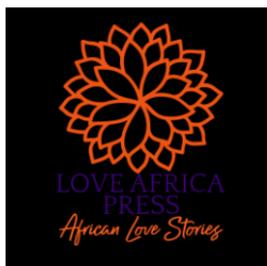




**unravelling  
his MARK**

**ZEE MONODEE**

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Last but not least, thanks to the Universe, for always having my back.

## **DEDICATION**

For my beloved dad—for all he did and still does for me even though he is no longer of this world.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo  
Thursday, January 29. 10.42 p.m.*

“Damn it! Don’t die on me! Don’t you dare die on me, Vosloo!”

Zachariah ‘Zach’ Hashemi fell to his knees beside the prone body of Dax Vosloo. A bullet whizzed past his head less than a second later. He ducked, flattened himself to the dirty floor, and dragged his companion with him behind a solid wall after making sure there were no openings on this side of the abandoned building. There was no time to retaliate, not when a sniper had his lens trained on them.

The bullets kept coming, raining shards of concrete into the air. They didn’t pierce the wall, though, which already gave him

an idea of the calibre used. This was probably not from a military-grade rifle—their .50BMG, .338 Lapua Magnum, or .300 Winchester Magnum rounds would've caused way more collateral damage.

No, this was probably from a semi-auto sniper platform. Whoever was after them had to be some low-life mercenary or the like, but this person wasn't the one they had come here looking for. This was too crude, too unpolished.

The stealthy assassin known in their circles as Evangeline did everything with elegance and class. This shit show here couldn't be her work.

Or could it—because the target had clearly been Vosloo: the killer's former associate, the only one who knew her true identity. Vosloo might've been getting too close, thus the need to remove him from the board by any means.

Silence descended on the premises, broken by the gurgled spurts coming from Vosloo's throat.

Zach got up onto his knees and pushed aside the other man's shirt to ascertain the damage the bullet had wrought.

A gaping wound bled on his left shoulder.

Damn it. The shooter had hit centre mass, just low enough to cause irreparable damage to the blood flow network around the heart and lungs. Vosloo wouldn't survive this.

"Tell me," he growled as he shook the man to keep him awake. "Who is Evangeline?"

Vosloo seemed to be zoning out.

He couldn't let him die without telling them who the woman was. Vosloo was their only lead.

"For once in your shitty life, you son of a bitch, do the right thing! Tell me who Evangeline is!"

Vosloo's rheumy green eyes grew wide. He must have seen death coming for him. The man had always been a coward.

"Anna ..." he mumbled.

“What?” Zach lowered his head closer to Vosloo’s face so he could hear the words.

“Annabwe ... Viarbe.”

Zach blinked. This was utter gibberish. “You’re not making much sense, man. Come on, hang on. Tell me—”

“Annab—” Vosloo’s head fell onto his shoulder, his eyes glassy and open.

He was dead.

“Damn it!”

Zach stood and kicked the wall in frustration.

They’d come here because they’d heard another associate of Evangeline operated out of this hijacked building in the Congolese capital. The person handled the communications network allowing her to conduct her kills without care or concern that she could get caught. A Kali—as such female assassins were known inside the Corpus, the clandestine agency he worked for—relied on a criminal facilitator to carry off her measles operations—assassinations leaving no trace of a killer’s involvement. Evangeline had never really

been one of theirs, though, even if she had tried her darned best.

Dax Vosloo had been Evangeline's lover before both their trails had gone cold about a year earlier. The man had, however, turned himself in to Corpus a few weeks before, working with them to unravel the killer's network. He had so far sent them on a wild goose chase that had unearthed 'intel' but still no clue as to who the woman was.

Until now. Could those mumbled words actually mean something?

It was the only lead they had, though. Vosloo was dead.

By this point, the bullets had definitely stopped raining, and with the wall behind his back, Zach could stay put for a long time. It sucked, but he could do it. With a sigh, he pulled out his cell phone and tapped in a number. It rang twice on the other end, then an operator picked up. Instead of replying, he entered a sequence of numbers and cut the call.

Seconds later, the phone vibrated in his palm. He picked up, knowing his boss would be calling after having been given the message implied in the code.

“He’s dead,” he said without preamble.

“Shit,” the woman at the other end cursed. “Did he say anything?”

“Annabwe and viarbe.”

“It was her?”

She hadn’t said anything about those words not making sense. She wouldn’t pronounce herself on that until she was sure they really didn’t mean anything.

“Negative.”

