

**KAYVION LEWIS**

**THIEVES  
GAMBIT**



**NANCY PAULSEN BOOKS**

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*[Dedication T/K]*



# THIEVES' GAMBIT





# ONE

**A** QUEST CAN'T trust anyone in this world—except for a Quest.

So when a Quest, particularly Mama Quest, tells me to curl up like a Twizzler twisted into a pretzel inside a cabinet so small it would be illegal to keep your dog in a cage the same size, I *trust* she has a good reason for it. Or at least, whatever I'm stealing is gonna be worth it.

If I were a normal person, my legs would be in a coma right now. But I guess Mom's intense flexibility training came in handy for jobs like this.

I'd been crammed in here, on the secluded side of the mansion, for about three hours, scrolling through my dummy Insta. Over the last few months, stalking accounts about dorm life had become more addictive than K-dramas on Netflix.

When my battery dipped to 20 percent at midnight, I had to stop. Mom warned me not to use it up on irrelevant stuff—if I missed her text, I'd be screwed. So instead I thrummed my gloved fingers impatiently until my screen lit up.

**ATTN: Rosalyn Quest, Gambit Invitation**

Not Mom's text, though—an email? Did one of the summer gymnastics programs finally get back to me? Or that competitive cheer one? I'd emailed a lot of college summer programs for high schoolers in the middle of the night a few days ago, when our house felt the loneliest and the thought of spending weeks on a bustling college campus with other kids my age was the most refreshing. None had hit me back until now. I was starting to worry they'd seen through the transcripts I frantically forged for the applications.

A text notification dropped down before I could unlock the screen. This time it *was* from Mom. Almost like she sensed what I was about to look at and virtually slapped my hand away.

**Your turn.**

The email would have to wait.

I cracked open the cabinet door, slipping my fingers under to take the weight off the hinges so they wouldn't creak. A simple trick, but one I'd known since before I could write my name. I took a quick peek out.

The hallway was deserted. According to Mom's recon, this wing was typically empty; she and the other maids spent most of their time polishing vases in the private gallery in the other wing. Here there was less security.

I crept past the mansion's rooms with untouched four-poster beds, sparse bookcases, and bare end tables. The still quiet should have been unsettling, but I was no stranger to



lonely houses. If I blinked for too long, I might have thought I was back in our family's home on Andros.

The blueprints I'd memorized took me through a living area on the first floor, where an accent dresser covered with picture frames caught my eye. None of the other rooms had anything so . . . personal.

I picked up the farthest frame. A beaming group of college kids posed on the steps of a redbrick building. In the bottom corner, in neat, black script: *Freshman Year*.

Memories. Relationships. I could steal the picture, but I couldn't take those. If I wanted them, I'd have to earn them myself. Away from home. Away from Mom.

A soft sound made me freeze.

I put down the photo and ducked behind a sofa. Crouching, I unrolled my weapon of choice. The Quest fam isn't fond of guns—they're not stealthy. Mom carries a knife, and according to her, Granny once had a collection of syringes with fast-acting sedatives that she could dish out like spices by a five-star chef.

I suspected I didn't have the stomach to sink a blade—or needle—into someone's flesh so instead, I adopted the meteor bracelet. The length of links is easy to wrap around my wrist and the heavy metal cherry-sized weight at the end pops snugly into a magnetized ring on my middle finger. It's less difficult to smuggle past checkpoints than blades, and in my hands, just as effective, if not as final, as a knife.

The pit-pat drew closer.

So much for no security.

Rearing back to snap my chain around someone's neck, I choked out a laugh. The prettiest cat popped onto the top of the sofa. A Siamese with sandy fur that looked like she'd dipped her

paws and rubbed her face in ash. She blinked at me with vibrant blue eyes, then jumped to the carpet and purred, rubbing herself between my feet.

I rewrapped the bracelet around my wrist and scratched her behind the ears. She mewed and rolled onto her back. I'd just made her month.

When I was a kid, I binged vlogs on pet adoption while Mom was gone on long jobs. This was before I'd realized that nothing without Quest blood was ever setting foot in our house—animals included.

Siamese cats are popular because they're gorgeous, but they also get lonely easily. Without companions, they tend to die early. I had a feeling the owner of this isolated house hadn't thought too much about getting their cat a friend.

When I continued on, the cat followed, tail flicking happily. I nudged her away. Cute as she was, picking up a feline sidekick wasn't in the game plan. Turning, I broke into a run. French doors divided the next hallway from the last. I clicked them shut before the cat could get through. She mewed in a voice just low enough to break my heart, before darting off.

With her gone, I reopened the doors in case security passed through and noticed a change.

My mental map led me to a room with the curtains pulled wide. The Kenyan stars and moon lent just enough light to see how stock-standard the room was. Tidy furniture. Tasteful wall art. A bed no one had ever slept in. Another room for ghosts.

A lone vase sat on the nightstand.

Qianlong period porcelain, circa 1740. Estimated value: irrelevant. The only price that mattered was the sum our client offered to get it out of their rival's collection and into theirs. A

week ago, this vase had been on display in the private gallery on the other side of the mansion.

Until Mom started working here as a maid.

She coined this a Jigsaw Job. Piece by piece, she smuggled in shards of a replica and assembled it. For someone as skilled as Mom, switching the real one with the fake was child's play. Unfortunately, the owner was—rightfully—concerned about theft. Security searched the staff each day when they left. Mom could move the vase around inside the house, but she wasn't gonna get it out.

That was my job.

I dragged out the case Mom had left under the bed. The cushioned interior was perfect for shock absorption. Pro tip: If you don't have a way of getting your product out undamaged, don't bother at all.

Something rattled inside the vase as I picked it up. Tipping it, a string of diamonds poured into my palm. I rolled my eyes. Mom has so many tennis bracelets you could see her from Mars if she wore them all. If I asked why, she'd just respond, *Why not?*

A laser pointer was tucked in the side of the case. I angled the beam into the motion sensor on one side of the window. Fun fact about motion sensors, you can trip most up with a five-dollar laser pointer off Amazon. They only detect motion when something disrupts the beam connecting them, so I made sure they thought that beam was always there, keeping my laser pointed directly at the sensor while I slipped out. Simple things work best. I would have had a harder time if they'd bolted the window shut with nails. *A little* harder.

In about sixty seconds, I was out and on the windowsill like Spider-Girl. I squeezed the case between my thighs and was

about to slide the window closed when something burst into the room.

Something desperate to get out.

The cat vaulted past me and straight onto the lawn. Landing, well, like a cat. Thank Jesus I still had the laser pointed at the sensor, or that would've been not so great for me.

She mewed endlessly, begging me to come down and play with her. She was persistent, that was for sure.

With the window shut, I scaled the brick wall to the camera facing the lawn. I had ten seconds to stop it from swinging toward me. No time for finesse. I ripped out the larger of the two cords feeding into the wall. The camera stopped midturn, stuck until someone came to fix it. Hopefully not until long after I was gone.

The cat was still screaming her head off.

"Okay, I'm coming," I said.

And now I was talking to cats. But it wasn't like the video-only camera—Mom had gotten the serial numbers off the cams so we could look up their specs ahead of time—was going to hear me.

I leapt down. The cat rubbed herself again all over my legs. How could I resist? I swooped her into my arm that wasn't holding the case and let her melt into my chest.

I made my way quickly to the industrial lawn mowers waiting in a line, ready for the morning. The little four-by-two storage compartment under the driver's bench, right above the engine and behind the bags of fertilizer, was going to be my suite for the next few hours.

I looked out over the horizon, where waves of savannah grass and bushwillow trees met the star-speckled sky. In moments like this, I understood why my family had been in love with this globe-trotting profession for three generations.

But it wasn't always starry nights and cool breezes.

"You know I can't take you with me." The cat made a soft clicking sound as I tickled above her tail. "At least you've got a pretty view, yeah?"

She meowed, and maybe I was losing it, but it sounded like cat for "Are you serious?" I set her down and pushed aside fertilizer bags before folding myself into the space, keeping the case snug to my chest. Everything smelled like gasoline and mildew. But so be it. Mom would tell me to think about a new laptop. Five-hundred-dollar braids. Custom kicks that no one but she and Auntie would ever see me wearing.

I pulled the fertilizer bags back into place, but the cat wiggled through a tiny opening between two of the bags. She settled atop the case on my chest, still purring and mewing.

"You want me to steal you too, is that it?"

She licked my cheek. Okay, she could stay. For a while. I wondered how long it would take her owner to notice if I *did* steal her.

