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MARIE LU



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and
SMOKE

STARS AND SMOKE

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STARS *and* SMOKE

MARIE LU



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To you, my reader.

Thank you for the love and comfort you've given me over all these years. I hope this book keeps you company in the way you have kept me company, and that we get to share many more stories together.



MISSION LOG

AGENT A: "Winter Young?"

AGENT B: "I said what I said."

AGENT A: "Tell me you're kidding."

AGENT B: "You don't think he can do it?"

AGENT A: "He's a pop star, [REDACTED]."

AGENT B: "Correction: He's the biggest superstar in the world."

AGENT A: "I only accept semantics on Fridays, please."

AGENT B: "Oh, cheer up, [REDACTED]. Name a better cover than a superstar. The boy's exactly what this mission needs."

AGENT A: "Why? Because he can do a backflip?"

AGENT B: "Because he's the only one who can get us in."

AGENT A: "He doesn't know the first thing about what we do!"

AGENT B: "Isn't that the point? Our agents are unconventional."

AGENT A: "I meant that I doubt he's capable of doing our kind of job."

AGENT B: "Well, it's not as if we have a better option."

AGENT A: "The CIA's not going to like this pitch."

AGENT B: "We're the [REDACTED] Group. They never like our pitches, and yet they always seem to hand us a contract. Isn't that funny?"

AGENT A: "Hilarious."

AGENT B: "Is that your blessing I hear?"

AGENT A: "Fine. But you owe me."

AGENT B: "How much this time?"

AGENT A: "The nicest dinner in the city."

AGENT B: "Orleana?"

AGENT A: "Naka."

AGENT B: "Listen, if I can get a reservation at Naka, I'll quit my job."

AGENT A: "If Winter Young can actually pull this off, I'll quit mine."

1

Those That Birth Obsession

There was nothing particularly distinct about the car that wound its way across the parking lot, streetlights striping across its sleek surface in a hypnotic rhythm.

The only thing that made it stand out was the two black SUVs following it, both full of security personnel. The mini caravan made little sound as it approached the back of the stadium, avoiding the barricades near the front where ninety thousand fans had already congregated in a shifting mass.

Behind the first car's tinted windows sat a lean figure with one leg crossed idly over the other, his chin resting thoughtfully on his hand as he watched the throngs of people milling around in the distance.

At first glance, it was hard to tell that the boy was dressed in luxury. His clothes—black sweats with no logos in sight—looked simple enough. But closer inspection would reveal his careful choices, the hand-sewn details along the seams, the fine quality of the bespoke fabric, then the thin rings on his fingers, one studded with tiny black diamonds, the other platinum and engraved with his logo, a stylized rabbit head with ears shaped like two halves of a broken heart. He wore his favorite custom Gucci sneakers, a birthday gift from the fashion house, along with a pair of pink-tinted aviators that, an hour after being photographed in public, would be sold out worldwide.

Even if his clothes didn't grab your attention right away, the rest of him did.

Winter Young—the most famous superstar in the world, the boy everyone talked about—was so beautiful it was hard to believe he was real. His was a luminous sort of presence that could turn every head on the street: messy hair so lushly black it gleamed blue in the light, geometric ink running along his forearms that ended in a snake coiled around his left wrist, slender dark eyes rimmed with long black lashes, a mysterious grace in his movements, an expression that could somehow switch between shy and mischievous in the space of a second. But it was more than that. Many people were objectively gorgeous, but then there were those few, the stars with some undefinable quality so searingly bright that they birthed obsession. Once the world got a glimpse of them, it would move heaven and earth just to see them again.

Now Winter was staring at the window, studying the beads of rain on the glass and the million different colors refracted within them, humming an experimental bridge of music under his breath as his mind worked away on a new tune. Beside him, his manager tapped on her phone.

“If Alice reschedules you for a quick photoshoot tomorrow morning at six thirty A.M.,” she said, “can you make do with a fifteen-minute breakfast around five? No answer means yes. Don't forget to return that call for Elevate's CEO—Miss Acombe wants to pitch you on endorsing their upcoming sneaker redesign. Oh, and if you want to shorten your New York dates, you'd better tell me now.” The stadium's lights through the car's tinted windows cast the woman's dark skin and glasses in a green tint, and her voice, dampened against the backdrop of the rain, had the tone of someone who was used to winning arguments with him. “Ricky Boulet's tour schedule will coincide with yours, and I'd really rather not spend an hour of my life fighting with his manager about why we're”—her voice took on an exaggerated inflection as she rolled her eyes—“*stealing his weekend.*”

“Let’s do all the dates,” Winter said to the window.

