and she felt a weakness flood through her. “Please...
please don’t,” she whispered, the effort made her cringe. She tried to adjust her position in bed, but her pain made it impossible.

“Kristie…” his tone pleaded.

She closed her eyes in protest, and if she could manage it, she would’ve folded her arms under her breasts in her defensive way. “Please go away.” Breathing took an enormous effort after the injury she sustained. She wanted not to care, not to feel, not to breathe. Anything but feel as though she hated Jonathan and couldn’t live without him simultaneously. “I can’t… its wrong.”

The shush and whirl of machines and gadgets stretched out the moments between them. Jonathan’s jaw went slack. He looked as shocked as he would if Cameron rose from the dead to threaten her life again. “Kristiane,” a tremor stole his strong tone.

She shook her head. Jonathan carefully got to his feet. He stood like he had so many nights in the hotel, unmoving, wordless, interpreting life. A war raged on in his Kristie, and she was his even in her denial of him. “I’d like to stay… if you’ll have me.”

The blue of her eyes flared with the glassing of tears, unshed hurtful tears. “I won’t.” Even in the croaky sotto of her voice, her words cut him.

But he wouldn’t fight, not while she was so weak, in so much pain and so conflicted. He couldn’t fight her again like he had before. He opened his mouth again to take his leave.

“No,” she interrupted before he could. She lifted her curled hand and swiped at the tears that stubbornly began streaking down her face. “You… you used me. You’re… no better than, than… than…” she couldn’t bring herself to speak his name. “You. Used. Me.”

The tone of betrayal in her voice struck him hard. He couldn’t argue the point; she was right. He’d put her at the center of the conflict to end it. He dangled her in front of Cameron to tease him out of his hiding hole. Jonathan called the shots. He saw the opportunity, the endgame playout, and he’d shamefully put Kristiane in danger for the greater good. He couldn’t deny it or defend it.

He opened his mouth, his lips forming phantom words that remained elusive. Was there any defense? Sophie, his conscience, had vanished and he didn’t have her there to point him in the right direction. “Kristiane, please… let me ex—”

“No!” The emphasis, the vehemence, the strength behind it made her wince in pain. Her left hand snuck across her stomach to hold the source of her pain on the other side. “There’s nothing you can say, nothing to explain… this.” Her teary face dipped to look at herself in the hospital bed.

Jonathan licked his lips, nodded in shame and shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “I’ll go…” He took a slow audible inhale, his mind flooded with words and phrases to say. How beautiful she was to him, inside and out. How happy she’d made him. How every decision he’d made in recent weeks had been with her in the forefront of his mind.

But he needed her to know, and she needed to hear it from him, “You… you asked a question, back in the hall. I’m sure that you didn’t hear the answer. I’ll tell you now.”

He took a breath, a long pull of air into his lung, his chest expanding with it. “It was real. I did care for you, I do care for you. I don’t give a fuck if the reasons we were brought together were manufactured. I don’t care that someone brought us together to further their nefarious plans. What I feel for you, the joy I felt with you, the passion, being close to you- all of that was real. Every bit of
it. Between you and me. That was pure.”

After avoiding her eyes for so long, looking anywhere but at the bed, he finally gave in. He paused to let her snuffle and wipe uselessly at the tears that relentlessly coursed down her cheeks. “Kristiane, I love you. I love your spirit, your sense of humor, your strength, your courage… I love you.”

He took his leave then, not because he wanted to, but because Kristiane asked him to. As soon as he clicked the door closed behind him, he allowed his emotions out. He’d ripped his heart from his chest, poured the contents out before her, for her. All of this had been for her, and he almost felt like he could rest… almost. He pressed his back into the cool surface of the hospital wall outside her door, his world imploding before his eyes.

He’d believed her when she told him that he was a good man. She blindly gave him her trust and he’d thrown her to the wolves for it. He’d exploited it for the greater good, or what he believed to be the greater good. It wasn’t the best option for his beloved Kristiane, and the thought had never occurred to him. He never considered another option that didn’t involve Kristiane.

And he’d lost her for it. Almost got her killed for it.

Jonathan sank down the wall to the floor and held his throbbing head between his hands. The ache of… he had no idea pinged around, his thoughts rolling and mutating and morphing from one thing to another. It all became noise. So wrapped in his thoughts and his guilt, he missed Angela’s approach.

The female agent peaked inside the patient’s room. The princess stared listlessly at the ceiling, trying not to cry. “So it went well then? The reunion?”

Jonathan raised his face to her to give her a rueful, contemptuous pout. “Would you check on her please? She wanted me out.”

“I’ll sort her.” She nodded knowingly. “I’ll offer her a beverage.”

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“Shall I ask, or should I continue ignoring this?” A few minutes later, Angela pointed at the patient’s face after helping her drink some water. “Your eyes are leaking, princess.”

Kristiane dabbed at her eyes with the tissue Angela handed her. “Such a mess…” The patient had trouble speaking, the strength and stamina took too much out of her. She rested against the pillows, trying to calm the pain in her chest.

“And you don’t know what to do?” Angela prompted, reading the girl’s small hand gesture like the scrolling on a tablet.

Kristiane’s hand dropped to the sheet in an expression of defeat, in conclusion.

Angela understood. Dragging a chair over beside the bed, the agent cringed at the squeal of wood across the floor. She whispered an apology as she sat. “Your life’s a mess, yeah?”

Kristiane nodded.

“A few weeks ago, everything made sense. Two functioning lungs. A healthy arm. Smooth unbroken skin.” She patted her own breastbone to illustrate. “Never been kidnapped. No recent car accidents, if ever?” Angela grasped since she didn’t know the girl prior to the brief she’d read when the letters began appearing at London theatres on her songs.
Kristiane confirmed again with another nod. She lifted her right arm to look at the tube attached to her.