From my hiding place I caught a flicker of light. No, two lights? Somebody was patrolling the lawn. They were early . . . Had something triggered an alarm? Had they noticed the camera?

The cat's purring sounded like an electric fan. I wanted to shush her, but how do you quiet a cat?

I reached to unwrap my bracelet. It sounded like they were coming my way. How the hell was I going to pounce out of this spot fast enough to get the jump on them?

Crap.

"Nala . . ." A man clicked his tongue. Kibble rattled in a jar. "Where are you, you little brat?"

Double crap.

I tried to push Nala out, but she kept springing onto the case, purring relentlessly and *mewing*.

Then I remembered something else about Siamese cats. They're also the most vocal cat breed.

"I can hear her," another man's voice said. "How did she get outside?"

The other guy scoffed. "No clue. This stupid cat's always trying to run away. We'll put her in a closet until Boss returns."

With everything in me, I willed Nala to be quiet. Why hadn't she just run away when she escaped from the window? She could've been long gone by now. The thought of her panicking in a closet for days or weeks twisted my conscience. If she would just be quiet, I'd take her with me. Screw what Mom wanted.

But she wouldn't be quiet.

And they were getting nearer.

*I'm sorry, Nala.* My arm twisted around to grab the laser pointer from my back pocket. I shined the little red dot over the case, instantly making her eyes dilate and her muscles stiffen. Cat reflexes: activated. The flashlight beams shifted away from the mowers for a split second, and feeling crappier than I expected to, I shined the laser onto the mansion's wall. Nala darted out, tearing across the grass toward the pinprick of light and right into the sights of her pursuers.

"I got her!" Nala's desperate hissing filled up the night. She was putting up a hell of a fight, but she'd already lost.

The flashlights faded. Everything did, except for my own quiet breathing.

I hated what I did to that cat. But she should know, you can't really trust anyone.



## TWO

**T**HE FIRST WORDS out of Mom's mouth after a job are never "Are you okay, Ross?" Instead, it's "You have it?"

I rolled out of the mower, landing right at Mom's feet. Never mind the fact that I'd been about to die of heat exhaustion and had been nearly suffocated by fumes for the last half hour since the mower started moving. I was fine. If I was alive and with her, then I was fine. The target was the important thing.

"Look at my baby, being exemplary and all," Mom said, clicking the case open and examining the prize. She looked completely unlike herself disguised in landscaper overalls. Very different from her typical polished island baddie look, even when she fished the tennis bracelet out and slipped it onto her wrist.

Mom sighed, watching the way the bracelet's diamonds danced in the morning sunlight. I had to admit, diamonds suited Mom. She was a glamorous sort of beauty. Long weave and tasteful eyelash extensions. Thick hips and a pinched waist she loved to accentuate—the complete opposite of my more slender build. Her style was dramatic, not fur coat and stilettos level, but enough that whenever we went someplace where she could really flex herself, she was always drawing double takes.

Hence her love for diamonds. Anything that could make her sparkle more.

Mom pressed a quick kiss to my forehead. She smelled like cut grass and gasoline, but I probably smelled worse.

"Exemplary like my mama," I said, because I knew she'd love to hear it, and hopped up onto the driver's bench, leaving room for her too. With a contented smile, probably more about the compliment than the successful job, she cranked the mower on, and we headed toward the edge of the property where an off-road Jeep, water, and air-conditioning cold enough to make me cry with gratitude waited.

I pressed my forehead to the car's air vent.

"We can go somewhere cooler next." Mom eyed my worship of the cold air filtering through from behind the wheel of the Jeep. "Maybe southern Argentina. Or the Alps, eh?"

"We literally just got off a job. Not to mention, the Boscherts." I'd heard they hadn't appreciated our last jobs in Denmark and Italy, breaking their unofficial claim on the high-end thieving market in Europe. In the world of family-run thieving empires, there could only be one top dog, or at least one per continent.

Forcing myself to sit back, I swiped the charger and plugged



in my dead phone. The side-eye from Mom told me she didn't approve. We were having a conversation, so I should be paying attention to her.

"Good thing we'd sooner be caught stealing costume jewelry than caring about what the Boscherts want." She cocked a perfectly threaded brow at me, so I gave her the nod she wanted.

The spark of an idea kindled in my mind. "I mean, if you want us to pick up more jobs in Europe, it'd make sense for someone to network over there. Maybe if I went to school for a while, as a cover, it'd be a good opportunity?"

I held my breath. There were probably smoother ways for me to bring up the leaving thing again. All my life I'd never been anywhere without Mom, or Auntie, and I'd been a lot of places. I thought when I'd turned seventeen a few months ago, when other Bahamian kids graduate high school, she'd start being less . . . you know.

"Hm . . . maybe not." Mom looked straight ahead into the empty stretch of road and savannah grasses. I waited for an elaboration. A reason, something. Instead, she said, "Once we're back, we'll lounge and watch something low-budget for a whole week, huh, baby?"

I forced a smile. "That sounds cool."

Satisfied, she picked a playlist on her phone and turned the volume up. My screen glowed. An email. From one of the summer programs.

I angled it away from Mom as I read.

Dear Rosalyn,

Thank you for applying for our High-Performance Gymnastics Summer Camp. We are pleased to invite you

to our second session (July 1–July 28), or if it's not too late notice, we have one spot remaining in our first session (June 2–June 29). As a nationally renowned program, we are excited to attract dozens of talented young athletes every summer who are passionate about befriending peers in their field. We hope you'll choose to join us for this unique experience.

The email went on with housing and fees and contact info. The more I read, the harder it was to school my expression. My bullshit transcripts and fake competition scores actually worked. I could be there . . . in a week if I wanted to be. Today was May 26.

Nala should've outrun the guards when she had the chance. Now she was stuck. I wasn't going to make the same mistake.

I typed back. **I'd love to come!**

Mom rapped along with the lyrics blaring from the speakers, nudging my shoulder to jump in with her. As usual, I pursed my lips and put up a fake fight before joining in. She used a verse about ice on her wrist to flick her new bracelet, and I laughed. On the outside, everything was the same. Same post-job high. Same me and her. But it couldn't be like that forever. I felt like I'd just shifted the wheel of my life off its axis, right under her nose, and she hadn't noticed.

I scrolled through my inbox. Where was that message I got before Mom texted? Weird. Unless it wasn't in my personal email . . .

The black box email account. How our family accepted jobs. Accessible only through the deep web, and 100 percent hack-proof and untraceable—that was the way Mom explained it to

eight-year-old me. You needed a passcode just to get an email sent to it. I *never* got notifications from the black box email. It should have been impossible.

I punched in the five consecutive passcodes for the black box's account.

The message was there. Still unopened. Mom must not have checked it yet.

My heart caught in my throat. Someone was emailing the black box just for me?

Hello Rosalyn Quest,

Congratulations on earning our interest. You are invited to participate in this year's Thieves' Gambit.

The competition will begin in one week. We anticipate a two-week run time. Please contact us to make arrangements.

—The Organizers



# THREE

**T**HIEVES' GAMBIT. A competition. Days later, back home in the Bahamas, while I should have been overwhelmed with thoughts about my summer camp escape, the invitation's words rattled in my brain like dice in a Yahtzee cup.

I assumed—I'd never played Yahtzee. Family game night lost its charm when Mom refused to stop cheating.

It was enough to distract me from my agility practice. I'd been in the training room for over an hour—makes for good stress relief—trying to ace the leap from one square-foot-wide box to another seven feet away. Last month I set a personal best at six and a half feet. Afterward, Mom told me she could jump seven and a half when she was my age.

Balancing, I bent my knees and tried again. The second my feet left the box, I knew I'd screwed up. Not enough momen-

tum. The ball of my foot scraped the edge, and gravity caught me before I could catch myself. I crashed into the mats.

I huffed, blowing one of my braids away from my face. A shadow crossed over me. Auntie Jaya stared down, hands on her flared hips. For being ten years younger, she sure as hell looked just like Mom. If I squinted, I might have thought it was Mom frowning at me with those trademark Quest pinched lips.

“What’s wrong with you?” She didn’t offer me a hand. No one offered hands up in the Quest family. “It’s your goofy shoes. They’re tripping you up.”

I glanced down at my kicks for the day. Custom-embroidered white Chucks with hundreds of tiny gold leaves painstakingly sewn into the canvas, painted along the rubber seams, and cut into the soles, with sparkling gold laces to match. My shoes were gorgeous. Auntie must have been selectively tasteless.

“I take personal offense to that, Auntie. And even more offense to the thought that I would buy anything I couldn’t move in.” It wasn’t like I collected pumps and platform boots. My custom Chucks were perfectly practical for training.