Claire peered skeptically over her phone at him. “No one does four consecutive days in New York.”

Without looking, he held a hand up to her. “You know we’ll sell them all out.”

She swatted away his high five with little slaps. “I’m talking about your health, obviously, not your star power. Please don’t make me deal with you collapsing onstage again.”

Winter finally turned his head to give her a sidelong smile. “Five years and still no faith in me at all.”

“None whatsoever. Did you even eat lunch today?”

“Do three churros count?”

Her expression turned stern, and she nudged his leg with her boot. “Winter Young, I got you sandwiches specifically so you wouldn’t just eat empty calories.”

He rested his head against the seat and closed his eyes. “How dare you. Churros are a perfect food, and I won’t hear blasphemy against them.”

She sighed in long-suffering patience. “I wish you’d stop working so much and take care of yourself, for once. Go hiking. Go on a date. Have a fling, at least. You want me to reach out to anyone’s agent for you?”

The thought made him weary. They’d had this conversation before, and he wasn’t interested in explaining himself all over again. After too many empty nights, he’d come to hate flings. And the thought of dragging someone through all the mud that came with dating him made Winter cringe. During his last breakup, his then-girlfriend had told him that the media circus made him *undatable*.

But to Claire, he just shrugged and said aloud, “There’s no one interesting.”

“Are you saying you’re the most interesting person in the world?”

“True until proven otherwise.”

“I think it’s already been proven otherwise in this car.”

Winter put a hand on his heart in mocking pain.

"Besides," she went on, "it's not about interest. It's about free publicity and a little fun for you both."

"Really? I thought it was about love."

"Ah, Winter." Claire shook her head. "Nineteen years old and already given up on romance."

"Learned it from the best. Have you seen anyone since you broke up with that magazine editor?"

Claire sniffed. "Susan and I technically haven't broken up."

Winter gave her a pointed look. "Right. You just haven't talked in two years."

"Stop changing the subject. We're trying to fix *your* love life."

He gave her a sly smile. "But I already love *you*."

She waved a flippant hand at him. "See that charm coming out right there? Why don't you make it useful?"

Winter couldn't help laughing a little. Once upon a time, he was just an awkward-looking, unpopular high school freshman with lanky limbs and a bad haircut who spent his lunch hours alone, rehearsing dance routines in the empty gym after class, scribbling down melodies and nurturing a big dream. Then he'd booked a gig as a rookie backup dancer for Ricky Boulet—at the time, the hottest star in the world. Winter's performance at Ricky's opening concert had been so extraordinary that a video of him went viral overnight.

Claire, then an ambitious young associate at a management company, had seen the potential behind that video and called him the next morning to nab him before anyone else could. He was the get of the decade; she was the compass for his success. The two of them had risen together as life catapulted him from backup dancer to record deal to one of the biggest pop careers in history.

You're going to be famous someday, his older brother, Artie, had once teased him, back when Winter was only twelve and had first started writing songs.

Winter had only laughed. *You're so optimistic.*

Optimism is my hidden power, Artie had said with a smile. Then his brother had looked at him squarely. *There's a restlessness in you. A conviction that something bigger and better must be waiting further down the road.*

Winter's fingers played mindlessly with his phone. It took him a minute to realize that he was swiping it locked and unlocked, then pulling up his brother's name before swiping it away again.

Artemis Young.

As Winter stared down at his phone, the memory returned of their final day together. Just a pair of brothers, twelve years apart in age, sitting on the edge of a pier watching the sun sink into the ocean. The salt and wind frizzed their hair. The Ferris wheel in the distance was alight with bands of blue and yellow, the colors reflecting off their faces. He could still smell the sea, could recall staring at his brother's profile and wishing with his whole heart that Artie wasn't leaving again the next morning.

Don't spend your entire life searching, okay? Artie had said to him. His brother had round dark eyes where Winter's were narrow, and wavy black hair that hung thickly over his brows, and looked so unlike Winter that no one ever guessed they were related.

What do you mean? Winter had asked.

I mean, sometimes you already have what you want. You just don't know it yet.

Winter had nodded along without really agreeing. It was an easy thing for his brother to say. Artie was the meticulously planned son, the favorite, the one from Mom's first marriage. Winter was the accident, the afterthought, the mistake from her second one. Maybe that was what made Artie think Winter would be famous someday. He knew that Winter craved attention, that he hungered for love every minute of every day, would seek it out to the ends of the earth. Artie had understood, even then, and pitied him for it.

