

TREASURED CLAIM

A MYTHOS LEGACY
NOVEL

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Chapter One



JEWELRY TRICKLED THROUGH ELAINA'S FINGERS, SCATTERING reflections across the peeling linoleum of her bathroom floor. Each piece hinted at how she'd acquired it for her collection—a broken clasp on a silver chain, earrings missing their backs, a loose sapphire she'd rescued from a sink drain. But the precious ornaments lacked the satisfying *clink* of gold coins when they landed in the safe-box at her knees.

Humans didn't make treasure like they used to. Such a shame.

She curled her fist around the last trophy—a brilliant ruby, almost the size of her palm. A weak dribble of energy from her talisman inched up her arm. She squeezed the gem harder.

It didn't help.

A sluggish rhythm still beat in her chest, and gnawing starvation still chilled her limbs. The pathetic recharge from her collection would barely keep her heart alive through the evening, much less until she *happened* to find another abandoned prize to claim.

Damn it. Her hand slumped to her lap, and she sat back on her heels. She didn't blame her ruby talisman. Neither it nor its sparkling companions had anything left to give.

Restraining her impulses was no longer an option. If she didn't take advantage of her natural talent to score an addition for her hoard at tonight's party, she *deserved* to die.

"Okay, I'll bring home a new friend for you." She kissed the gemstone. "I promise."

Thievery wasn't as bad as committing murder, right? Besides, she'd already weakened herself by selling off a bracelet to buy an outfit for the ruse. For once, embracing her danger-junkie instinct despite the risk of exposure was logical.

One brilliant success coming up. Or a deadly failure. One of the two for sure.

She placed her ruby in the lockbox and stroked the facets in a final caress. Habit propelled her fingers through the steps required to protect the metal case: Activate triple security locks on the safe, insert the false bottom of the filing cabinet in her bathroom's closet, and engage the cabinet's deadbolt, which fell into place with a thud.

Full-strength dragons would laugh at the feeble defensive measures, but it wasn't as if she could afford anything better. Where was a hidden mountain cave when she needed one?

Elaina restacked her clothes in front of the cabinet, obscuring her hoard, and jiggled out the dress purchased for Phase Two of tonight's party. Red, sleeveless, and way too expensive. Strappy heels joined the gown in an insulated bag marked *Stefano's Fine Catering—Chicago, IL*.

She mentally reviewed her checklist. The kitchen assistant's uniform she'd swiped from work last week? She tugged the cuffs of the almost-too-small jacket. Check. Mandatory white gloves? Check. But she wouldn't put on the miserable things until the last possible minute. Hair pulled back in a health-code-friendly bun? Check. Hair color that matched her fake ID? Uh...

The cracked mirror over the sink revealed multicolored shades of blonde, auburn, and warm browns swirling through her hair. At the sight, a surge of cold invaded her limbs. Slip-ups like that would bring about her death, regardless of the strength of her heart.

She concentrated for a second, and the natural colors of her bun magically darkened under a solid wave of rich black. The worried expression spreading lines over her forehead was another matter. In her imagination, the furrows spelled out "I'm a reckless idiot."

As if this risky venture were her first choice. Or her twentieth.

After triple-checking her disguise, she left her apartment, descended the building's unlit stairwell, and walked the two blocks to

the side street where her beater car was slightly less likely to be stolen. Creaks from its door hinges annoyed a dog behind a nearby gate. She ignored the deep barks and started her car. Or rather, *tried* to start her car.

“Oh no, you don’t.” She cranked the key again.

Nothing.

She slapped her palm against the dashboard, broadcasting her threat into the underlying mechanics. “If you don’t start in the next thirty seconds, I swear I’m going to make an appointment for you at the junkyard.”

Regardless of whether the rusted-out heap believed her, the engine sputtered to life, and she made it from inner Chicago to Stefano’s headquarters on the outskirts without a single stall. She parked in a back corner of the lot, away from the lights and security cameras.

She relaxed, her spine sagging into the seat. Step one of Phase One complete.

Then she straightened and groaned. Arriving meant she’d have to cover her skin with the gloves Stefano required all his employees to wear. Her plan could have been so much simpler—not even requiring a Phase Two—without those fabric obstacles between her and survival. Stupid rules.

But she didn’t have a choice. Stefano catered all the ritziest parties in the metro area because of his reputation for rule-following perfection.

Tonight was no exception. Right on schedule, the employees finished loading the carts, ovens, and trays into the delivery vehicles by the building. Time to go.

One last check in the rearview mirror verified her disguise, but that damned worried expression was still there too. She poked at her forehead. Yeah, as if stretching the skin flat would erase her concerns.

“I can do this. I was *born* to do this.”

Technically, she was born to kill to get what she needed. At the thought, a memory flashed—her mother’s lifeless face sparkling with blood—and she shoved it away. No, she’d die a cold death in the form of an extinguished heart before becoming like her father.

No one deserved to be murdered. Not even humans.