“Then what’s causing this? Come on, tell Auntie what’s distracting you.” Auntie made it sound like she was annoyed to have to ask, but seeming too cool for every conversation was just her MO. She always came when I needed her, speaking Rosalyn fluently enough to know a message saying **What’s up with you** 🙄 really meant there was something I wanted to talk about. And in this house on an island so rural convenience stores were in people’s living rooms, where you could sit on the gravel road all day and see more wild boars than cars, people to talk to that weren’t my mom were few and far between.

Auntie was already here waiting when our private plane dropped us back home.

"Have you ever heard of something called the Thieves' Gambit?" It was the first time I'd said the words aloud, and they sounded as bizarre as they had in my head. *Thieves'*, plural possessive? It was an oxymoron. Thieves don't just get together.

Auntie tensed like she was waiting to get punched in the stomach.

So she had heard of it.

I sat up, leaning back on my palms.

"The organization sent you an invitation?"

"A week ago. Who said they were an organization? Do you know who they are?"

"What'd you say? Did you respond?" Auntie completely ignored my questions.

My nose scrunched. "I know better than to answer weird messages in the black box. I deleted the email as soon as I saw it."

She relaxed. That jab to the stomach didn't land. "Good."

"My turn. Who the hell is the organization, and why do you know about them and I don't?"

I kip-upped to my feet. Auntie, Mom, and I were all about the same height, so I could look her in the eye. If I was curious before, now I had to know. There weren't supposed to be any secrets in this family.

Auntie clicked her tongue, drawing out the moment. "They're just a bunch of rich schmucks with a power complex who run the Gambit once every year or so. That's all I know about them."

All *she* knew. Did she mean Mom might know more?

The way she avoided eye contact made me think this all had intentionally not been brought up before, and therefore prying out more information about this organization was going to be a chore. I redirected.

“And the Gambit is . . . ?”

For a second, I thought she really wasn't going to tell me.

“It's a competition, a thieving competition. Kinda like a private . . . illegal game show.” She moved her braids over her shoulder and sauntered away, fishing a pair of handcuffs out of a supply box packed with a variety of practice locks.

I followed her. “You were holding your breath about me entering an illegal game show run by a secret one-percenter club?”

“I said *like* a game show. Don't get it twisted, this isn't *The Price Is Right: Heist Edition*.” She whipped a bobby pin out of her hair and started picking the handcuffs. “From what I've heard, somebody always leaves bloody. If they get to leave at all.” The cuffs popped open. She gestured for my hands. Mindlessly, I gave them over, and she closed one of the cuffs on my wrist.

“Why would anyone play, then? Killer money, yeah?” Thieves never do anything for free.

“More like killer reward.” Auntie turned me around and slapped on the other cuff, locking my hands behind my back. On instinct, I double-Dutch jumped the cuffs and fished my own bobby out of my braids. I had enough in there to build a little castle. “They say the winner . . .” Auntie continued. “Gets a wish.”

I cocked my head at her. “A wish? Like, there's a shooting star, look, make one?”

“Shooting stars don’t grant wishes. Money does.” She snapped her fingers in front of my face. “Don’t get distracted.”

Right. The cuffs. I slipped the head of the pin inside and felt for the locking mechanism.

Auntie frowned. “You could have gotten out easier without the pin . . .”

“I’m not letting you break my thumb, Auntie.” The first cuff clicked open—no bone breaking required. She’d been trying to get me on the bone-out-of-socket training for years. It was a line I preferred not to cross.

“It only hurts the first few times,” Auntie insisted. I got the other lock open and dropped the cuffs back on the table. She studied me. “You didn’t tell your mama about your invitation, did you?”

There was an unsaid why behind her words. Trying to ignore it, I moved to reset the boxes for another jump.

“She’s busy,” I said. “Planning the next heist and all. You know.”

*And I’m planning on dipping out in a few days . . .* Curious as a thieving game was, I didn’t need to risk getting distracted by it or anything else Mom might want to drag me into. An underground game wasn’t going to help me make friends, especially one that involved a bunch of deceptive con artists.

“Mm-hmm.” Auntie may speak fluent Rosalyn, but I spoke fluent Auntie Jaya too. Translation: *Try again.*

I sighed and, instead of jumping back up on the box, sat down. The training room around us was littered with all sorts of practice material. Safes, dartboards, dummies for arm bars and headlocks, boxes of ropes with different knots to unravel. This wasn’t the only room that hinted at my family’s business. All



over the house there were trophies from jobs spanning continents and decades. I knew all their stories by the time I was five. Grand-Papa swiped that book off a shelf in the US Library of Congress. That still life? It was in storage under the Louvre until Great-Aunt Sara got there. The coins in the bowl where we kept the keys? Auntie pocketed them off the president of Uganda's chief of staff. The house is full of little mementos, lots of them left over from the days the rest of my family lived here too. Back before Mom had the infamous falling-out I still hadn't gotten an explanation for, and even her parents decided they didn't want anything to do with her outside of making sure jobs didn't overlap. I'd say the trophies were hidden in plain sight if there were anyone around to hide them from.

My whole damn house was a thief's paradise. A reminder of what I was born for. The job, the family, that should be the only thing I ever lived for.

But it wasn't all memories and trophies.

There were fresh locks to crack on the fridge and cabinets every week. Car keys would go missing, so you'd have to hotwire one if you wanted to go anywhere. Let's not forget the many times Mom locked me out of all my devices and the only way I could get the new code was by pickpocketing it off her. Living without a device on this island was its own form of hell. Mom said our family lived this life because it was liberating. Boundless. Fun. Sure, the jobs could be. But the rest of the time . . .

I couldn't spend another year by myself, isolated like this. Trusting people in the industry, outside of the family, was out of the question. The options were stay locked up here or give up the life and make normal friends. I would give up the exhilaration of weekly heists for that.

Auntie's question still hung in the air. *Why didn't I tell Mom about it?*

I only shrugged, fiddling with the end of a braid. "What if I want to take a break from all the thieving stuff for a while?"

"Maybe there's something else you want to do on this break." She said it softly. Like if she spoke at just the right volume with just the right tone, she'd probe the truth out of me.

I crossed my arms. Obvious tactic or not, it was working. Something about Auntie, maybe because she was younger than Mom, was less intimidating. Maybe I could tell her about my getaway plan. I could frame it like there was something for the family I wanted to learn on campus. Something that made it seem less like I was ungratefully tossing aside the cushy, high-octane family I was lucky enough to be born into. She could help me broach the topic with Mom.

The sound of sandals clacking down the hall cut through my thoughts. A reminder—Mom was always listening. At least, as long as I was in the same house as her. I blurted out the best response I could think of. "I don't want anything besides my family. What would I be without us?"

"Boring? Poor? Not living in paradise on one of the most beautiful islands in the world?" Mom strode inside, looking absolutely Caribbean chic in high-waisted jeans and a vibrant off-the-shoulder red top. She finished tapping something out on her phone before gracing us with her full attention. "What're my babies talking about? Nightmares?"

I held my breath. Luckily, it didn't seem like Auntie was going to tattle about my Gambit invitation. I could tell by the way she punched one fist on her hip and narrowed her eyes at Mom, her

mind wasn't on snitching me out at all. "Stop calling me your baby! You only have one daughter, and I'm not her."

"Oh . . ." Mom cooed at her. "My dolly is throwing a fit." She pinched Auntie's cheeks, before getting her hands slapped away. Apparently, Mom used to think of Auntie as her real-life baby doll when they were kids. When Auntie was five and Mom was twelve, Mom convinced her for a whole month that she wasn't a real girl, just a doll. Twenty-seven years later, and Mom's still messing with her.

Auntie's jaw tightened. She stormed out.

"You shouldn't tease her like that," I said. "It bothers her, for real."

Mom scoffed and flicked some dirt from under her nail. "You don't have a sister. You don't understand."

That stung. No friends, no dad, *and* no siblings. At least two of those were her fault.

I smothered the instant guilt that came with that last thought. It wasn't fair of me to resent Mom for the whole dad situation. She was never into relationships—that was as deep a description as she ever gave me when it came to her sexuality—so she went the sperm donor route. Of all the men in the world, she just had to pick a donor who'd died a couple weeks after turning in his first, uh, sample. Someone who would never be around for me to hunt down or to come looking for any kids that might have popped up from his donation. Mom swore she didn't find out he was deceased until she was in her third trimester, and I knew she wouldn't lie about something like that. But still, it was the kind of thing that was always in the back of my head when I needed a reason to be mad at her.

Mom eyed the boxes behind me. "Seven feet?"