Winter had shrugged at the time. *All I want is to be like you*, he told Artie.

Artie laughed, a rich, throaty sound that Winter was always trying to copy. *Be like you, Winter. Be good.*

Artie had worked for the Peace Corps and died. Winter had become a shallow superstar and lived. Good never won in the end.

The memory faded, along with the bits of music he was working on in his head. Winter put the phone down and shook his hand out. Still, his fingers twitched. He didn't know why he kept his brother's number. Artie was gone. Only a stranger would be on the other end.

Finally, their car came to a halt at the stadium's back entrance. A team of security guards were already in place in front of barricades, but that hadn't deterred the massive wave of admirers pressed in on either side of the path from the car to the stadium door. There had to be hundreds of people here. He recognized a few of the signs they held up, some of the same fans who'd attended his soundcheck earlier in the day.

"Chin up," Claire told Winter as they both straightened. "You're about to wow this audience."

Winter tucked his thoughts away like a loose hem, reminded himself of where he was and who people expected him to be. He took a deep breath and winked at Claire. "Always do," he replied.

The two of them tapped fists. A bodyguard outside opened the door, and Claire turned away from him to step out of the car.

The crowd cheered at the familiar sight of her, knowing what her arrival meant. Then the cheers turned into an explosion of screams as Winter emerged.

Cold rain blew against his face. As the blinding flash of lights hit him, he cast the crowd a casual glance and saw a sea of phones turned in his direction. Frantic shouts peppered the chaos.

"Winter! Oh my god, oh my god—WINTER!"

"WINTER!!!"

"OVER HERE, WINTER!!"

"I LOVE YOU, WINTER!!"

Everyone here had clearly been waiting for hours, their hair soaked from the rain. They waved frantically at him as his bodyguards ushered him down the path, then shrieked as he touched his fingers to his lips in a quick kiss.

Posters and markers, along with desperately reaching hands, were shoved out at him as he passed. The dozen security guards tried to push them back, but Winter still made a point to pass near the edge of the barricades, forcing his entourage to stop so he could scrawl a few hurried signatures on some of the posters. He was about to autograph a sign for a little girl when one of his guards pulled him away.

"Let's keep moving, Mr. Young," he said, shaking his head.

Winter shot the girl an apologetic look as he was ushered toward the rear entrance. The rain and screams cut off abruptly as the door closed behind them.

Up ahead, Claire slowed down and gave him a disapproving look. "We talked about not doing that," she said. "I know you think it's just a couple of posters, but it's not safe."

Winter frowned. "Come on. They've been standing in the rain for hours. Can't we at least pitch a tent for them or something?"

"I'll take care of it," Claire called at him over her shoulder as she led them down the stadium's corridor.

Winter pulled out a thin notebook from the pocket of his sweats. It went everywhere with him, this collection of scribbled lyrics and half-finished song bridges, words he found beautiful and choruses he wanted to run by his producers. Now he hurriedly scribbled his signature on a blank sheet and ripped it from its binding, then handed it to his nearest bodyguard.

"For that little girl in the blue raincoat who was waiting out there," he said. "Please."

The bodyguard gave him a small smile, then nodded and took the paper.

Winter watched him go, his throat hollow. There was a time not long ago when he could afford to spend hours talking to fans, one by one, and would leave them feeling rejuvenated by all their love. He couldn't remember exactly when it switched to this rushed, soulless routine. He looked on until his bodyguard disappeared around the corner, then followed Claire down the hall.

They made it to the greenroom, a space crammed with makeup chairs and a table sprawled with snacks, where Claire finally left him. Winter did a few quick stretches until his muscles felt warm and loose. Then he poked halfheartedly around the snack table. His stomach rumbled. Claire was right—he should've eaten something more than just churros, but it was too late now, and he didn't want to cramp up.

He'd just managed to tear his eyes away from the plate of croissant sandwiches when someone shoved him roughly in the ribs. He grunted and looked to one side. There stood a handsome brown-skinned boy with a headband holding back his crown of lush dark curls, his eyes fixated on the cookie plate. Leo.

"If you're not gonna have anything," he said, "can you at least move aside so I can?"

Winter rolled his eyes as he took a step backward. "Don't you think you should eat a little earlier? We're an hour from showtime."

Leo scooted toward the plate, grabbed a cookie, and shoved half of it in his mouth before replying. "You're one to lecture me about food," he answered. He looked ready to wipe his hands on his shirt, then seemed to remember that he was already in his stage clothes and makeup. He idled there for a moment, then wiped his hands on a tall Black boy passing them by. Dameon.