Despite the warm evening, a shiver skittered down her limbs, and her blood's temperature dropped another degree. Not much longer now.

Her mouth went dry, and she rubbed her arms, even though a summertime Death Valley heat wave wouldn't be enough to fix her low body temperature. Would it hurt to die? Would her heart stop beating before she froze to death? Or would her muscles freeze in place first, leaving her trapped in eternal hibernation?

She hissed at herself and threw open her car door. Neither of those was going to happen. She wouldn't let the situation come to that. Her plan *would* work.

With a tight grip on the insulated bag containing her gown, she crossed the parking lot and joined the workers climbing into the vans. No one gave her a second glance or questioned why the woman they knew as Linda, a front-office employee, was dressed for kitchen prep work tonight. Bravado was an art form—one she'd mastered. She squished into a seat and set the insulated container beside her.

Another employee eyed the bag. "Does that need to go in back with the rest?"

"No, this is extra serving ware, just in case. You know how Stefano is." She pasted an innocent smile on her face until the man shrugged and turned away.

Horns from the crushing weekend traffic accompanied them all the way to their North Shore destination. Through the van's windshield, the Wyatt estate finally came into view.

The building's grandeur had been impressive enough in daylight when she'd gone there to take notes for Stefano during his meeting with Mr. Wyatt's assistant. Now, landscape lights accented the dramatic columns and arched windows against the evening's twilight. The place did a fair impression of the impregnable fortresses in the stories of old she'd heard years ago from Nastav, her tutor.

As they neared, tingles spread over her skin, and her muscles tightened, even though she was in no shape for *fight* or *flight*. Last week's prep meeting at the mansion hadn't prompted that reaction from her senses. Something must have changed. Or had she run out of time already?

She pressed her fists into the bench seat and rolled her shoulders back. No, her heart was still beating. She'd make it.

Opportunities for a big score were the whole reason she'd applied for this job with Stefano. No more hoping for lost trinkets. No more freezing. No more starving.

And no killing required.

Maybe that weird feeling was anxiety. Given the stakes, she forgave herself. Especially as the mansion was an intimidating spectacle.

Next to her, a server around her age leaned forward and whistled. "I'd sure like to be the one to take Alexander Wyatt off the list of *Chicago's Most Eligible Bachelors*."

The driver snapped around. "That's Mr. Wyatt to you. Stefano will have our heads if anyone is less than professional."

Masked by the darkness, the woman gave him the finger. Elaina stifled a snicker.

The van rolled up to the back entrance, joining Stefano's trucks already there for the afternoon's prep work. The vehicle's headlights spotlighted security guards at the door. Elaina clutched her bag and joined a group bustling into the mansion. Overhead cameras monitored everything in sight, and she kept her face down.

A guard shined his flashlight on her nametag. "Linda Jones."

Elaina suppressed the impulse to fidget with her jacket sleeves again. She'd sent the list of approved employees to Mr. Wyatt's staff, so she should be safe—unless Stefano had updated the file for some reason.

The guard checked off the name on the list and waved. "Go ahead."

She'd breached the castle's defenses. The thought tugged her lips into a curve. Maybe she shouldn't have been restraining her risk-taking instinct after all. The rush of danger lured her forward.

The elegant kitchen wasn't yet buzzing with activity, and she stashed her bag in one of the oversized ovens. Stefano used a portable kitchen for dishes that couldn't be prepared ahead of time—he'd never risk dirtying clients' appliances—so no one would look in the house ovens.

Her flagging energy weighed down her limbs, but the rest of the team would notice if a "kitchen assistant" didn't help with

dinner preparations. The proper timing for the next phase couldn't come fast enough.

Faking patience and dealing with human food. Neither were her strong suits.

Hours passed with steady chores, and as she worked, she went over her mental dossier of the guest list. Although the riches around the Wyatt mansion would keep her heart beating for months, the building's security created an intangible barrier. She wasn't strong enough to force a bond with any of his possessions, so she couldn't remove them from his territory. But his guests...

Yes, the annual fundraising dinner put on by the famed Alexander Wyatt of Dakon Enterprises attracted everyone of importance in Illinois. And away from their homes—their territory—the adornments they wore should be vulnerable to her.

Servers hustled into the kitchen with dirty dessert plates. Finally, her cue for Phase Two.

She grabbed her bag and slipped into a storage room off an empty hallway. Those skin-covering, thwarters-of-jewelry-acquisition gloves came off first, followed quickly by the rest of the uniform. Within a minute, she'd stepped into her candy-red dress and heels. A second after that, her hair tumbled down her back, released from its bun. By the time she exited the room, she'd changed her hair's waves to blonde.

Laughter around a corner drew her to a cluster of women with freshly touched-up lipstick migrating to the ballroom. Prickles once again crept over her skin.

Okay, got it. Imminent death or something. She was working on that problem.

Time for her dinner. And if she was lucky, maybe she could nab some dessert too.