I squirmed. "Almost."

She nodded, then stood in front of me. Though we were the same height now, she still felt taller. Big enough to wrap me in one of those pick-you-up-and-spin-you-around bear hugs she did when I was younger. Coconut lotion wafted off her, and for a second, I really did feel like I was little again. Maybe it was a Pavlov-type training, but smelling her, letting her tuck one of the braids behind my ear, it filled me with comfort. Confidence. This was Mom. If I really wanted something, I should be able to just . . . ask her, right?

My tongue felt dry. But I spoke anyway. "You know . . . Louisiana State University has one of the best gymnastics programs in the US? I bet those students could make a seven-foot jump, easy."

Mom tensed. She drew away, slowly.

That warm, Mummy-loves-you look was gone.

I shouldn't have said anything.

"Come on, Rossie?" She groaned, sounding more annoyed than anything else.

"I don't know what the big deal is!" I insisted. "I'm seventeen. All the other seventeen-year-olds on the island are going to start college soon."

"And how would you know that?"

"You're right, I don't know that, because I don't know anybody!" Years of the same thing being drilled into me repeated in my head. *No, you can't walk down to the neighbors. No you can't go to Central Andros High. Other families can't be trusted.*

Sure, I got it. Revealing the whole thief-family thing and even getting friendly with people on the island weren't stellar

moves, and I'd learned a long time ago to never, ever trust someone else in the same profession as us. But if I was away, if I was pretending to be a sheep around other sheep in a whole different country, if I was keeping my guard up, would it really be that dangerous . . . to meet other people?

"You know lots of people," Mom insisted. "Me and Jaya, and Granny and Papa are always a phone call away. And my auntie Sara."

Did she realize how few people that actually was? Not to mention the fact that I was the only one of those people under thirty. I folded my arms in on myself. "They don't count. That's just family. That's not enough—"

I tried to stop myself, but it slipped out before I realized what I was saying. My eyes shot to Mom. The curl of her lips told me the exact translation she'd heard. *You're not enough.*

"I didn't mean—"

She pressed a finger to her lips. I shut up. "Rosalynd," she started, "family doesn't leave you. Family doesn't lie to you. Family you can trust. Look at what we do for a living. Everyone wants something—a lot of the times things that belong to other people. People will play you like a violin to get whatever they need from you. People you think are your friends, people you think you can trust, they'll snap your heart in half and leave you to die. You're smarter than that, baby girl. If you're not yet, then I'm smart enough to make that choice for you. Because I love you. So no, you're not going anywhere. Not without me. Final. Decision."

It was final. The word was on the stone, and the verdict was rendered. No cross-examination. No testimony from me. I gritted my jaw painfully. Heat bubbled in my chest. But there was

nothing to do with my anger—it wasn't like I was going to start throwing things.

And if I was going to go route B with this, route *screw what she wants, I'm doing it anyway*, then I needed to keep my calm. No letting anything slip.

Mom and I locked eyes. She was waiting for a response. I forced a nod, and she brightened, clapping her hands under her chin and smiling like what she'd just shot down was no big deal.

"Good girl. Now, where's that pretty black backpack with the gold zippers I got you?"

I froze. That was the bag I'd started stashing things for the summer camp in. Was she already onto me?

"I dunno, somewhere. Why?"

She hesitated. "Don't hate me, but you should pack it. I need you on a last-minute job. Leaving tonight."

"Tonight! We just got back!" It was great that she hadn't found my getaway bag, and but this was pretty bad, too. Getting dragged into another job did *not* vibe with my plan.

"Relax, baby girl, I'm not whisking you to another continent. It's just over on Paradise Island. Two days max, we'll be in and out. I'll AirDrop you the details, 'kay?" Mom had started walking away, as if I'd already said yes.

"But I—" She glanced back at me. "What if I have something to do?"

Mom's expression darkened. "What do you have to do that's more important than your family, Ross?"

New experiences?

Friendship?

The chance to figure out if there *was* something more important?

None of those was the correct answer. She'd already told me how it was. My family, her, was all I could count on. Nothing else that mattered.

I understood why Auntie hated being called Mom's little dolly. Sometimes, it didn't seem like Mom was joking. She was always treating us like her toys, always playing knowing she would win.

If I was going to leave, maybe it was my turn to toy with her. An idea was forming in my head. If I had to show up for this job, what if I disappeared in the middle of it? Wouldn't that be the last thing she was expecting?

I smiled. A real, genuine beam, and wrapped my arms around Mom's waist.

"Nothing's more important than us." I squeezed her side.

She eyed me for a second before possessively snuggling me back. "Good girl." She squeezed a little tighter. "Remember, there's nothing and no one else out there. No one you can really trust, anyway."



# FOUR

**M**APPED AND PLOTTED.” I rotated the iPad for Mom to see on the other side of the table. She turned her attention from her fresh manicure, compliments of the in-resort spa.

We were on Paradise Island—the one most people think of when picturing the Bahamas. Tall coral towers, white sand beaches dotted with shacks selling conch fritters, and a range of marinas hosting sleek and elegant yachts worth more money than most of the tourists flittering around the island would see in a dozen lifetimes. Belowdecks on one of those lavish yachts was our target, and our tenth-floor hotel room had a perfect bird’s-eye view.

Mom had tasked me with working out the entrance-exit strategy. Not that she couldn’t do it herself. She started having me do it for some of our jobs when I was fourteen. Stress testing



my training or whatever. I liked to think she knew I was the best at it. If there's one person who can figure out how to twist out of a tight spot, it's Ross mother-hugging Quest.

Little did she know this was a two-part plan. She was looking at the route she was going to take on and off this yacht, not the separate one I was going to use to hightail it back to shore on a one-way trip to Nassau International Airport and a plane toward something new.

It was hard not to let anything smug slip on my face. Mom had dragged me here for my exit-planning genius, and I was using it to run off. Maybe one day, when she got over my leaving, she'd look back and be proud of the finesse I was about to make.

"The yacht's ninety-five meters from stern to bow. It's got four decks, not including the engine room."

Mom cut in. "Logs say there's five guests and fifteen crew members aboard, so let's assume it's actually double that, right, baby girl?"

"Yeah, course." As if I wouldn't have already figured that into my calculations. One of the Quest rules: Whatever you think you're up against, double it. "I mapped the best route avoiding cabin quarters and guest spaces. There's a small port for detachable speedboats at the back. We'll buoy our Zodiac between that area and the starboard side of the bow, since there aren't any port-holes nearby, then follow the map I routed through a manhole on the first deck, through the engine room, and into the hold. It's a pretty efficient route, so we should be able to transfer everything from there back to our boat in less than thirty minutes."

It really was a flawless route . . . almost.

Mom pursed her lips. "What about a backup plan? You couldn't find any other routes for emergencies?"

I tried not to let my increased heart rate show. Leaning over, I swiped to another pair of blueprints, these showing a much more convoluted emergency route tangling through crew cabins around to the bow of the ship. "There's this too, but it's messy. My first route should be fine," I said.

"You're sure there's no other way out?" Mom scanned the blueprints for an exit that wasn't there. Not on the blueprints, at least.

"I'm never wrong about exits."

She couldn't argue with that.

"Perfect." Mom stood, and it felt like she was looking down on me again. "We leave at sunset."

THE WATER WAS inky black.

Speeding over it felt like gliding over a shadow, heading straight for the starry horizon.

Well, it felt like *I* was headed for the horizon, but first I had to get past this job.

The yacht was nearly invisible, a sleek black vessel frozen in a setting just as dark. I reran everything in my head as our Zodiac bobbed over the waves. With any luck, everyone onboard would be asleep. Mom would carry the target in duffel bags back while I loaded up the next delivery. Not the most sophisticated job, but this was last-minute, and not everything needs to be a whole event, as Auntie would say.

This was easy money, for real. What was going to be a bit harder was my addendum.

I was so high on anticipation my hands were tingling. My sneakers, a palette of ocean blues with abstract waves and foam

and coral green laces, jumped against the boat floor. I clenched and stretched my fingers. Mom noticed, pulling her eyes from the water.

“Don’t tell me you’re nervous, baby girl,” she teased. Even in all black and with her hair tugged back into a practical ponytail, half-hidden by the night, she managed to look ten times more dazzling than I ever could.

I smiled. “Excited.”

She matched my grin and squeezed my thigh. “Winning is exciting.”

She had no idea.

A hundred feet or so out, Mom turned off the engine. We paddled the rest of the way to the back of the yacht, away from any windows, portholes, and lights. Most of the ship was unlit. Asleep.