Dameon frowned at Leo. "Seriously?"

Leo shrugged. "You're not dressed yet."

“Doesn’t mean I don’t like this shirt.” Dameon shook his head, dreadlocks swinging, at the grease stain Leo had left on his sleeve. Then he looked at Winter. Even right before a concert, there was a serenity about him that Winter found soothing. “I’m heading to the practice room. You want to do one more run before we go out?”

Winter turned his eyes away from the snack table with a sigh and shook his head. “No, they need me dressed soon,” he replied. “You guys go ahead.”

Leo put a hand on Dameon’s shoulder as they walked. “How many run-throughs until you’re happy?”

Dameon shrugged. “As soon as you stop being half a beat late on everything.” He glanced back at Winter and gave him a smile. “See you out there.”

Winter waved, eyes lingering on them for a moment. Then the real chaos began. Makeup artists and designers fluttered around him, transforming his casual getup to the first of his shimmering stage ensembles. Meanwhile, the arena had begun filling with fans. Even down the hall and far from the center of the stadium, Winter could feel the shudder of their claps and chants, could hear the sporadic waves of their cheers.

The call finally came. Winter’s bodyguards scattered to the front and back of his path as he walked down the hall, adjusting his earpiece and the small mic curving around to his mouth. Already he could feel the electric pulse of his fans in the arena fueling the fire within him, bringing forward the strength he didn’t think he had even an hour ago. His steps turned more confident, and the young, unsure version of himself—the one that had sat on the pier all those years ago, laughing with Artie—retreated behind the carefully crafted version that the rest of the world saw: the curve of a seductive smile, a trained narrowing of his dark eyes, the swagger of his walk, the lines of his body moving with hypnotic grace.

The music swelled in the arena, the bass of the beat so strong that it shook the floors. The screams of fans rose and fell. Winter ducked

under the latticework beneath the stage, moving silently until he reached his designated spot. There, he bent into a crouch as workers hurriedly strapped him into a series of harnesses. He followed their instructions obediently, moving his limbs as they asked and checking his devices to ensure they were working. Every step the same as it'd always been for years. He worked mechanically, unthinking.

At last, his team cleared away, leaving him alone. He bowed his head, bracing himself.

The beat announcing his cue came.

The platform he crouched on rose, vaulting him up onto the main stage.

The audience exploded with cheers. The harnesses around Winter's arms and legs suddenly pulled up, and Winter launched high into the air in a spin. As the beat dropped, the harnesses dropped with it. He landed lightly on his feet in front of his backup dancers, who had materialized on the main stage behind an enormous, neon-lit sculpture of his rabbit logo.

The crowd shrieked their enthusiasm. Winter closed his eyes and breathed deeply, soaking in the tide of love that enveloped him. *This* was what he really craved, the only time he ever felt a true, fiery connection to the world, and it was never satiated.

He raised a hand to the sky.

"Are you ready?" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

The world roared back at him. He tilted his head up, his figure ghostly in the midst of the stage's smoke and fog, and hurtled into his first routine.



As always, everything afterward felt like a blur.

A dozen people swarmed around him the instant he stepped back down beneath the stage. He smiled numbly as hands patted his shoulder

in congratulations and he thanked the crewmen unhooking the harnesses from his body. The post-concert haze draped over him, covering him in its weight. He could feel the tremors in the ground as the arena continued to cheer long after his disappearance, clusters of fans still breaking into spontaneous song.

He'd done well. He was flush with the knowledge of it, even as he could already feel that rush seeping out of his limbs and giving way to bone-deep exhaustion. As he followed the crew through the same corridor from hours earlier, the roar of the stadium began to recede, until it sounded only like background noise against the echo of his shoes.

Claire was at his side now. He couldn't remember when she'd popped up. She was smiling at him, but in her eyes, he could see her concern. She knew how he got right after concerts.

"That was legendary," she said to him. Her cool fingers curled around one of his arms as she guided him down the hall.

"Did she come?" he asked.

Claire looked at him, then shook her head. She didn't have to ask to know he meant his mother.

Winter nodded, his expression blank. "Can you send someone to make sure her car's in her driveway, that she's home safe and isn't stuck at the airport?"

"I'll take care of it," Claire reassured him.

The dance crew streamed by around them, whooping at Winter when they saw him. He looked over as Dameon and Leo passed by, clapping their hands in the air.

"Dinner in your room!" Leo shouted. "We're gonna buy out the hotel's champagne!"