THE BIMBO BRIGADE AROUND ALEX POUTED AT HIS ATTEMPT TO retreat. Tonight was too important to risk upsetting any donors, even these women willing to throw themselves at him for the temptation of money. So much for their self-respect. He forced a smile to soften their disappointment, but his expression was as

superficial as their charms.

"I'm very sorry, ladies, but my assistant needs me to assess the fundraising efforts." He disentangled himself from the group and strode toward George at the temporary stage.

Damned gold-diggers. Years of experience had taught him what that type was really like. His entire life, every woman on his arm had been lured to his father's side after the man flaunted his bigger wallet. He blamed his father for the betrayal more than the women he'd been shallow enough to choose.

Women of that type were simply locusts, greedy parasites marking their territory. As if he were a prize to be won.

Some prize.

They'd probably never realize the truth though. His charitable efforts could never make up for his failings. No one had ever recognized his dearly departed father as a fraud either, no matter how much Alex had wished for that exposé. Of all the skills to inherit from the old man.

As he neared the dais, a flash of red drew his eye to a woman entering the ballroom. Adrenaline surged through his body, throwing him off balance. Every nerve ending sprang to attention, focusing on her, and he stumbled into the side of the platform.

What the—? He caught himself on the edge of the raised floor and outright stared.

Sure, her red dress hugged every enticing curve, but he'd never reacted like this to any woman, much less recently. The longer he gawked at her, the more she struck him as unlike any woman he'd ever seen.

Her hair color defied description, shining pure blonde one minute and displaying streaks of reds and browns the next. Instead of jewelry for decoration, her skin shimmered with subtle rainbow colors, as though she'd bathed in body glitter that had sunk into her flesh. On anyone else, the effect would have looked ridiculous. On her, it was radiant.

Even the way she walked kick-started long-dormant lustful desires. She glided across the floor, each step a sinuous movement. An image of her body slinking across his burned itself onto the top of his all-time fantasy list.

His control washed away, his immunity to beauty lost in her

wake. A need consumed him. A need to hunt her. Dominate her. Conquer her.

Echoes of his father brought him up for a second, and he tugged at his collar. What the hell was he thinking? He'd spent years proving he *wasn't* like that bastard, and he wasn't about to let that change.

She scoped out the ballroom, but her arrival went unnoticed by the crowd, failing to trigger leers or jealous glances. They must have all been blind. Completely blind.

Her gaze skimmed over the other guests and then met his. They both froze. Her bright blue eyes glowed like the center of a flame. Her eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly, and then her attention veered elsewhere.

He shook himself, banishing a numb shock from his body. No one could look like her. She was an impossibility. But here she was, and—God help him—he needed to confront her no matter how much his reaction set off alarms in his mind.

Beside him, George finished prepping the ballroom security team, and Alex leaned toward his assistant. "Who's the woman in the red dress? I don't remember meeting her before dinner."

George set his to-do list on the platform, a peculiar quirk of needing empty hands to concentrate. He arched a brow at the hundreds of formally dressed guests. "Which woman in a red dress? There must be over thirty of them in here."

Alex tilted his head toward the cause of his fascination.

"The blonde?" George shrugged, dismissing the unique shades of her hair as easily as her beauty. "Doesn't look familiar. Probably someone's guest."

Alex paused, weighing George's theory. Maybe she was rendezvousing with a husband or boyfriend. But she didn't meet anyone else's gaze, and she didn't smile at anyone in recognition. Instead, she appeared serious, as though analyzing the crowd.

The compulsion firing his blood made the decision for him. For the first time in years, Alex would approach a woman for something other than business.

He couldn't decide if that was good, bad, or an impulsive risk he'd later regret.

Chapter Two



A TINGLE RAN DOWN THE BACK OF ELAINA'S NECK. DANGER. Danger here, among humans? Not likely. She searched the ballroom for hidden threats. Tapestries on either side of an alcove caught her eye, where a red and bronze dragon confronted a knight brandishing a sword. Her fingernails sharpened into points. Well, that was...

Disturbing. But not dangerous.

No, she was probably just off-kilter because of the way that man, Alexander Wyatt, had stared at her. Could he know she didn't belong? Or had the assistant at his side identified her? Between her hair color change and her attempt to remain unobtrusive during the meeting with Stefano, she'd assumed Mr. Wyatt's assistant wouldn't recognize her.

It didn't matter. She needed more treasure to stay alive. Period. Giving up this opportunity wasn't an option.

If only her father wasn't obsessed with making her his next victim, she wouldn't be in this mess, having to live among humans and use up all her energy to evade him. It wasn't as though she'd snatched the most prized item from his collection for her *Ziwō* rite of passage.

Oh, wait. That's exactly what she'd done.

But he'd started it by threatening her in the first place. And now she didn't have a choice if she wanted to survive to tomorrow, much less to next week.

Besides, she could handle a little danger. If she let her instincts have any say, it might even be fun.