She remained silent for a few seconds. “Come back to Berlin ASAP. I’ll have them ready the plane for you at the airstrip.”

Berlin? Not Prague, as per the usual procedure?

Over this connection, they could talk without fear of being listened to. A network of proxy servers rerouted the call locations, hence the practice of calling a central switchboard and the operator then

directing the requests. The calls happened across the same encrypted net connecting the entire Corpus framework through its hyper-tight security protocols.

She cut the call; he'd been dismissed.

With a final look at Vosloo's dead body, he crouched low and pulled out his Heckler & Koch P30 semi-automatic pistol. The shooter might still be around even if the bullets had stopped raining. Though he doubted that. The target had been despatched, and Zach wasn't to be collateral—he would be dead already if his name had been on the brief. Whoever had done this had wanted just Vosloo out of the picture.

His mind told him it had to be Evangeline, but something felt off about it. It also couldn't be her. She loved to go for the slow kill, the more twisted and psychopathic the better. This had been too straightforward to be her work.

Maybe his boss would have some answers for him.

His steps careful and measured, he made his way out of the building, crouching around openings. He sure would not offer himself up as a moving target now.

\*\*\*

*Berlin, Germany. Potsdamer Platz  
corporate district*

*Friday, January 30. 11.24 a.m.*

Zach took the lift inside the *Dynamogenics* headquarters building. The doors opened onto the carpeted inner sanctum of the company located on the top floor of the tower. His long strides took him across the massive space.

Vero, the boss' PA and also her bodyguard, looked up from her desk and gave him a small smile. He returned the smile and added a nod. She cocked her head towards the wide mahogany doors to the side.

Nobody seeing them here would imagine the two of them had spent a wild night

burning the sheets of his bed inside the company accommodations in Djibouti a little while ago.

Blonde Vero who looked deceptively like an innocent and wholesome girl-next-door had been sent to establish a satellite office of tech and R&D giant *Dynamogenics* there. But this was actually a cover for having Corpus agents on the ground in the African city that had become the centre of the spy game on the continent, like what Berlin had been during the Cold War.

They'd spent the one night together, then she had come back here, and he'd stayed over, positioned there under the cover of being the security consultant for the whole office. She'd moved on, he'd moved on—and that's how it should be. There was no place for emotional entanglements and even attachment in their world. He'd closed the door on the thought of love a long time ago.

The thick door opened to let him into a bright and airy office, the floor-to-ceiling windows at the far end revealing a

panorama of Berlin, Brandenburg Gate distinctly visible in the distance. Behind the massive desk sat a redhead who many would describe as an alabaster bridal mannequin come to life. The world knew Alexis Friedrich as the daughter of the late Tobias Friedrich who'd founded *Dynamogenics* during the Cold War. She handled her CEO duties with panache and played the slightly ditzy heiress in social circles with flair.

Only a select few were aware she had also inherited the clandestine Corpus Agency from her father, at the head of all its operations now.

Zach's gaze slid from her to the older man with the swept-back dark hair and the large black-framed glasses on his patrician nose. He frowned. What was Simon Wexler doing here? The guy was the founder of Wexler-Prinsloo, the most prominent communications and ad agency in the whole African region. Yet another front for Corpus.

“Zachariah,” Alexis said, nodding towards the empty sofa beside Wexler.

She was the only one who never made use of his moniker. It always felt off to hear himself being called by his full name. Even his father used the shortened Zach.

“Ma’am.” He took his seat after undoing the button on his suit jacket.

She joined them on the three-seater across. “You’re sure it wasn’t Evangeline?”

“Yes. The facts don’t add up. Nobody knew we were going to be there. Vosloo wouldn’t have let it leak, knowing he would easily become a target. Believe me, the man was too much of a coward to face such danger willingly.”

“You say he arranged the meet?”

“He’d found the network’s engineer would be on site that night. It wasn’t even a meet, since this was supposed to be a surprise landing on the target.”

“Someone must’ve been following you,” she said.

Zach nodded. "My theory, too. But it wasn't Evangeline. An associate, or a gun for hire, but not her."

Alexis simply lifted an eyebrow in question.

"Well, firstly, the strike was way too messy to be hers. She's a narcissist, loves to leave her signature on her kills. Knowing her, if she'd even gone for a long-range gun, it would've been a single headshot neatly in the middle of the forehead using a hollow-point bullet like a Black Talon that would've torn his brain apart but contained the shot inside his cranium. No exit wound, no blood and gore splatter. Elegant and almost poetic, even. Vosloo was killed by a 7.62x51 rifle bullet." He paused at the confusion on Wexler's face. "Civilians know it as .308 calibre. Way too common for her tastes. I didn't find the sniper's nest; the person would've already fled from the site by the time I got out, but the closest building offering such range was three blocks from

where we were. She likes to get as close as possible for her kills.”