Dameon's grin was more subdued. His eyes followed Winter, studying him in his quiet manner. He seemed to notice Winter's expression, in the way that he always noticed everything about Winter, but didn't comment on it.

"Take your time!" he called to Winter.

Winter's eyes locked gratefully with his for an instant. Then Dameon and Leo were gone, moving with the tide of people down the hall toward the rear exit. Winter followed Claire to the greenroom.

"Take some time for yourself," she told him. "But I want to get you out of here way before we open up the lots. Ten minutes, tops. Okay?"

He flashed her a grin as he wiped his forehead. He didn't even know who'd put a towel in his hand. "Got it."

She grasped his chin firmly and gave him a gentle shake. "And for chrissakes, eat something."

"I promise," he answered.

Then she released him and left him alone.

The greenroom was empty now. Winter found himself wandering around the space, past the tables and empty makeup chairs. The silence seemed overwhelming after the screams of tens of thousands of people.

In about an hour, the headlines would start all over again. How his new concert had been. How he'd looked and who he was wearing. Alongside news about war and protests would be how many thousands of dollars his upcoming tour's tickets could fetch for resale. New rumors and gossip. He'd linger over a late dinner with Dameon and Leo, recounting the best parts of the night. Then he'd lie awake, alone and listless, and feel his soul beating weakly in time with his pulse.

He leaned against one of the tables and bowed his head. Sweaty strands of his hair hung across his vision. For some reason, he found his thoughts returning to the sight of the soaked fans who'd been standing outside the side entrance, waiting for him to emerge from the car. He thought of the little girl shivering in the rain just for the chance to get a piece of paper with his scrawl on it.

The last lyrics he'd written in his notebook echoed in his mind.

'Cause what am I doing here? What are we all doing here?

They all came to see him, gave him their hard-earned money, handed

him this magical life of his. What did he give them in return? Once, it felt like he offered them something substantial—his music, his performances, his heart. Something to help them forget about whatever worries might plague their lives. But now it felt less like that and more like . . . well, he didn't know. Repetitive interviews and thick barricades. Meetings and attorneys. Fans who thought they loved him but didn't get to know him at all. A never-ending cycle of rote actions: wake up, makeup, show up. Pose. Recite answers to the same questions. Rehearse smiles for the same photos. Eat and sleep in a hotel room.

And the love he needed to thrive, to *survive*, felt more and more distant every day. Were his creations still creations, an expression of love? Or had it all just become business? Was he worth the world's adoration? Was he deserving of their love that he so desperately craved?

He was never sure. Just as he was never sure whether his mother would remember he existed, or when she might fail to take her medications, or if she was proud of his successes, or whether she loved him.

Just as he was never sure why his brother had to be the one who died.

Ah, Winter, Artie had once told him gently after a failed audition. *You don't have to be famous to matter.*

But Winter didn't know how to matter without being famous.

Artie had given his life for something that made the world better. What was Winter giving?

Suddenly he couldn't stand it anymore. The high from the concert had dissipated, leaving only exhaustion. The restlessness that always roamed inside him ached now, pulling forever toward some unattainable version of himself that was a better person than who he currently was.

If he could just reach it, he would be worthwhile. He would be happy.

But he couldn't. So all he wanted to do was flee to a hotel room. Maybe he'd bail on dinner with the boys, too. Claire had said ten minutes, but he looked at the clock on the wall.

"Five minutes," he muttered.

Long enough. Knowing her, the cars were probably early and ready for him anyway. He straightened and ran a hand through his messy hair. Then he headed out into the hall and away from the arena stage.

His bodyguards hadn't come for him yet; maybe it was too early, and they were all waiting somewhere near the back entrance. He walked alone down the corridor until he reached the small, nondescript side door leading to the back.

Winter stepped out into the cool, wet night. His sight settled immediately on a sleek black SUV waiting right at the entrance. As he walked toward it, the car's door opened automatically for him, revealing a plush interior.

Winter let out a small sigh of gratitude as he slid inside. Claire must have upgraded the cars during the concert. This one had tinted windows that were currently playing some soothing video of an ocean scene, a feature that his other car definitely didn't have, and new leather seats that were already heated to a cozy temperature.

The door closed automatically behind him, sealing him in. Then the car pulled away.

That was when he realized something wasn't right. The woman sitting in the shadows beside him wasn't Claire. And the driver wasn't someone he recognized, either.

Winter blinked. "Is this the wrong car?" he asked.

"It's exactly the right car," the woman answered.

And in that moment, Winter realized he was being kidnapped.