Just in case though, she concentrated on the biggest prize first. Her internal precious metal and gem detector sensed an opal and diamond pendant in the room. Probably the same necklace she'd seen the governor's wife wearing in pictures from other occasions. Perfect.

She aimed for the jewelry, but before she moved a foot, a warm hand caught her elbow and squeezed. Uh-oh.

The tingle she'd felt earlier intensified and, more surprisingly, carried a wave of valuable heat through her body, halting the shivers of her heart. She resisted the urge to move closer and instead calmly confronted the danger.

The host of the party stood beside her. "Excuse me, I don't believe we've met." He released her and extended his hand. "I'm Alexander Wyatt."

Her breath hitched at the sudden loss of warmth. Money-fueled power flowed around him like an aura, and his deep, resonant voice compelled her to meet his steel-gray eyes.

The magazine covers hadn't done justice to his appearance. On the surface, he looked younger than his thirty-one years, but the intensity of his gaze made him seem old enough to have witnessed her father's birth. His styled mahogany-brown hair and custom-tailored tux would turn heads even in a *GQ* spread. Come to think of it, he'd probably been on that cover too.

And in his pocket, diamonds—lots and lots of them. Her fingers twitched at the torture. So close and yet so impossible to acquire.

Power, looks, gems. Wow. Humans had never interested her before, but this one...

Dizziness swirled her thoughts, and she grasped his outstretched hand despite having perfect balance all her life. Lost in the whirlpool of his stare and the warmth of his touch, she forgot everything.

Except her name. Her real name.

"I'm Elaina Drake," she heard herself saying.

Her words echoed in her mind, and she recoiled, knees wobbling. Her chest caved with a sudden inability to breathe. What the hell had she done? Ten years of fake-ID anonymity broken by

three little words spoken by an *idiot*.

An absolute idiot.

She yanked her hand away. Exit. Where was the damn exit?

He tilted his head, chasing her gaze. "Are you looking for someone?"

She stretched her fingers and forced her nails to reform into a shape less noticeable than their current points. He hadn't come to escort her off his property for crashing the party, so there was no need to panic—and certainly no need to freak out about her reaction to this human male.

Time to play nice rather than draw more attention to her presence. The faster she got away, the faster he'd forget her name, and the faster she could return to her hunt.

She went for blasé. "No, I'm just deciding where to start."

His grin that surfaced, broad and triumphant, could knock at least twenty IQ points off any woman's ability to think clearly. Liquid pooled in her mouth, and she nearly choked at the unfamiliar sensation. Her piecemeal self-education on human society—browsing the front covers at newsstands, reading the merchandise when she'd worked at a comic book shop, and various menial odd jobs—hadn't prepared her for this reaction from *her* body.

He offered his arm. "If you don't know everyone here, I'd be honored to make introductions, Elaina. May I call you that?"

"Yes, I mean, no." A quiet hiss escaped through her clenched teeth.

Damn it, her danger-junkie instincts were *not* helping. She had to get away from him before she completely lost her head. Not to mention what little remained of her security blanket of anonymity.

"That's not necessary, Mr. Wyatt."

"I insist."

He placed her hand over the crook of his elbow. His touch shocked her skin again, and a similar reaction glinted in his eyes.

He dipped his head to hers. "And please, call me Alex."

The quiet rumble of his voice sent shivers over her body, but the warmth of his touch strengthened the beat of her heart.

Once more, she succumbed to him. "Thank you, Alex."

The glow of victory in his expression was unmistakable.

He was dangerous all right.
Very, very dangerous.



ALEX COULDN'T HELP STARING AT THE WOMAN ON HIS ARM. SHE was even more gorgeous up close. And she smelled intoxicating, like an exotic blend of incense. The unusual fragrance complemented the slight foreign lilt of her accent, which he couldn't quite place. Eastern European maybe? Intriguing.

He stroked her fingers hooked over his elbow and savored the sensation of her skin. Sleek and lustrous as silk, the feel of her body spurred his fantasies into a gallop.

He would possess her.

A part of his brain sounded more alarms at the direction of his thoughts. Conquering? Possessing? That was too close to his father's *modus operandi*.

He blew off the warning. It had been too long since he'd been with a woman—and never one this attractive. The testosterone overload seemed darker simply because of his vow not to follow in the bastard's footsteps.

He *wasn't* his father. He still had his self-control, his constant companion.

It wasn't as if he was going to drag her out of the ballroom caveman-style. Probably.

He introduced her to the group clustered around Chicago's mayor. She stiffened when he said her name, as though inexperienced with being presented. By the time he was done with her, she'd be a pro.

The mayor's enthusiasm for Alex's new foundation gave him hope that he'd have the crowd's support. At a lull in the conversation, he excused them and steered Elaina toward several of his board members huddled near the string quartet. She tugged on his forearm after a few feet.

"Mr. Wyatt—" He raised a brow, and she huffed. "Alex. I'm quite capable of entertaining myself. You have a roomful of guests. You shouldn't concern yourself with me."