“Hmm,” Alexis hummed.

When she remained silent, Zach started to get up. The debriefing must be over. He’d been surprised she’d even asked him here. Alexis oversaw all operations, but the nitty gritty was handled by her second in command, Graeme, over at The Retreat, their covert facility in north-western Prague.

But Evangeline seemed to be a sore spot with the big boss. From what Zach had gathered, Alexis’ biological mother had tried a coup on the agency, which had resulted in a mutiny inside the ranks and the murder of her father. Evangeline had been the woman’s designated assassin, the Kali—the harbinger of death, the bringer of destruction. She was the only loose thread left to apprehend from that mutinous uprising.

“You also gave us some intel,” she continued without even looking at him.

They weren’t done. He sat back down.

“Yes. Vosloo said two words. Annabwe and viarbe.”

He didn't ask if she'd figured out what they meant. She would tell him if she wanted him in the loop.

She pressed a small fob in her hand, and the big screen on the wall across from them came on. A slideshow started, pictures of the same woman. A brunette, White, with thick, long black hair, delicate features on a tiny face with fragile bones, and gunmetal grey eyes slightly upturned at the outer corners, suggesting she might have some Asian blood in her lineage. The first image looked like a professional headshot. The others were candid snaps of her always in classy clothing as she went about her day. One picture was of her in a bikini as she prepared to dive into a pool.

A beautiful woman, for sure. Late twenties, he'd say.

He blinked. “Wait. Is that ...?”

“Evangeline?” Alexis asked. “She might be.”

Zach blinked. This creature looked like ... an angel. She couldn't be a stone-hearted killer. Her blinding smile in the headshot picture?

Unless she used it as a façade to lure everyone. He was a spy—he of all people should know the face people presented to the world sometimes had nothing to do with what they really were inside.

A shiver coursed through him. “Who is she?”

Alexis nodded at the other man, who had remained silent so far. “Simon?”

Simon Wexler cleared his throat and waved his hand at the screen. “This woman is, officially, Annabelle de Castelban ...”

Annabwe ... Could Vosloo have been saying Annabelle?

“... Thirty-four-year-old French-Mauritian who owns and heads a boutique communications and events management agency called Sparkle Communications on the island. The agency also has an ad and design leg called Glitter Ads. Comes from

an illustrious family who is still a big landowner in Mauritius.”

“What makes you think she is Evangeline?” he asked.

Alexis spoke this time. “She is also Dax Vosloo’s ex-girlfriend. Whenever there has been an Evangeline kill before December of the previous year, both Dax and Annabelle have been in the country of the hit in the same period. It might be a coincidence, but I don’t like to dismiss such occurrences.”

The gears inside Zach’s brain were clicking together fast. “And in the past year, since both Evangeline and Vosloo went dark ...”

“She has remained in Mauritius, yes,” Simon continued. “With a trip once to Grenoble to visit her mother, she hasn’t left the country otherwise. We have no intel of any hit carried out in France around that region or in that period, though.”

They wouldn’t be telling him all this if they didn’t want him on board this

operation, whatever it turned out to be. So he pressed on.

“And *viarbe*? You found out what it could mean?”

Alexis shook her head. “No clue. We’re hoping Ms. de Castelban could know.”

And how would they— Of course. “I’m going to Mauritius?”

“You are. Simon will be able to tell you more.”

He turned his attention onto Simon Wexler.

“Your file says you completed your MBA with scores in the ninety-to-one-hundred range.”

Zach nodded. “I did.”

Fat lot of good it had done him in the military, though. He’d gone to business school to please his father and also to be close to home while his sister finished her secondary schooling. But sitting behind a desk crunching numbers and reports had not been his thing. He’d needed the field, the outdoors, better use of his strategizing brain.

“I hope you haven’t forgotten all that bull, because you’re about to put it to good use,” Simon added.

Had the man been reading his mind or what?

“I’m the security consultant for the Djibouti division,” Zach stated.

“Not anymore,” chimed in Alexis. “For the next two weeks, at least, you’ll be considering a career change. Spy work can get tedious, and you are, let us say, weary of it all, so you’re looking at other options.”

“Like assessing an agency’s eligibility to become a Wexler-Prinsloo partner,” Simon volleyed.