Angela tested further on the details of the patient’s life, “Blissfully unaware that love existed?”

The girl collapsed into the pillows, her limbs all limp, all energy drained from her at once.

Arrogantly, Angela laughed at the reaction, having read her correctly. A knowing matronly hand patted at Kristiane’s hand.

Kristiane dabbed at her weeping eyes. “And now… now,” her voice rose in an incredulous exasperated tone. “My eyes are leaking!” She looked at the wet tissue in her hand as if it was the thing to blame.

“Those generally go hand-in-hand. The love and the crying…” Angela made another sound of humor, settling into the chair.

“It sucks.”

“Lemme tell ya a story ’bout me, ’bout the point I knew my life sucked.” She crossed one leg over the other while her hands imitated the movement after digging her mobile from her pocket. “I met Mr. Burr at the academy after uni. A registrar clerk, he was… worked in a government job. Solid. Typical nine-to-five, off holidays. Safe. Routine.”

Kristiane winced in pain, but didn’t move much. Her tears had tapered off as Angela recited from memory.

“Me, I studied crimes—cases… learned to fire weapons, investigated evil schemes, chased criminals… typically they don’t work nine to five. But there was someone else. He… was like me. An officer. We trained together. He was all heat and passion. Until last year, I—questioned my choice of the safe one, the even and predictable one, my Mr. Burr. William was born… we never chatted it up, never considered the possibility… but when my son was placed in my arms… my William, I knew I’d chosen right.”

“You had a baby?” Kristiane realized then that she hadn’t learned much about her friend, the workhorse agent.

A close-up of a rounded face baby smiling displayed on Angela’s phone. The agent proudly held it out for Kristiane to see. “My William, that’s him. When he came into my world, my life went to shit… but—” She held up her hand when Kristiane blanched. “My job, my marriage—everything I knew to be right became wrong. William set it right. I do what I do to keep him safe.”

Kristiane smiled weakly at the irony, her fingers pulling at the blanket over her legs for something to do with her hands. “So you’re saying…”

“Sometimes there’s reason for chaos. For mess. In the wake, you’ll find the reason in the ashes.”

Angela got to her feet again and winked for the patient, patting her hand again in her way, in commiseration, in understanding, in knowing. “Need anything, princess?” she hinted.

A shake of her head was the first reaction. “Not… not yet.” Kristiane chewed on her lower lip, contemplating the wisdom her friend blessed her with. “But soon… maybe… soon.”

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Jonathan spent two days outside of her hotel room on hooks in hopes that she’d ask for him. The
time didn’t matter to him so much; he’d wait for science to recreate Walt Disney to dream up or conjure another princess that had a sliver of beauty to his Kristiane. But the terrible suspense of not knowing at all if he’d be allowed to talk to her again… that agonized him until he felt like scaling the walls, just for activity that would occupy his mind.

After pacing for another hour, he huffed and dropped into a plastic hospital waiting chair. It doubled as a torture device whenever he sat in it. The thing whined and groaned louder than a teenager before the first day of school after summer break. Telling the thing kiss his ass seemed a bit redundant, so he kept the frustrated thought to himself.

Jonathan wasn’t really angry at the chair or the pale blue walls with the boring sailboat paintings or the godawful fluorescent lighting that made everyone look bright yet deathly pale. Most of the other people in the waiting room kept to themselves without trying to make small talk. It was a small hospital for exclusive clientele and VIP types, celebrities, politicians, football stars. Angela arranged for Kristiane to be treated there to keep her name clear of any of the Cameron business.

The rumors had churned out conspiracy theories about the nature of Kristiane’s illness, but for the most part London didn’t care much. She was nothing more than a sensationalist headline to read on the tube to work, only to be forgotten before the lift doors closed to deliver the droves of office workers.

Angela urged him to go home and get some rest, which he only ignored or denied. The woman did at least give him updates on her condition, the improvements, the nightmares she experienced, and her own take on the situation. And still, he waited for some word on her release from the hospital or her willingness to see him again.

“Where will she go, Angela?” Pine asked on the second afternoon, when she brought him another coffee. He gladly accepted this one, having neglected his stomach in favor of waiting, reluctant to leave should Kristiane ask for him.

“Wherever she fancies, I reckon…” she shrugged a shoulder. The subject hadn’t come up between her and the patient. “I’ll offer her the safe house.”

Jonathan winced at the mention of it. He hadn’t been privy to that, but he’d also exiled himself to the hotel after Kristiane’s last medical emergency. “Do you think she’ll go back to New York?”

“Dunno, she hasn’t said.”

Swallowing some of his coffee, Jonathan took comfort in the warm liquid coating his insides, the gradual descent and how it spread through him. The bitter taste reminded him that he was alive, after the past few weeks of uncertainty. “Is this thing over?”

“Is it ever?”

Resigned, he agreed, “That target’s still on me, probably always will be.”

Angela locked his gaze and took a sip from her own cardboard cup of coffee. “You’ve Roper’s money. His web reached far and wide. Greed’s a powerful motivator within his circles.” She made a circular motion with her forefinger.

He nodded into his cup. “I don’t care about the money. I only wanted an insurance policy that it wouldn’t fall into the wrong hands again.”

“I know that. So… lemme give you some advice,” she said pointedly, huddling closer to him. “Spend it.”
Jonathan’s eyes roved her face for the meaning of it, to search out the truth of it.

“Tying it to the hotel is good. Smart.” Angela pressed her forefinger to her temple before waving it back in forth in front of her like a wiper blade to a windscreen. “But not safe for you to stay put with it. So... live on it. Use it! Live, Jonathan! Live on it.”

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