She glanced toward the doorway and shifted away from him.

He tightened his elbow against his ribs, holding her hand hostage.

Sure, he was out of practice, but a woman had never before itched to escape his presence. His internal guide to women made several suggestions. A few were even appropriate for public venues. Flattery had always worked in the past—that was worth a try.

“Perhaps I wanted the most beautiful woman in the room on my arm tonight.”

Her gaze snapped back to him, and she recoiled. Not the reaction he’d hoped for.

“How ironic.” She laughed, the hollow sound stomping on his intentions. “That I should be nothing but an ornament to you.”

“No!”

The mayor silenced behind them, and others nearby stared. He led her away from the spotlight of the scene and stopped at a clearing between groups.

“I meant to compliment you.” How could his praise be such a blunder as to be ironic? He’d apparently become far too cynical to predict multifaceted women. “Plenty of women here would be eager to hang on my arm. I assumed you’d welcome my attention.”

The tips of her mouth twitched up. “I’m not like other women.”

In other words, *not* a gold-digger. He couldn’t help a grin. “Obviously. That confirms why you belong at my side.”

Her eyes brightened, and she stood on tiptoe, placing her lips near his ear. Heat sped through his body in a race with his heartbeat.

“Maybe your name should be Lex instead of Alex.” Her sultry whisper sounded more resonant than a feminine voice like hers should.

He pulled back and gave her a questioning look.

Her tone took on a shrewd edge. “As in, Lex Luthor. A filthy rich man who pretends to be nice with his charitable donations, and all the while he manipulates everything around him because he’s used to getting his way.”

His stomach sank, and just like that, he’d gotten his wish—someone had recognized him as an irredeemable fraud. Only now, he wished the truth had come from anyone but her.

His jaw must have dropped, because she pushed up his chin, closing his mouth. She slipped her hand from his elbow, but

stroked her fingertips along his wrist.

“It’s too bad the circumstances aren’t different. I might have liked you.”

A click on the marble floor from her heels accompanied each stride that took her away. The flutters of her dress drew his eye until he lost her in the crowd.

He stood there, off balance and disoriented. Had he really struck out with her? Or was she teasing him?

At the thought, he couldn’t decide if he found her body or her mind more attractive. *This* was a woman who could match him for the relationship equivalent of a fair fight.

All he knew was that he would *not*—no matter what—allow himself to chase after her.

Yet.

Chapter Three



ELAINA WEAVED THROUGH THE GATHERING, SELF-BERATING thoughts piling high in her head. “Reckless idiot” summed them up.

Her logic warned her to abandon the ruined plan and slink toward the ballroom exit before Alex could corner her again. As though a hastily thought-out Plan B would be any better. Forget that.

Her danger-junkie instincts had the right idea this time. Suppressing them would accomplish nothing and kill her by morning. She searched for the grand prize of the diamond and opal necklace, and her senses aimed her toward Governor Boyce’s wife, fifty feet away.

A shiver seized her heart at the memory of Alex’s touch. She ignored it.

Between his money and his looks, the guy was clearly used to getting everything he wanted. Good thing dragons couldn’t love, so she was immune to his charms.

His warmth didn’t tempt her. His powerful aura didn’t affect her. Nope, not at all. She was here to do a job, and she wouldn’t let him get to her.

Reckless? Abso-friggin-lutely.

She joined the group clustered around Governor Boyce just as he was introducing his wife to the gathering. Showtime. Salvaging the plan, Elaina dismissed the distraction of her inconvenient

reaction to “Lex” and gathered her wayward thoughts.

“Mrs. Boyce, it’s such a pleasure to meet you.”

She hid her left arm behind her back and shook the woman’s hand. At the touch of bare skin, she mentally called to the pendant around the woman’s neck.

Elaina’s left palm remained empty. Damn it, that man had flustered her.

Or maybe she wasn’t strong enough to do a summoning.

No, she refused to believe that. She *could* do this. As long as her determination to acquire an object was stronger than the wearer’s attachment to it, she could take ownership—a nifty trick thanks to her DNA—and starvation made her damned determined.

Desperate even.

She changed her approach and lightly pumped their handshake, faking excitement. “I admire your unflagging support for your husband’s career. He’s a great asset to the state, and I’m sure you must be the foundation of his success.”

A flush rose to Mrs. Boyce’s cheeks. “Why, thank you.”

If the woman’s emotions toward Elaina softened enough, the necklace’s resistance to her call might diminish. Elaina concentrated harder.

A second later, the jewelry vanished from Mrs. Boyce’s collarbone and materialized in Elaina’s hidden hand. A giddy laugh bubbled up her throat. She’d normally suppress the not-quite-human sound, but she needed to draw the others’ attention from Mrs. Boyce so they wouldn’t notice the disappearance.

“No, thank *you*.” She released Mrs. Boyce and gave the woman a genuine smile.