Mom climbed up to the first deck, then me right after. I took the lead, following an invisible path. I stayed on guard, ready to unwrap my meteor bracelet at moment’s notice. But the ship was almost supernaturally silent. It felt empty, even though I knew that wasn’t the case.

A silent hop and a skip later, and we were belowdecks in the cargo hold. Moonlight from a tiny porthole illuminated wooden crates. Mom popped off one of the tops. Inside were centuries-old treasures dredged up from meters under the ocean. Gold doubloons, pieces of a wheel from an ancient ship, shards of pottery, silverware, bracelets, a rusted dagger. Our unfortunate hosts tonight were from another subsection of our business—treasure hunters. Raiding shipwrecks for every piece of antiquity they could get their hands on, sometimes only days after its discovery. Never mind that those treasures technically

belonged to whoever originally found the wreck, or the government, depending on where and how close to shore you were. It was a lucrative business, obvious by this fancy yacht, and just as illegal as what we were doing.

Unfortunately for them, there was another team of rival treasure hunters who weren't too happy they'd been beaten to the punch on this find. They hired us last minute to steal the already stolen treasure and deliver it to them. After my family's fee and the trouble of selling all this on the black market, I couldn't imagine they were going to make that much of a profit, but I figured it was more about pissing off their enemies than the money.

Mom pressed her hands together, then pointed behind her, our silent signal for "pack and go." I nodded and started delicately stacking silverware and doubloons into one of the padded duffels we'd carried in. We worked together to fill it up, before Mom slid the strap over her shoulder and headed out. I started on the second bag. With me packing while she was transporting, we'd be out in half the time with half as much noise.

My heart beat faster with each full bag. The closer we got to the end, the closer I got to my escape. The realness of it tingled across my skin. My fingers itched the way they always did when I was about to steal something. But they weren't itching for treasure this time, I was stealing my own future back.

Soon we were down to the last crate. Three bags, that's how many I guessed it would take to clear out this one.

The time was now.

Mom returned for the umpteenth time, and I traded the latest stuffed pack for an empty one. When she took the full bag, I tried not to give anything away, but I couldn't help but take her

in one final time. This would be nothing but a betrayal to her. Even if I came back a week later, a day later, an hour later, even if she tried to drag me back, this would always be between us. Ross ran away. Ross left the family. Ross didn't think we were enough for her. I was about to snap my life into two halves, before and after. Which would I look back on as the better?

Mom locked eyes with me, and I jerked my gaze away. Did she see it? Could she actually read my mind? Would she stop me?

She didn't. Like all of the other times, she took the bag and left unceremoniously. There went her last chance to catch me.

The second she was out of sight, I burst into action. I set a pre-saved message in my email to send in fifteen minutes, approximately when Mom would return, then turned my phone all the way off. The message was simple: **Need a break. I'll come back in a few months, promise.** Short, but nothing she'd let me say to her face. Then I followed the blueprints in my head through the shadows of the hold to a small nook flanked with bolted shelves and dinghies. In the middle of a collection of neatly stacked life-jackets, first aid kits, and emergency provisions, I found it, just like the online yacht-crew message board said. Emergency inflatable life raft, battery-operated engine included.

An airtight door—deemed too narrow and unsafe for evacuation by the International Maritime Safety Committee, and therefore removed from all emergency-exit planning blueprints—sat closed with a metal wheel smack in its center. I tugged the raft bundle out of place, then spun the wheel to release the door. It creaked open. Outside, dark water lapped at the side of the ship about six feet below. My heart was absolutely thundering by now. It was a straight shot from here. The emergency engine would have enough juice to carry me back to shore. This hidden

door opened out of the view of Mom's speedboat. Ten minutes from now, once she realized I was gone, I'd be far out of view, gobbled up by the darkness.

I tossed the emergency raft. All I had to do was leap.

A gunshot cut through the quiet. I froze, just a second away from plunging into the water. The sound of pounding footsteps raced through the decks. Outside, the gleam of lights burned to life over the waves. People were awake, and they were shooting.

*Mom.* Had someone found her?

I raced back into the main cargo hold, toward the rush of footsteps and danger, just in time to see Mom scrambling down a ladder leading into the lowest deck.

No! What the hell was she doing? There was no way out below, she was wandering into a dead end. Instead she should come this way—

She wouldn't know.

I told her there wasn't another exit on this level.

I opened my mouth to call after her, but my training instantly stopped me. That would tell the pursuers where we were, where she was. On the tiny chance they didn't already know.

Instead, I made a beeline after her. I'd get her to come back the right way with me.

But the second I burst into the cargo hold, two very pissed men skidded in, them and their guns. They didn't bother with questions. One look at the obviously empty treasure crates was enough.

One of them raised a pistol. I turned and sprinted. A gunshot rang out behind me. They were boxing me in. Back at the open emergency door, I did the only thing I could do: I jumped.

The water sucked me in. I held my breath and kicked toward

the back of the yacht. Muffled gunshots cut through the water. The emergency raft, still uninflated, bobbed above me. I kept swimming, a meter under the surface, for as long as I could without air. When I came up for a desperate breath, salt water stung my eyes. I could barely make out the edge of the zodiac before a wave overtook my sight. Another deep breath and few meters of breast stroking, and I was able to make it to the side. I was just starting to pull myself in when a beam of light shone over the side of the ship. It hit the water first. Two guys were pointing a searchlight and guns over the edge of the yacht. The ball of light was coming toward the speeder. Fast. Getting caught in this boat under the light would be . . . not good for me.

Before I could think of any other options, I let go of my grip and slipped back into the water. I kicked away from the boat, coming back up meters away against the side of the yacht, just in time to see the searchlight centered on the Zodiac, treasure and all. "I see it!" the voice from above said. Pressed against the side of the boat, fighting waves, I strained to look up at the railing, where the guys were scrambling down the steps, eager to get their hands on what they thought they'd lost. Someone above grunted, a woman's voice. I didn't need to see to know it was Mom.

"You carried all of this out yourself?" another voice asked.

Mom didn't answer. Or if she did, I couldn't hear her over the growing drone in my ears. I clung to the side of the yacht, struggling to stay afloat and in the shadows. It was taking all my strength not to cough up water and reveal my position. But Mom . . . I had to do something about Mom.

The two guys, with the defined but slender muscles of frequent swimmers and sun-burnt sailor's skin, who'd come down

had the speedboat locked into the yacht's accessory port in no time. It happened so fast. I'd lost my chance to get back onboard undetected before I realized it.

"Who hired you, huh?" some guy above asked, his voice like gravel.

"Your wife," I heard Mom say, a laugh in her voice. "Said she deserves a fortune for putting up with you."

A slap. Metal on skin.

The guy asked again.

There was no answer.

"Get her out of my sight. She'll talk soon enough."

No, she wouldn't. I knew she wouldn't. Because once she talked, these people wouldn't have any reason not to kill her.

I needed to rescue Mom before that. Maybe if I could circle back around to the emergency door or—

The yacht's engine roared to life. A massive arc of water blew up, creating a suction that swallowed me. I sputtered under the waves—*don't breathe the water, you can't breathe the water*—fighting my way through the darkness and back up to the surface.

Finally, I broke through, spitting up water and gagging. Everything was a salty, burning blur. I blinked and blinked until the world came back. And when it did, the yacht was speeding away. Disappearing into the night. Along with my mom.





# FIVE

## **PANICKED.**

For a few seconds, it wasn't about Mom. It was for me. I was far offshore, alone in dark waters. I could very easily have gotten picked up by a current and swept under for good, but a blinking light was my salvation.

The emergency raft bobbed in the water yards away. I swam for it frantically, until I was close enough to yank the rip cord. The raft swelled to life. I climbed inside and landed on the thick plastic with a defeated squelch. The little motor sat at the back of the raft, ready to be cranked up alongside a glow-in-the-dark warning. *This engine will only run for half an hour. Use wisely.*

Throwing this inflatable out may have saved my life. And all it cost me was my mom's.

She was gone. Captive on a yacht headed to . . . I had no clue where. How long were those people going to keep her alive? What were they going to do to try and get the information out of her?

Even if the lights of the yacht hadn't disappeared, I didn't have enough juice in this emergency raft engine to chase them across a literal ocean.

So I just sat there. Bobbing hopelessly in the dark while everything closed in around me. Mom was gone.

And it was my fault.

My phone buzzed. Sniffing, I pulled it out of my back pocket, a knee-jerk reaction. My waterproof case was worth the money. Despite the dunking it had taken, there was a little notification—my prescheduled email had been sent. It was such salt in the wound, it rivaled all the salt water sitting on my tongue. Even in the middle of all this, I hoped Mom wouldn't see it. Her kidnappers probably had her phone anyway—

I hit call on Mom's contact. The current had pulled me close enough to shore to give me one bar. As expected, no one answered. So I sent a message, all caps.