Zach chuckled and concealed a smile when he figured what they were getting at. “So my cover into Annabelle de Castelban’s entourage will be as a Wexler-Prinsloo rep. What’s my mission?”

It would be the perfect cover—few outside the Corpus knew of the agency’s role as a front. The mutinous group had never targeted the outfit; it must mean

they hadn't known of its clandestine purpose.

Alexis didn't blink. "To find out if Annabelle de Castelban is indeed Evangeline and taking the appropriate measures, should it be the case."

In other words, despatch her to kingdom come before she could do more harm.

He trained his gaze onto the screen. Alexis had stopped the slideshow onto the headshot image of Annabelle. The woman had her head slightly tilted to the side, her smile open and beguiling, her pale skin looking creamy and smooth in the black and white shot.

Her eyes, though ... They spoke of something else. Of depths. Of darkness.

Of death?

He took in a deep breath. Only one way to find out.

"When do I leave?"

\*\*\*

*Pamplemousses, Mauritius. Château de Venus*

*Saturday, January 31. 9.14 p.m.*

To Hell in a handbasket. That's where this whole event was going!

Annabelle de Castelban marched backstage at the fashion show like a Fury on crack. If anything went south during this evening, it would reflect badly on her agency, and she could *not* have that. She had worked too hard, invested too much, into Sparkle Communications to have a low-life rat take her down.

Don't play the victim.

The words popped into her mind, and she paused for a second in a dark corner of the hallway to let herself think them through. Leaning against the brushed wood panel covering all the walls in this colonial period dwelling, she closed her eyes and took in a deep breath.

Tonight's fashion gala showcasing up and coming Mauritian designer Nina Harelson hadn't been easy for her to nab.

If it hadn't been for Hector Valriche, a family friend of the Harelsens, she would never have been able to establish the connection. Having Hector on as a possible future partner of Sparkle had swayed Nina to give them the deal of organizing her first major fashion show on Mauritian soil. A 'name' already abroad, Nina would thus have press people from Europe, Australia, and the Middle East at this unveiling.

This would've been a significant coup for Sparkle, and having to double-down with Hector on this hadn't seemed like a chore. Hector knew people. As much as Annabelle prided herself on having an extensive contacts list and counting the unofficial social queen of Mauritian society as a good friend, there were still some heights she couldn't touch alone. Of course, she could ask said social queen to introduce her around, but that wouldn't have felt right. Too much like nepotism, which she abhorred.

So why, then, hadn't she put her foot down when Hector had clearly played such a card tonight?

Everything had been arranged; she'd made sure of it. But forty-eight hours before the gala, the little shit had cancelled the catering company Annabelle had worked with for years in favour of his inexperienced niece's start-up.

The prawn cocktail had gone off, and thank goodness her assistant, Daniel, with his super-sensitive sense of smell, had figured something fishy was going on. And she didn't mean that as a pun, either. To cut costs, the idiot niece had actually stirred in fish sauce so the smell would mask the dearth of prawns in the mix. This had made the mayonnaise turn—no wonder, on a night when the temperatures flirted with thirty-five degrees Celsius outside and way higher inside. The air-conditioning was waging a lost battle in these big rooms and such a crush of people.

They'd managed to ditch the spoiled food before it had gone out to be served, though.

If she got her hands on Hector ...

No, she would *not* play the victim. She would own up to her shit, as opposed to some people who never did— *Do not think of your mother now!*

Too bad she hadn't put her foot down when he had played the catering switcheroo on her. She'd fucked up, definitely. But she'd make things right, now. Starting with letting Hector go. This partnership would never work.

Of course, he would smear her name once she released him from their verbal agreement, telling the world she was an ungrateful bitch who had dumped him after she'd gotten the event's contract from Nina Harelson. He didn't know she had an ace to counter his strike, though.

Nobody knew of the call from Wexler-Prinsloo the day before.

She'd almost fallen out of her chair when the video call had come in that Friday

around ten in the morning. The screen had lit up, and indeed, the image of *the* Simon Wexler had materialized. She had totally recognized the man who looked like a fifty-something Yves Saint Laurent as he was one of her heroes.

What he'd said had floored her. He and John Prinsloo had apparently been keeping an eye on Sparkle, and they were considering the agency to join them as an associate. Someone would be arriving early next week to shadow her for two weeks to see if they had what it took to be a Wexler-Prinsloo partner.

This had come before the debacle of tonight, and had nothing to do with Hector or his helping out. The timeline would speak for her when the bastard started his mud-slinging campaign.