Elaina’s smooth, practiced motion to lift the hair off her neck brought the pendant unseen to her bare skin. Against her flesh, the necklace bonded to its new owner—and became invisible to humans.

A sudden rush fried her thoughts. *Oh, um, wow.* That was new.

The energy kick from the bonding satiated her starvation and then some, the necklace’s strength explaining its earlier reluctance. The overflow buzzed inside her head, and she excused herself from the group before she started giggling like one of her drug-using neighbors.

She'd won. She should definitely indulge her recklessness more often.



ALEX RESTRAINED HIMSELF FROM SCANNING THE BALLROOM FOR HIS obsession. He might have finally found a woman with enough self-respect to stand up to him.

Maybe before, he'd subconsciously chosen the wrong women to prevent a heartbreaking betrayal, as his father had never believed in a fair fight. As a result of too many lost battles, Alex yearned for fairness and equality. But now that he didn't have to contend with his father's sick need to best him in every way possible, he was in no hurry to make his move.

He would *not* seek out Elaina yet, no matter what his instincts wanted to do to her. Right now.

Instead, he worked the crowd, promoting his new foundation. Encouraging donations tonight was just the first step. He needed ongoing partners for the foundation to succeed.

After his spiel, a mob gathered, picking his brain with endless finance questions. In the midst of a debate on the Fed's interest rate policy, a tap on his shoulder startled him. One of his security personnel stood behind him.

"Sir." The man leaned forward and spoke in an undertone. "I'm sorry to bother you, but we have an issue."

Perfect. Just the excuse he needed to escape the political jousting. He took leave of the group and followed the guard to the security control room down a back hallway of the manor.

His security manager greeted him. "Mr. Wyatt, I'm sorry to pull you away from your guests."

"It's all right, Baxter. What's the problem?"

"Governor Boyce's wife was wearing an irreplaceable heirloom necklace this evening. She noticed a few minutes ago that it was missing, and she asked us"—he indicated the guard beside him—"to begin a quiet search for it."

All but one of the monitors on the wall behind Baxter displayed real-time feeds from cameras throughout the mansion and grounds. According to the time stamp in the corner, the remaining

screen had been cued to show the ballroom from several minutes earlier.

“We’re not sure what happened to it. In one frame we can see her wearing the necklace, and in the next frame, it’s gone.”

“Did it fall?”

The guard shook his head. “I’ve already checked the floor in the vicinity, and the lady said it hadn’t slipped down her dress.”

Baxter motioned toward the monitors. “We have an unobstructed view from this camera angle. If it fell, we’d have seen it happen.” His gaze flicked to the screen and back. “I’d like permission to question one of your guests about the situation.”

Christ. Alex clasped his hands behind his back, the potential fiasco playing in his mind. No matter what, one of his guests—investors in his cause—would hold him responsible. Either he’d let down the governor and his wife, the people he most needed on board with his foundation, or he’d offend this other guest.

Tension constricted his grip around his right wrist. “You’d better have a good reason for that request.”

“Let me show you the incident, and you can decide for yourself.” Baxter adjusted the monitor’s settings and zoomed in on Mrs. Boyce among the milling crowd.

Cold seized Alex’s chest at the image. There, in front of the governor’s wife, stood Elaina.

At least he thought it was Elaina. It looked like her, but then again, it didn’t. This woman was a full-on blonde, and her skin didn’t shimmer. Her facial features were slightly different as well, plainer and less angular. What the hell?

His gut churned as Baxter played the clip. The women shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. And then the necklace disappeared.

Even though he already knew the answer, he forced his dry mouth to open. “This woman is the guest you wish to question?”

“Yes. She—”

“She never touched it.” He didn’t recognize his voice through the defensive tone.

Baxter cringed. “Let me play it again, and this time, watch her other hand.”

With the second viewing, the agitation in his gut twisted harder.

As Baxter had pointed out, Elaina's left hand—assuming it was Elaina—remained behind her back until after the disappearance. Then she stroked her neck. True, the pose was odd, as though she was hiding something in that hand, but she hadn't touched the necklace.

"That doesn't prove anything."

"Of course, Mr. Wyatt." Baxter straightened. "We certainly don't have enough to justify involving the police. I'd thought it wise to question the person closest to Mrs. Boyce, but we'll investigate the best we can without disturbing your guests."

No, that dread in his stomach meant something, and he had to figure out the significance. Maybe this incident explained his mental alarms or those urges to hunt her down. And there was the mystery of her appearance as well.

He gave a sharp nod. "We'll question her together."

Then he'd get his answers.



THE ENERGY RUSH FROM HER NEW ACQUISITIONS MADE ELAINA light-headed, and she had to concentrate on steadying her steps across the ballroom floor. She'd gotten the necklace she'd come for, as well as a bonus dessert of a diamond tennis bracelet and drop earrings from other guests. Her ruby talisman would be glad for the fresh additions to her hoard when she recharged tomorrow too. When had she ever felt this satisfied? Oh, never.