**I'M AN ASSOCIATE OF YOUR CAPTIVE. ANSWER.**

This time, they called me. The same male voice I'd heard from before, questioning, then striking Mom, was quick to speak.

"Don't suppose you're still on my yacht. If so, you can make my life a lot easier by telling me what deck you're on." American accent. Southern American. Not that I could do much with that information at the moment.

"Give me my associate back."

"Sure. Do you want an ice cream sundae with that?" There was some shuffling. I imagined he was sitting down somewhere.

“Why don’t you tell me who hired you? And we’ll leave her body somewhere easy to find, eh?”

My heart cinched. “If you kill her, I swear to god you’ll wish you’d offed yourself instead.”

“I’m terrified.” He chuckled. “You sound young. What are you, twenty or something? I don’t scare easy, especially when threatened by overgrown teenagers. Why don’t you go fetch your mama, ask her to threaten me instead?”

I sucked in an audible breath and immediately regretted it.

He paused. “Oh, I see. This *is* your mama. Oh, that’s real unfortunate for you, isn’t it. Look, I feel for you, kid . . . Well, I actually don’t. Here’s a life lesson, since you won’t be getting any more of those from Mommy. Sometimes things just don’t work out for you.”

My blood was pulsing a million miles an hour. He could hang up any second now. Toss her phone over the railing. Then she’d be gone.

These people weren’t just going to give me Mom back. No duh, Ross. But he hadn’t hit end call yet. There was still a chance. They were treasure hunters. I just needed to offer them something they wanted.

“What do you want?”

Now I was speaking his language. “About half an hour ago, all I wanted was my treasure back. I’ve already got that, so you tell me. What do you have for me?”

“One million.” *Take it.* I could get that easy. Mom had more than that in her personal savings.

He laughed. Like, a from-the-pit-of-his-belly, funniest-thing-he’d-heard-in-years *laugh*. “Did you see my boat, kid?”

Got two more just like it. I've gotten crappy birthday gifts worth more than that."

My stomach twisted. "Ten million." It would be more of a stretch. I'd have to get Granny and Papa to help. But they'd do it. No matter what kind of beef they had with Mom, they'd do it. She was their daughter.

"Come on, does Mommy really mean that little to you?"

I hesitated. How far could I raise it? Twenty? Thirty? I could get that . . . somehow. With some extremely well picked jobs, getting the whole family's help. Selling some valuable mementos. I could do it. Maybe, just maybe—

"I'm getting bored of this slow tick up," the man on the other end said. "So I'll pick my number." More rustling over the line. It sounded like he was talking to someone. Deciding just how much Mom's life was worth.

He returned. "I've got it. One billion."

I shook my head so hard my braids slapped my shoulders. "You're out of your mind! I can't get you one *billion* dollars! It's impossible!"

"Oh, I think you can, Little Miss Quest."

I froze. No way Mom gave up our name. She would never.

"It was an easy peg," the man answered my question without even asking. "I heard you guys were based somewhere in the Caribbean. That and the whole Black thing. So I'm guessing I'm holding one of the legendary Quests. Am I right?"

I didn't have to reply. He wasn't expecting me to.

"Thought so," he said, self-satisfied. "So, knowing that, I think you *can* get me one billion dollars. If anyone can do it, it should be a Quest."

This was happening. He wasn't going to budge on this number. One billion dollars for Mom's life.

"Okay," I said. Even if I had a whole year, I didn't think I could steal one billion dollars' worth of anything. But hell, maybe I didn't know what I was capable of. For Mom, I could do anything, if I had enough time. "How long?" I croaked the words out.

"Hm . . . I'm a pretty patient man. How about a week?"

"A year."

"No."

I fisted my hand into my braids. "A week isn't realistic. You can barely get an international bank transfer in a week, that's not happening."

He paused. "You can have a month. Not a second longer."

Once I got Mom back, I was adding it to my bucket list to break this guy's jaw.

"I want proof-of-life calls too."

"Whatever. But if they start to annoy me, I'm ending this. All of it. Understand?"

His tone didn't leave any question about what *ending it* implied. I'd have to be frugal with these. Still, I couldn't help it. "I want one now."

He hesitated. "She's not conscious. Guess you'll have to call back later. Don't worry, we'll take excellent care of Mommy in the meantime." He laughed again, and the call ended.

Slowly, I lowered the phone from my ear. Water lapped over the edges of my raft. I had hope. Mom was going to be alive for at least another month.

But after that, they were going to kill her. Because I had no idea how I was going to get one billion dollars before then.



THERE WASN'T ANYONE around when I dragged the inflatable raft into the tiny cove on Paradise Island. Just like I planned. My go-bag waited behind a closed cabana, exactly where I'd left it. I'd been so worried about snags in my runaway plan. Someone would see me speeding onto the island and call border control. My backpack would be missing. The inflatable raft wouldn't expand right. But everything went flawlessly. It was like the universe was laughing at me.

My phone had died after my call with Mom's . . . captor. All I needed was a quick charge from my battery pack, and I was dialing the emergency phone back home. The one whose number I knew by heart and we were only supposed to call when everything had gone to crap.

She picked up in one ring.

"What's wrong?"

I crumpled into the sand and sniffled. "I messed up, Auntie. I really, really messed up."

PAOLO, OUR PRIVATE pilot, met me with the single engine at Nassau's private airport. In less than an hour I was touching down in Andros, driving Mom's Jeep from the airport to Love Hill, and dragging my feet up into the house in the morning light. Everything happened like a dream. A nightmare. I was sleepwalking through the last hours, my mind replaying everything from last night. The gunshots, the water, the yacht speeding away into the darkness.

How clever and sneaky I'd felt, thinking I was going to disappear from right under her nose.

*Alone.* If she was killed, if she never came back . . . I was going to be really alone. Auntie would go back to her other home on Nassau eventually, wouldn't she? I barely knew my grandparents and estranged great-aunt. Mom was never invited to any family reunions, so I assumed I wasn't either. What would I have?

No. I could fix this. I *would* fix this.

Auntie was in the kitchen, frantically making her way down a list of contacts. She didn't hug or comfort me. No time. The best she could do was a pitying glance as she slid me a tablet with a list of names. Crying isn't the Quest way. Work and practicality first, always. And the most practical thing to do right now was hit up anyone we knew who knew anything about getting kidnapped moms back, or where to get one billion dollars.

NO ONE COULD help us.

We spent the whole day trying. We called everyone. Granny and Papa. Auntie Sara. Associates who specialized in extraction. Less-than-legal loan sources. Everyone who owed our family a favor. No one *would* help us.

At some point, Auntie started pacing during her calls. I hadn't even noticed she'd disappeared to her room until I ran through all the names on the list she'd given me, hours later.

I froze by Auntie's door, fresh off the phone with Granny reporting another dead end.

When I heard the desperate tremble in Auntie's voice, my

feet refused to go farther. If that's what she *sounded* like, what would I *see* when I pushed open that door?

"I know what I'm giving you isn't a lot," Auntie said. "Isn't this what you do? Bring people back when no one else can?"

"Calm yourself, Ms. Quest." Whoever Auntie had on speaker sounded painfully disinterested. Like this was a customer service hotline and she was ready to hang it up and go home for the day. Like this wasn't my mom's life on the line. "We're extractionists, not magicians. Finding someone on land is one thing, finding a yacht that could be headed to anywhere in the world is another. Not only does your lack of information not align with how we operate, but given what you have managed to tell us, the captors are highly capable, and there's a high probability the target may be executed before we can get to them."

A lightning bolt struck my chest. *Execution?*

The woman went on: "I'll also note that it was recently suggested we not answer any calls from your family, so *you're welcome* for the time I have spent discussing the situation with you. I recommend you start coming to terms with your loss. Good evening." The call ended.

Something crashed against the wall. Auntie's phone? Quiet sobs trickled into the hallway. I couldn't take it.

I flew into my room, dropped to my knees, and jammed my fingers into my braids. Choking panic swirled around me. My chest heaved. For an awful second, I let everything consume me. The reality of a world without Mom. I couldn't get this money, and she was going to be shot and thrown overboard—I'd never even get to see her body.

My fault. For the rest of my life, it would always be my fault.



Would she figure it out before then? That her only daughter did this to her . . . that I'd been planning to leave? Was this the universe giving me what I wanted, in a messed-up, careful-what-you-wish-for sort of way?