So that was settled. Monday, she would tell Hector they were done. Hopefully before the Wexler-Prinsloo rep came to the office. Then, she and her team would be on their best behaviour for two weeks and totally nab this deal.

With a deep, fortifying breath, she opened her eyes and tore herself from the wall. The stiletto heels on her shoes made clopping sounds as she stalked across the antique teakwood parquets running the length of this château. She paused on the edge of the podium, swathed at the back in the shadows expertly created through the play of lights lighting up the runway. The brilliance hurting her eyes died down somewhat as the last model from the opening line-ups stepped backstage. Nina's collection would come on soon, after a brief intermission.

She had better go check if all was well with the diva.

A mixture of apprehension and unease started roiling inside her stomach the farther in she went. This bade nothing good. She hadn't eaten the prawn cocktail and didn't remember, had she? No, she never ate on big nights. Nerves twisted her too much. She doubted the sparkling water she loved to sip on to keep her electrolytes up would be making her sick

today. In fact, it should be helping her stay hydrated amid all this ambient heat.

If everything had been going to Hell in a hand-basket earlier, well, now, all Hell had broken loose.

She stopped dead at the sight of diminutive Nina stomping her feet around and cursing everyone out. They just needed her to start rolling around on the floor for this to be a full-on tantrum.

“You!” Nina shouted when she noticed Annabelle, who cringed at being put on the spot.

Of course, when everything went well during an event, praise went to her whole team. When something—anything—went wrong or sideways, she was singled out to bear the abuse.

“You let this happen,” Nina raged on. “Fix this!”

Fix what?

It wouldn't pay to antagonize the client, so she pulled on all the calm and Zen she could conjure and pasted a smile on her

face. “Nina, I am sure whatever it is, we can make it right.”

“Make it right? How will you? Do you know how long it took me to find him? This show couldn’t happen until I found him, and now, he can’t do it!”

Who can’t do what? She sighed inwardly as Daniel sidled up to her.

“It’s not good, *patronne*. The model who was to have the showstopper bride on his arm ate some of the prawn cocktail. He is currently puking his guts out in the guest loo at the back.”

“Thank God he made it to the loo and didn’t barf on any of the clothes.”

Trust her problem-solving mind to come up with the silver lining in every situation. But seriously, if any of the gowns had been ruined, Nina would’ve had her hide. All the pieces had thousands of pearls or Swarovski crystals hand-sewn on them.

Think, Annabelle, think.

“So the only problem we have right now is that we need an escort for the showstopper.”

“And her,” Daniel whispered with a glance towards a still-raving Nina.

“Her, we can deal with, and it will sort itself out once we find a replacement for the sick model.”

Daniel snorted. “Good luck with that. Have you forgotten the brief she forced down the throat of every modelling agency on the island? The man had to be buff and—”

“Taller than six-foot-two. I know.”

Good luck finding a six-foot man at random on the island in the first place, and now on such short notice? They had their work cut out for her.

Still, there were some foreigners in the audience. There must be one about six-two and muscular. What had Nina written on the call sheet? She’d wanted ‘a tall drink of water.’

There was no time to ponder the situation. The sooner they calmed Nina down, the sooner they’d get this show underway, and the sooner this night would be over, too.

So, armed with optimism and determination, Annabelle strutted back into the main room, a smile plastered on her face as she eyed every single man around. Just her luck. None seemed taller than six feet, and they all looked like guys whose only attempt at exercise came from a leisurely stroll once a month along a putting green.

Her spirits were sinking fast, but no, she wouldn't be the victim. She would turn this around one way or another. If she couldn't find— Her shoulder collided into someone, and reflex made her look up and say, “*Oh, pardon.*”

But the apology died on her lips as her gaze raked over the hulking piece of masculinity she'd bumped into. He was tall, all right. Comfortably above six-two, she'd say, with the frame to match. Those broad, broad shoulders looked snug inside the clean lines of an obviously expensive hand-tailored suit the shade of a rare *Dom Pérignon millésime*. His skin was the colour of sugar when it had just started to turn

into caramel, a golden glow on his chiselled features and cheekbones so sharp and defined, it was ridiculous. His head was shaved, and his eyes were dark. Smouldering. Intense. A thin goatee that looked like it had been hand-drawn onto him framed his solid chin and gave bearing to his strong jaw.

A puff of air escaped her.

“Tall drink of water,” she mumbled, and blinked.

The gears of her stunned mind started clicking then, and she gasped. “Tall drink of water!”