She should leave. Really.

So why hadn't she grabbed the opportunity to escape?

Maybe she was *too* happy. What was the human term? Intoxicated? Drunk?

That must be it. She certainly wasn't seeking an excuse to give in to temptation and search for the man infecting her thoughts.

Nope. Not going to happen.

Proving her denial, she spun on her heel and started her escape. Stefano's crew should have finished the cleanup by now for her to leave the same way she'd arrived.

She rounded the doorway from the ballroom, aiming toward the storage closet. Twenty feet ahead, Alex entered the hallway

with two burly-looking guys and stopped short.

Uh-oh. The anti-party-crashing police. Her knees locked in place, and her mind blanked.

Like an inebriated human, she couldn't make her brain focus on anything, much less an exit plan. Instead, the mass of cells in her skull noted in a detached way that maybe she should be careful about over-indulging in the future. Not helpful.

Alex's heated gaze swept over her, scrutinizing her neckline for some reason. His expression hardened, and he stalked closer. He seized her upper arm and yanked her toward him.

"My office," he ground out. "Now."

Yep. Busted.

Chapter Four



ALEX THRUST ELAINA AWAY ONCE THEY REACHED THE privacy of his office. Any other woman might have stumbled in those heels, but not her. No, as he somehow knew she would, she easily kept her balance, despite the uneven edge of the area rug over the hardwood floor. Then she swiveled toward him, slow and deliberate, as though flaunting the evidence of her crime.

His security guards stopped mid-stride and gave him a double take, no doubt surprised by his brutish behavior. He didn't give a damn about his father's influence or his public image right now. This thief was worse than all the gold-diggers in the ballroom added together.

"What the hell were you thinking?" He jabbed toward the necklace brazenly hanging around her neck, where her skin once again shimmered with iridescence. "Did you think you'd be able to walk out of here with it?"

Her eyes narrowed, taking in the two guards, and then she considered him. "I'm sorry, Mr. Wyatt. There must be a misunderstanding. Walk out with what?"

"That necklace. The one belonging to Mrs. Boyce. The one you're wearing now that you didn't have on before."

She flinched, and her fingers splayed over her collarbone, as though attempting to hide the jewelry. "I'm wearing a necklace?"

Her irrational question sharpened his need to do...

Something to her.

His security manager entered the room before anything regrettable happened. The two other guards spread out between his desk and the door, covering the various angles. Alex forced his shoulders to relax.

"Baxter, call the police for Ms. Elaina Drake, if that's even her real name, and reclaim that necklace."

Baxter turned to her, then Alex, and then back to her. His brows pulled low, even though the situation didn't warrant that level of confusion.

She openly sized up the man and gave him an innocent smile. "I'm sorry, Baxter, is it? Mr. Wyatt seems to be under the impression that I'm in possession of a necklace." She raised her hands and slowly twirled in her form-hugging dress. "However, I clearly don't have any place to hide something like that." She opened her palms. "I don't even have a purse."

Alex's jaw slackened at her gall.

One corner of her lips twitched up into a teasing curve. "Unless this is all an elaborate setup for a strip search."

"What the hell do you mean by tha—?"

Shouts cut off his exclamation, and Alex found his biceps grasped from behind. He'd apparently stormed closer to the maddening woman without realizing it.

He whirled on his captor. "Get your hands off me."

Baxter paled and released him. "Sorry, sir, I was trying to protect you from trouble."

"Your *job* is to get that necklace." He scanned her from head to toe. "And that bracelet and those earrings she didn't have on before while you're at it."

Elaina ignored him and kept her attention on Baxter. "How much abuse am I to tolerate from this man simply because he's rich? Earlier, I made it clear to him that I wasn't interested in his company, yet he continues to find reasons to harass me."

Harass her? The word normally would have stopped him cold, but confronting a thief was *not* harassment.

"I'm sorry, ma'am." Baxter held up his hands. "This is a terrible mistake. I take full responsibility. I'd spoken to Mr. Wyatt about you a few moments ago, and he must have misinterpreted my

concerns. You're free to go, of course."

"The hell she is." Alex seized her arm. "You're all blind."

He yanked at the necklace, but couldn't get a grip on the pendant, as though it was an illusion. What the—? Were his eyes playing tricks on him?

She wrenched his hand away from her neck. Hard.

"Do you *enjoy* having restraining orders filed against you? This won't help your reputation, *Lex*." At her emphasis of the name, she gave him an alluring look through her lashes.

A shiver coursed through him, and his body clenched, wanting to take her on his desk this second. Damn his raging hormones to hell. How was the woman messing with his control like this?

If he couldn't trust his control, he couldn't trust himself, much less his eyes. She'd already made him think she was more beautiful than she really was, with the hair and the skin and everything. And now she'd deceived him into seeing non-existent jewelry to make him look like a fool. If he didn't know better, he'd say she'd bewitched him.