*A wish.*

I'd deleted the invitation, but I remembered the email address.

My backpack was already packed—a bag I'd packed for a whole different life. With my meteor bracelet still wrapped around my wrist. I swiped a jacket out of the closet and stuffed my feet into my quietest kicks, deep blue embroidered with silver stars and Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* painted on the soles.

Auntie didn't hear me leave. I made sure she didn't. What would she think when she realized I was gone? I'd thought she'd be the one person happily waiting for me, resentment free, when I eventually got back from my college excursion, but the world was suddenly so much different than what I'd thought today was going to be. What if I didn't see her again?

I made a detour for the notepad on the fridge.

*Making a wish. Promise I'll be back.*

Then I continued on as a shadow until I was in Mom's Jeep. Praying for a fast response, I emailed the address my number.

My phone rang less than ten seconds later.

"Hello, Rosalyn Quest," a woman's voice answered. Her accent bounced between English and American and Australian in only three words. That took practice.

"You've called to register, I presume?"

I swallowed. "If I win, I get a wish?"

"Yes, that is the prize."

"And you can do *anything*?"

She paused, and I could feel her smiling. "Aside from bringing back the dead or changing the laws of physics, yes. Anything."

"I'm in."

"Excellent." My phone vibrated. "Check your email. Your personal one."

My brow furrowed as I saw a new notification. A digital plane ticket with my name on it. They had this ready?

"Your flight leaves from Andros Town International in one hour. That should give you plenty of time to get there, correct?"

They knew where I lived? Or they knew exactly where I was right now? "Yeah," I forced out.

"We'll see you when you arrive," she said. "Oh, and welcome to the competition, Ms. Quest."

A heaviness sank into my stomach. Whoever these people were, they were the real deal. They wanted me to know this was *their* game, and I had no choice but to play along. But whatever the challenge was, I'd win.

I put the key in the ignition and started the car. Looking in the rearview, I locked eyes with myself.

The girl looking back at me was not here to play.



# SIX

**A**NDROS TOWN INTERNATIONAL Airport was no bigger than my house and never open after dark. But tonight, despite the empty gravel parking lot, all the lights were on. It was waiting for a single passenger to arrive. Waiting for me.

As I entered, the ceiling fans clicked above. Fluorescent lights buzzed. I eyed the ticketing desk on the other side of the chipped plastic chairs. A blond man, a stranger to me, with a baby blue pressed jacket totally unlike the tan shades the airport workers usually wore, had his hands folded behind his back. He hovered behind the counter like standing sentinel there had always been his life's dream.

"Where's Elise?" I asked. There were only two gate attendants at Andros Town International. Elise works on Fridays.

“She’s off.”

I glanced at the customs office, also vacant. Then the flight board. No departures or arrivals listed.

I flashed the attendant my virtual ticket, and he nodded. No penciling in a departure and arrivals sheet. I offered him my passport, but he waved it away and pushed open the glass door leading to the runway instead.

“Have a peaceful flight, Ms. Quest.”

No passport scan or security check. It was like getting invited to Willy Wonka’s; all I needed was the golden ticket. If I’d known they weren’t going to check my bag, I would have brought more weapons than just my meteor bracelet, which I’d worked extra hard to style as a harmless accessory. What were my competitors bringing to the game?

A single jet sat on the runway, all glowing windows and sleek edges. Another white flight attendant, in the same baby blue uniform, greeted me as I climbed the stairs.

“Welcome aboard.” Her teeth sparkled behind cherry red lips. She had a strange accent. It halfway reminded me of posh English accents, but with hints of Eastern European.

The plane’s engines hummed under my soles. A strange smell lingered in the air. A stiff, subtle sweetness. I’d have assumed it was something dangerous if the woman in front of me hadn’t been breathing it too.

“May I take your bag?”

I twisted it away from her offering hands. “No, thank you.”

She looked pleased at my refusal.

“All right.” She swept her hand toward the aisle. “Take whichever seat you like.”

I kept my eye on the woman as I sidestepped her into the

aisle. It wouldn't hurt to be extra cautious about everyone from here on out.

The plane was larger than I was expecting, but closer to a private jet than a commercial airliner. Instantly, I scoped for exits. One up front, one in the back. No over-wing exits, the plane wasn't large enough to require them.

Each of the creamy white leather seats was larger than what you would find in first class on an average commercial jet. A few of them faced each other, sharing a small table between them.

I wasn't the only passenger.

There were two teens who looked about my age already in their seats. A Hispanic girl with her face smushed into her arms, resting on the table between her and the opposite seat. Her long black hair draped her like a curtain. I was pretty sure she was passed out. It didn't look like a very comfortable angle to sleep in. The other was a white boy who had taken a seat in the far back. One side of his head was shaved, and the other had brown hair long enough that it tickled the arms crossed over his chest. His mouth hung halfway open, and he was slumped against the window.

Why were they asleep? Who the hell sleeps on the plane ride to . . . I didn't even know where.

I settled into a rear-facing seat in the front row. From here, I'd have a good view of all the other passengers. My competitors.

I heard the cabin door shut and latch. I bit my finger, but quickly pulled it back down. I thought Mom had trained that anxious tic out of me years ago. I needed to pull myself together.

The flight attendant brought me a tray with a glass of water and packaged cookies. I waved them away, but she pulled out the tray table and placed them down anyway.

“Complimentary.” Was it possible for her to say anything without a cheerful bounce in her voice?

My attention slipped down to her name pin. *Suvelana*. What a strange way to spell that name. And it was even more curious that she didn't seem to have a Russian accent.

“Uh, thanks.” Looking at the water and cookies, my stomach pinched. When was the last time I ate? Maybe the stress of Mom's situation had burned all the calories I'd eaten today. My tongue felt dry. I hadn't been this thirsty before, had I?

I froze after my hand wrapped around the glass. No, I was sure I hadn't felt this thirsty before. This felt wrong. As wrong as this strange smell.

The flight attendant hadn't moved. I peeked around her. The girl had a glass in front of her too. It was empty now, but identical to mine. I couldn't see what was in front of the boy, but I swore that the tray for his seat was pulled down as well.

I let myself feel the dryness of my mouth for a moment. My senses sharpened as I looked back to the attendant, still standing there.

I tapped the glass. “This is gonna put me to sleep?”

Her eyes narrowed. “How very smart you are, Ms. Quest. Yes, yes, it will.”

“And I assume this strange smell is making me want to drink it?”

“Perhaps.”

“Did the other two passengers figure that out too?”

“One of them.”

“Will you tell me which one?”

“No.”

The plane hadn't started to taxi. It wasn't like we were waiting on any other planes to get out of our way.

I held the glass at eye level. It looked like water, and probably tasted like it too. "How long am I gonna be out, then?"

"No longer than necessary," she promised. "We have a couple more passengers to pick up. We'd like to help everyone maintain their anonymity. I'm sure you can understand that."

Was I just supposed to let myself stay unconscious while more strangers boarded this plane?

"We promise nothing will happen to you until you awake."

She still didn't move; only waited. This wasn't a request. I had a feeling it was the first test to see if I would play by their rules.

I didn't have a choice. Mom was on borrowed time. And I was awfully, awfully thirsty.

I downed the entire glass. It was the most delicious water I'd ever tasted. Cool, crisp, and strangely sweet. The woman left the tray and my empty glass where they were—a clue for whoever was coming next.

I settled back into my seat and closed my eyes. The engines revved to life. I didn't even know what continent I'd wake up on. *If* I would wake up.

I swallowed, feeling my head start to loll. These people put in a lot of work to get me here—I was going to wake up. And when I did, I was going to win.

# SEVEN

**I** WOKE IN a small, windowless room.

The walls and ceiling were lined in black velvet—same as the plush settee I was lying on. A fog-like substance danced over the floor, but it was swirling out through a grate. A gas to wake me?

I scanned the room and checked under the sofa. Nothing here but me. Where was my backpack? I thought *I* was supposed to be doing the stealing. A glass dome camera winked at me from the corner.

Guess it wouldn't be fun if they couldn't watch.

A metal door like you might find on a submarine was on the opposite wall.

At least thirty different locks bolted it shut. Combination locks, key locks, number locks, directional locks, and even a let-



tered keypad at the very bottom. Another test. Whoever was watching wanted to see if I could get out.

Easy work.

I found one of the multiuse lockpicks I'd sewn into my jacket pockets. Fiddling open the key locks with the pin was second nature. For the combination and number locks, I pressed my ear to them and listened to the machinery tick and turn until I had them down. Before I knew it, I had a little mound of locks by my feet.

Only one left—the keypad.