The man looked at her with a frown on his broad forehead. He must think she was crazy.

Of course, her words wouldn't make much sense to him. She had enough trouble keeping up with the direction her thoughts had taken.

So she forced herself to pull in a breath, anchored herself solidly on her heels, and threw her shoulders back. She beamed a

dazzling smile his way as she psyched herself to give her pitch.

“S’il vous plaît, dites-moi que vous pouvez m’aider!”

She went into her spiel, but a few words in, he shook his head and raised his eyebrows. She stopped talking, and he said, “English, please.”

Okay, so definitely a foreigner. A local would understand French.

“So, I need your help. Please, pretty please,” she said with another smile.

“Pray tell how.”

He had a deep voice with a masculine rumble that almost made her knees go weak. She had a job to do and a crisis to avert here—she couldn’t let a man, no matter how delicious-looking, turn her into mush. She’d also picked up the hint of an accent, like a drawl. He actually sounded East African, without the crispness of Francophone Africans.

“Are you averse to being in the spotlight?”

No use beating around the bush.

“Not really. Why?”

His frown seemed to say he was carefully wondering what she might be getting at.

“I will need you for five minutes, tops.”

“Doing what?”

She glanced at the ramp, still bathed in low lights, as they waited for the first model wearing Nina’s new collection to come out.

“Walking the runway.”

He chuckled. “I’m no model.”

At least, he hadn’t outright refused or told her she was insane. She could work with that.

“You could be, though, with those looks.”

He threw his head back and laughed. A few heads turned their way—those people must also have been mesmerized by the rich sound.

“I hear Nina Harelson’s designs can be, how shall I put it, out there,” he said.

“It’s entirely a women’s collection,” she reassured him.

His eyebrows rose. “You want me to wear a dress? Hmm, kinky.”

The way he’d said that last word accompanied by a half-smile almost made her knickers combust. Quickly, she shook herself and got back into the conversation.

“Nah. You’ll just have to be, well, you, like this,” she said with a wave.

Nina had arranged for the showstopper escort to wear a Cerruti 1881 suit.

“What designer made your outfit?” she asked.

“Hugo Boss.”

Perfect. Same parent company representing the two brands along with Christian Lacroix and Ungaro, among others. She could smooth that wrinkle out after the fact.

He eyed the catwalk for long seconds then looked to her. “One turn down there?”

“Yes. That’s all I’m asking.”

He grinned. “What’s in it for me?”

She gulped. Anything he wanted, she would happily give him. Preferably in a

moonlit room, with a bed draped in satin sheets. Heck, who needed a mattress? The wall nearby in the darkened hallway would do just fine.

Get your mind out of the gutter, you slut!

“Name your price,” she bit out.

He watched her for a moment. “Rain check, for now?”

She gulped again. This would put her at his mercy ...

But more important right now was saving this show, stopping a major outburst that would have the reporters in titters backstage, and making sure her agency came out unscathed.

“Deal,” she said, and put her hand out.

He clasped it, and the heat flowing into her had nothing to do with the crushing temperatures inside the crowded room.

Priorities, Annabelle. Priorities.

Without releasing his hand, she dragged him out back and into Nina’s entourage. Well, non-entourage would be more fitting—everyone seemed to have left that

boat to sink, the diva's tantrums being legendary.

"Nina," she soothed as she got close. "Problem solved. Look who I found to step in."

Nina stopped her swearing mid-rant and trained her eagle-eyed, predatory gaze onto the man—wait, she didn't even have a name for him.

"He'll do," the designer said. "He'll do nicely. The suit, though—"

"It's Hugo Boss. They won't have a qualm that it's not the Cerruti 1881 they sent us."

"Perfect. Come with me," Nina said as she grabbed the man's arm in a tight grip.

He turned as she led him away and winked at Annabelle.

"That rain check? I'll find you sometime."

A rush of heat went over her, despite the fact she was standing right under an air-conditioning vent. This amber-skinned Adonis would be the death of her ... if this night didn't kill her first.

Figuratively tugging her big girl panties higher, she left the backstage area and went to give the green light to the crew in front that the show could start. Duties snapped her up, like making sure the DJ had his set right and the models were in the proper line-up. She also often darted to the buffet in the main hall to ensure nothing that could be spoilt had stayed on. It was too late to order new catering, though she had managed to ring a nearby hotel and get them to send her a dozen trays of canapés. Consequently, she missed the rest of the show.

By the time she finally had a moment to breathe and look around, the event was over, and her Mystery Man was nowhere to be found.

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