Those That Walk in the World's Shadows

It took another second for Winter to convince himself that he wasn't jumping to conclusions. He'd rushed into plenty of black SUVs before where he didn't recognize the driver or had to speed off for some reason or other. Claire didn't always have time to tell him everything, and over the years, he'd simply learned to get in first and ask questions later.

Maybe there was an explanation here, too.

But something about this driver and woman dressed in impeccable suits seemed different. Winter felt his sixth sense prickling the hairs on the back of his neck.

"Are we heading back to the hotel?" he asked them.

They didn't answer. The serene ocean videos continued to play on the windows, giving him the illusion of driving along a Mediterranean coast. Only the front window stayed clear. They were driving toward the wrong exit.

"Stop the car, please," Winter said instead.

No answer.

Now he knew he was in trouble. No driver of his had ever, in his entire life, not done what he asked. But the driver kept going, his gaze fixated on the gates at the far end of the stadium lot. The man's brows were so dark and intense that they looked like they might smother his eyes entirely.

“Stop the car,” Winter said again, sterner this time. “And let me out immediately.”

“I’m afraid we can’t do that, Mr. Young,” he said over his shoulder. Streetlight outlined the scruff of his short beard.

I’m being kidnapped. It’s finally happening. The thought rushed through Winter like a river of ice. It’d always been a possibility—and the real reason Claire seemed perpetually paranoid about his safety. He could hear the blood pounding in his ears. Was this why none of his bodyguards had been around? Had these people done something to them?

“And why not?” Winter asked as calmly as he could. As he did, one of his hands ran along the edge of the door, seeking the lock.

“They’re all auto-locked from the driver’s side,” said the woman sitting beside him. She ran a light hand across the side of her blue hijab, then regarded him with a pair of calm, deep-set eyes.

Winter’s hand stopped, and he reached instead for his phone, ready to trigger its emergency call feature. “If it’s a ransom you want,” he said quietly, “contact my manager. But I’m warning you. Claire won’t be happy to hear this, and you really, really don’t want to piss her off.”

“No ransom needed. It’s not money we’re after, Mr. Young.” The woman nodded at his hand. “Keep your phone where it is. It won’t work in here, anyway. This is just a CPU.”

Winter’s hand stopped short of the phone. “A what?” he asked.

She waved a flippant hand. “A car pick up. A meeting. We’ll only take a few minutes of your time.”

Now they sounded less like kidnappers and more like . . . solicitors? Winter frowned at her, his temper rising. “A few minutes? What the hell is going on? Who are you?”

They had exited the stadium gates now and were heading up the street. The woman reached into her pocket to pull something out. Winter tensed, wondering for a split second if he was going to have to wrestle a gun out of her hand—but then the woman held up a badge and flipped it open to an ID.

“Sauda Nazari, Panacea Group,” she said.

Winter shook his head. His heart was still pounding in his ears, and he blinked, trying to make sense of the situation. “What?”

“The Panacea Group. Panacea means a solution—”

“I know what panacea means,” Winter snapped. “What’s this? Who are *you*, some kind of CIA agent?”

The man up front snorted. “Close. But good guess.”

Winter shook his head. This was getting more and more confusing.

“The CIA hires us for the jobs they don’t want to do,” Sauda explained.

“I really don’t need your jokes right now.”

She looked at him. “These are not the eyes of a joker, Mr. Young.”

He stared at her before she finally broke her gaze and glanced ahead at the windshield. Up in the front, the man sighed.

“What did I tell you?” he grumbled. “There’s still time to return him to the stadium. Should we just drop him off and pick someone else?”

“Give him some time, Niall.” She looked at the man through the rear-view mirror and gave him a small, winsome smile. “Please, for me.”

He muttered something unintelligible again, but settled back into silence.

She turned to eye Winter. “We’re who the CIA calls when they’re looking to . . . outsource some work,” she said. “The Panacea Group is a private company, and we look for unconventional agents. We have a certain amount of leeway that our government-run cousin doesn’t. Less red tape, more funding, if you will. The ability to move faster. So we take on anything that slips through the CIA’s political cracks.”

“You really are serious,” Winter muttered.

“That’s what I said,” Sauda replied.

“The CIA.”

“The Panacea Group.”

“Panacea. Okay.” Winter rubbed his forehead. “Is this standard procedure, kidnapping people without telling them what you want? Is

that legal? Because I hope you know that in about half an hour, my missing status will be the top headline on every newscast in the world.”

Sauda leaned forward on her knees. “Rest assured, Mr. Young, that as soon as we finish this conversation, we will drop you off wherever you want to be.”

“And the conversation is?”