Not that he believed in witches. But if she'd created the problem, she could undo it.

Before he could state his demand, she had the audacity to address his security manager. "Baxter, maybe you should see if someone tampered with Mr. Wyatt's food or medication. Surely he's not always like this." She placed a wrist on his forehead, as though checking his temperature—which *was* quickly rising—and gave him a wink. "Unless, of course, we need to add an addiction to hallucinogenic drugs to your list of faults."

The teasing statement rang in his ears. It didn't matter that it was as false this time as it had been years before. No one accused him of that. Not anymore.



GOD, THIS WAS FUN. MAYBE IT WAS THE ENERGY BUZZ TALKING, but Elaina hadn't enjoyed herself this much in over ten years. This kind of danger she could handle.

Sure, unlike any other human, Alex could somehow see the jewelry. But her brain was in no shape to puzzle over that mystery

yet. Her mind would clear eventually, and she could wait.

After all, no one else could see the necklace, so Alex couldn't prove anything. And the more he protested, the more innocent she seemed in comparison.

Then his gray eyes flashed like a sword in sunlight. "Leave us."

Alex tightened his grasp on her arm and directed his glare toward Baxter, adding weight to the command. The guards focused on their security boss as well.

Her throat constricted, as though the necklace had become a noose. They wouldn't leave her. Would they?

Just in case, she slid the pendant along the chain to the back of her neck while no one was watching her. Futile? Yes, but she had to do what she could to protect her treasure. Maybe if Alex didn't see the jewel, he'd forget about it.

Alex lifted his chin. "That. Was. An. Order."

Baxter signaled to the brute squad, and all three members of the security team slinked to the office door. She struggled against Alex's vice-like grip, sobriety returning in an instant.

"You can't be serious. You're leaving me alone with *him*?"

At least Baxter had the decency to act ashamed, his sturdy frame rounding.

Over his shoulder, Alex added, "Shut the door behind you."

Click. No noise had ever sounded more ominous, and chills spread over her skin despite Alex's touch. She was abandoned to the man she'd just had way too much fun provoking.

Technically, she could defend herself against any mere human, but the death—or even just an assault—of a multi-millionaire would land her real name in the news and reveal her whereabouts to her father in two seconds flat. More to the point, using up her energy to do something forceful would put her back where she started.

Her reluctance had nothing to do with the fact that she didn't want to harm *this* human in particular. Nothing at all.

"I should warn you that I can scream—loudly. Your guests will hear me."

He scowled down at her. "I'm not going to *hurt* you."

As if to emphasize his words, he released her arm. However when she stepped back, he kept pace, continuing to loom over her

even as the backs of her heels thumped into the wood-paneled wall behind his massive desk.

The thrill of danger radiating from him did odd things to her thoughts. Her logic shouted at her to find a way to escape, but the rush pulsing through her body enticed her to stay, to explore these new sensations. Being a danger junkie had taken on a whole different meaning.

His broad shoulders caged her in, blocking the easy way out. "Fix it." His hand circled in the air. "Take away this spell or whatever it is you did."

His request interrupted her appreciation of his jaw line. "What?"

Had she pushed him too far? Had he snapped?

"Spell? Like a witch?" She scoffed. "Is *that* what you think I am?"

She wasn't leaning closer so she could smell him. She wasn't. Even though he smelled enticingly sharp and clean, not like soap, but like cold steel, it didn't affect her at all.

Despite her denial, her head tilted, placing her nose within inches of his neck. She drew in a lungful of his scent. Between the afterglow of her acquisitions and his nearness, her drunken mood returned, stronger and more reckless than before.

"I can one hundred percent guarantee you that I'm not a witch."

"Then why am I seeing things?" He caressed her bare arms, seemingly without realizing it. "Feeling things?"

Energy from his touch warmed her body, and she longed for more. Much more.

"Maybe you have a jewelry fetish? And an active imagination?"

His lips beckoned her gaze. How would they feel against hers? Not a kiss of course. She simply wanted to touch one body part to another to experience that tingling sensation there.

He stroked her arms more forcefully, pinning her to the wall. A wave of heat flowed through her body, building into a craving. She stifled a gasp and angled her head up to his.

"What about your hair?" He bent closer, his breath wafting over her. "And your skin?"

A static field hovered between their lips, only millimeters apart.

She closed her eyes, her voice a soft murmur. "What about

them?”

“Your hair shifts between multiple colors, and your skin shimmers.”

No! Her knees gave out, and only his embrace kept her from crumpling to the floor.

“Y–You don’t exist.” Her insistence was weaker than intended, no thanks to an attack of hyperventilation, and the solid strength of his arms proving her wrong didn’t help either.

Apparently, his kind was more than just a bedtime story told to scare younglings away from the human world. The danger she’d felt earlier now made sense. She’d recklessly stumbled upon the one human who saw the real her. The one man who could pinpoint her heart.

The one man who could kill her.

Would kill her.

Right now.

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