“We need your help.”

At that, a bubble of laughter rose in Winter and emerged like a bark. “Okay. That’s great.” He shook his head. “If this is one of Claire’s pranks, I’m firing her the instant I get out of this car.”

The woman didn’t laugh. Somehow, something in her expression made Winter’s smile fade. There was an authenticity to her that he couldn’t quite shake.

“You’re Winter Young,” she said.

“Yes. Impressive espionage work.”

“As you’re well aware, you’re one of the most famous superstars in the world, with quite a wide range of fans.” She crossed her arms. “And we are interested in one of those fans.”

Winter crossed his arms. “Is that so?”

“For the last few years, we’ve been tracking the activities of Eli Morrison. Do you know who that is?”

The name sounded vaguely familiar. “Not quite,” Winter said.

“Eli Morrison is one of the world’s richest men,” Sauda explained. “Thanks to his shipping empire, he’s worth thirty-seven billion. The CIA has attempted to arrest him in the past, with little success.”

“I didn’t know shipping things was illegal.”

“Shipping some things is. Like drugs. And people. And weapons.” Her smile looked grimmer. “We prefer to call that trafficking.”

“What the hell does that have to do with me?”

Sauda looked unfazed. “Morrison’s daughter, his only child and the apple of his eye, is turning nineteen soon. Her father is planning a

multiday celebration that will—pardon the accuracy of my quote—‘beat the shit out of any birthday party that anyone has ever had.’” She nodded at him. “And she’s your biggest fan.”

Winter felt a weight drop in his chest. “I get that a lot,” he muttered.

“I think this one might actually mean it,” she said. “In about eight hours, Morrison’s people are going to be reaching out to you and your manager. They are going to offer to hire you to put on a private concert for the celebration.”

Performing for the daughter of a criminal tycoon. Well, this was new. “Where?” he asked. His throat felt dry. “When?”

“In a month,” she explained, “in London. He is having ten thousand guests flown in, all on a fleet of private planes.”

“Holy shit.”

“I told you it was a big party.” She shrugged. “Security for the week, as you can imagine, will be extremely tight.”

He looked back and forth between her and Niall. “You want me as your in?”

“We want you as our in,” she confirmed. “You would attend this week of exclusive events.”

“In order to do what?”

“To help us get a crucial piece of evidence that we need to arrest Eli Morrison.”

Winter raised an eyebrow at her. “Is that all?”

She smiled a little. “You won’t just be any guest, Winter—you’ll be the personal invite of Eli Morrison’s daughter, the most precious person in the world to him. You’ll likely be seated beside her and her father at dinner every night and invited to every private party after the main events. That kind of opportunity doesn’t come around every day.”

Winter leaned back against the seat. “No, thanks,” he said.

The woman narrowed her eyes at him. “Mr. Young, I am asking you to think this through.”

"I *am* thinking it through, and now I have finished thinking it through. The answer is still no."

"Mr. Young—"

Winter looked at the window. "Stop the car and let me out."

Sauda stared calmly at him, as if she knew this would be his response. "A butterfly flaps its wings and changes the world." Her voice softened. "Your brother. Artemis Young. Peace Corps, right?"

Winter froze, all sarcasm leaking out of him. "Careful there," he said quietly. "Now you're treading on some dangerous ground."

"He talked a lot about you to his colleagues," she told him. "That he was proud of you, but that you were always searching for something bigger than what you had, some purpose, some reason to be worthy. I suspect that even now, as renowned as you are, you feel like you haven't found it."

Winter could hear the words as if they had been said by Artie himself. And suddenly, he could see a ghost of his brother sitting in the car, too, leaning back against the seat and regarding him with an easy smile. To his frustration, he could feel moisture welling at the corners of his eyes, his throat tightening against his will.

"Why are you digging up info on my brother?" Winter said, his voice hoarse.

"Because I assume there's a lot you don't know about him," Sauda answered, "or how he died. And that you'd probably like to know."

The world seemed to tilt. The night outside the car looked hazy.

"Artie died during a Peace Corps assignment in Bolivia," he said slowly.

"Did he?" Sauda replied.

His heart started to pound. "Am I wrong?" he asked.

Sauda's expression looked gentler now. "This isn't the time or place to tell you everything. And maybe you don't want to know. If that's truly the case, then just say the word, and I will have you dropped at your hotel,

no more questions asked.” She nodded. “But if you want to know, you’ll need to sign some paperwork with us. And to do that, you may want to consider my offer to you.”

Nothing made sense anymore. Winter’s hands tingled; his limbs felt numb. Artie, who had always fought for something bigger than himself, who had never talked about what he did. Winter felt like he was in some sort of waking nightmare, hearing about a version of his brother distorted through a circus mirror.

What if Sauda was telling the truth? What had really happened to Artie? How much did he not know? Why did *Sauda* know? Winter wanted to scream the questions at her, demand that she tell him what she was purposely withholding. His hands shook with restraint—his breath came out shallow and uneven, and his tears threatened to spill over.

Embarrassed, Winter wiped his eyes impatiently and scowled at Sauda. “Using my brother against me is a pretty low blow.”

Sauda looked unfazed. “I’m only doing my job. Nothing personal.”

“It’s always personal.”

“It’s for a greater good.” Sauda tilted her head. “Something I know you think about constantly.”

Winter scoffed and looked away, heart stretched tight. “I’m just an entertainer,” he muttered.

“You’re our perfect spy.”

Winter’s frustration spiked. “I am the literal opposite of a spy,” he snapped. “You understand that, right?” He waved a hand at her. “Isn’t the entire point of your work to stay in the shadows, to never be recognized for what you do?”

“It’s the most thankless job,” Sauda agreed.

“Well, my entire career revolves around being recognized.”

Sauda leaned toward him. An intense light illuminated her gaze. “What is a mission but a performance? You know how to make a scene, how to get people to look where you want them to look. You know how

to work a crowd, to pivot in the moment when something goes wrong, and to transform your entire personality depending on your audience. You know how to lie on a whim. Best of all, no one will suspect you. That's the beauty of being an unconventional spy." She tapped her temple with one finger, the nail spring green. "Let yourself think bravely, Winter Young. You may presume that you belong in the spotlight and I operate in a secret world, but perhaps we exist in the same place."

Winter swallowed hard. "I can't do this," he whispered.

"You've been staring at all the success in your life and wondering why any of it matters. You spend your nights awake, feeling grateful and guilty for your fans, wondering if you're worthy." Sauda leaned toward him. "I know you want to do good. To *be* good."

"I'm not my brother," he muttered.

"You have his heart." She tapped her chest with a finger. "You're searching for something. Validation, maybe."

"And you think I'm going to find that by working for you," he said coldly.

"I think you might find satisfaction in knowing that you can use your considerable stardom for justice, yes." Sauda smiled a little, and behind that smile was something tragic. "Maybe doing a thankless good deed for a change is exactly what you're looking for."

Winter didn't answer for a moment. He stared at the rhythm of light and shadow moving through the car.

"I hope you're not expecting me to kill anyone," he finally muttered.

A hint of amusement touched her lips. She sat back. "No murders required, I promise. Now, Morrison will undoubtedly require that you use his own technicians to set up the stage for you. You will be restricted from bringing most of your own backup dancers and crew. But we can install one of our own agents with you to masquerade as your bodyguard. I already have the perfect person in mind."

"That so?"

"We call her the Jackal."

Winter lifted an eyebrow. "She sounds nice."

"She's not," Sauda replied, just as dryly. "But she's very good at her job."

A Panacea agent for a bodyguard. A limited number of his own people with him. This had to be a dream. He would jolt awake in his hotel bed, drenched in sweat, the images of this woman and this car already fading from his mind. It was all madness—why did he need to do any of this? He had a wildly successful life on paper. He could simply go back to it without agreeing to these agents' demands. Could just force himself to forget what this stranger just told him about Artie. Nothing would bring him back, anyway.

"You don't have to agree to the mission right now," Sauda said quietly, studying his expression. "You just need to be interested in hearing more."

Just interested in hearing more.

Winter felt himself dangling over a precipice with a blindfold on, struggling to see beyond it. He felt that eternal restlessness in him awakening, insatiable and ravenous.

A thankless good deed.

"I want my mother protected," Winter finally said.

"Done."

"And if any of my staff and crew are coming with me, they better be guarded."

"They will be."

"And I want a nice car."

"We can start you off with a Mazda."

Well, it was worth a try. Winter stared at her calm, collected face. How did these people do this job? How could you stay in the shadows of the world, day in and day out, doing things that others would never see?

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I?" Winter said.

“It’s possible.”

Winter sighed. “How do I hear more?”

“Sign a contract, of course,” Sauda replied. “Obviously this entire conversation is strictly confidential. You will be bound to that until such time as we feel otherwise.”

Winter pursed his lips. “Contracts. Finally, something I understand.”

“Then you’ll do great with us.” She smiled. “Welcome to the Panacea Group, Mr. Young.”