I stretched my fingers. They needed a rest, and I needed a second to breathe. This last lock was going to be tricky. Not to mention, I didn't know what was behind this door.

Mystery doors are not my favorite things in the world.

I tried to peek between the edge of the door and the wall. What kind of lock was connected to the keypad? If it was magnetic, maybe I didn't need to try the keypad at all.

Scratch that. They took my backpack. No backpack, no credit card.

I dragged my fingers over the buttons. Which keys were the worse for wear? Looked like this was going to be a math thing—

The screen at the top lit up. A question scrolled across.

**What was your flight attendant's name?**

A smile swept across my lips.

**S-U-V-E-T-L-A-N-A**

The door clicked ajar. Cautiously, I slipped through, not knowing what to expect. More doors to get through, this time with a hundred locks? Maybe a good old-fashioned dungeon?

Not a dungeon. Or, a very nice dungeon if it was. I squinted while my eyes adjusted to the light. The windowless room was

round, with at least a dozen doors. A random collection of plush antique armchairs and velvet sofas were positioned in a circle, facing each other. They gave off a musty smell, like mildew and wood chippings.

And . . . her.

She sat at the edge of her sofa with her ankles elegantly crossed. Her pale hands were clasped over her skirt, which, paired with her blazer and boots, gave her an I-just-got-home-from-boarding-school look. She tilted her head, shifting her shoulder-length blond hair, and then narrowed blue eyes at me. I glared back at her from the depths of my soul.

Noelia Boschert. As if things couldn't get any worse.

Her lip curled for a second, the twin freckles at the corner of her mouth shifting. But one glance at the door behind me turned her scowl into a smug smile. "Always one step behind, hmm, Quest? Or five. Or ten."

"Ten? Is that how many jobs I beat you to this last year?" At this, her grin faltered.

Noelia Boschert was the one person on the planet I would have paid money to never see again. So of course, because the universe is just like that, she was the only person my age I had relatively frequent interaction with. The Boscherts were the biggest family-run thieving operation in Europe. As far as I knew, my family's enterprise was the most well-renowned in North America. You'd have thought we'd be destined to be perfect friends, right?

Wrong.

Tried that. One winter Mom left me at a ski camp where I first met nine-year-old Noelia. Just a coincidence that we met at all. We stole pink friendship bracelets from the girls in the dorm

next to ours. I taught her to do the splits, and she showed me my first wristlock. We made a game of seeing who could steal the most Starbursts from the other.

Then she set me up for swiping fine jewelry from four of our ski instructors on the last day of camp and left me to be handcuffed in the office and nearly sent to Swiss juvenile detention at the age of nine. Mom saved me just in time, and I spent the entire ride down the mountain sobbing while she reminded me over and over, *This is why we don't trust people. A Quest can only trust another Quest, baby girl.*

Noelia Boschert had been a recurring cockroach that kept crawling into the corners of my life ever since. Catching glimpses of her on miscellaneous jobs, her sending the police my way at common rendezvous points or spreading slander about me to some client so they'd request I didn't join my mom on a job. After that incident, which really pissed me off, I went through a phase in which I went out of my way to push Mom to snatch all the available jobs we could around Switzerland for three months, anything that would have been convenient, easy money for Noelia and her fam. It all culminated when I received a rather threatening email in the black box telling me to back off. I made it my screen saver for a week.

"Those clients must not have paid well," Noelia said, trying to dismiss my last comment, "if all you can afford are worn jeans and ratty T-shirts." She looked down to my shoes, pausing like she was going to add that to the list of disappointing clothing choices, but actually stopped herself when she saw my kicks. I braced for a snicker, or something like *goofy* or *silly*, Auntie's favorite terms for my shoes, but Noelia said nothing. She squirmed in her seat a touch.

Mimicking her, I glanced down at her riding boots. They looked like your average dime-a-dozen designer boots at first glance, but under, on the sole that I could just barely see with her crossed ankles, was something colorful. The design was understated and impressionist from what I could tell, but it was definitely there.

She recrossed her ankles, hiding the soles, like that was gonna spare either of us the embarrassment of knowing that we apparently had the same shoe quirk.

"I guess even the dingiest broken clocks are right twice a day," Noelia murmured.

I hopped over the back of the sofa farthest from her and settled in for a seat, ignoring the whole situation.

A small screen above the door behind Noelia was a nice distraction. In fact, there was a screen above every door but one. Twelve screens, each counting up by the tenth of a second. My screen showed a final time of 11 minutes, 30.3 seconds. Noelia's time was 9 minutes, 44 seconds even.

My teeth ground. She'd beaten me . . . for now.

Another door clicked open. The white boy from my plane flipped his hair back and turned to see the screen above him. I hadn't noticed before, but he was wearing dark eyeliner. Unstrapped suspenders swung over his pant legs. It was a casual look. Maybe he was *trying* to appear casual. Casual people are more approachable.

He looked back to us and raised his hands, as if to ask, *What the hell?* "Where's the next test?" The guy's accent was standard American. Noelia and I both cocked a brow at him. "The next *thing?*" he reiterated. "Like those locks? I thought I was gonna be walking into a series of increasingly difficult tasks or some-

thing.” Deciding that there really was nothing of interest, he claimed the nearest armchair with a defeated huff. He ripped a phone out of his pocket, put it facedown on his lap, and fished a deck of cards out of the other pocket. He started doing arch shuffles, but I noticed the close eye he was keeping on Noelia and me.

You know, I’d never seen someone so disappointed not to find themselves in immediate danger. He almost seemed annoyed. Noelia opened her mouth, but after looking him up and down, she shut it. If I knew her, she was already prowling for her newest expendable but useful best friend. Guess he didn’t make the cut.

A minute later, out came a thin girl who looked like she might be Indian. I did a double take when I saw her. She might have walked straight off a runway. Tall, slender, and with a black high ponytail, flawless makeup, and strikingly long lashes around intimidating brown eyes. She had a gold-trimmed-and-embroidered jacket, which was a meld between what I assumed was traditional Indian style and Western high fashion, with complementary leggings, slippers, and a scarf. If Noelia was posh, she was chic. She wore a ridiculous number of sparkling rings—at least one on each finger. Very sharp rings.

Noelia gasped in awe, clasping her hands under her chin. She said something to the girl in what I was pretty sure was Hindi—which I didn’t even know Noelia spoke. The girl smiled smugly, gesturing to her jacket, then Noelia’s.

And just like that, they were cool with each other. Well, as close as you could get after two minutes in a room with your competition. I’d call this new girl naïve for falling for it, but that’d make me a hypocrite. Once upon a time, I fell for it too, when a much younger Noelia started gushing over my barrettes.

At least I knew her MO this time. I wasn't falling for any other thief's bull.

Still, when she and Ring Girl laughed about something, I fought the urge to punch a pillow.

Another door opened, and a boy in a cream sweater exited. He had the most perfect, sculpted black hair—a side part with not a strand out of place. He was East Asian, with a focused gaze behind some pretty vogue glasses.

"The specs are sharp, man." The white boy gave him a chin-up nod, like they were classmates passing in hall.

Perfect Hair pushed the glasses up. "I know." He didn't sit until he made a full turn around the room, analyzing everything he could in it with slow precision, us included. The boy with the cards leaned back a little and smirked when Perfect Hair studied him, still playing with his deck.

"The last time a guy looked that closely at me, I got laid," he said with a saucy smile.

Perfect Hair didn't seem amused or flustered. He took out his phone and started taking notes, I assumed. "Don't get your hopes up."

The next person out was a girl, also East Asian. Her hair was wavy with a frizz and copper colored. Around her neck, bunching her hair, was a pair of retro-sized gold headphones. Even from the other side of the room, I could hear the buzz of music coming from them. She sunk into an armchair next to Card Boy, curling into the cushions. Her gaze was affixed to the arch of cards Card Boy was shuffling.

"Can I try?" She held out her hands. Card Boy was down for it and started telling her something about shuffling.

Two more contestants escaped their rooms, almost simulta-

neously. One was the Hispanic girl from my plane. Her hair was in a braid now—curious use of her time—which she flicked over her jean-jacketed shoulder. She walked with an angelic grace, airy and light on her feet. *Dancer*, I considered. *Or maybe acrobat?* I didn't have much of a chance to think—the guy who had come out then too demanded all our attention.

The first thing I heard was his boots. Like in movies, when they zoom in on bikers' boots hitting the floor in slow, measured steps and everyone in the bar shuts up. The room was quiet for a second. In walked a tall white guy. Crew cut. Bomber jacket. He cracked his knuckles. I shivered. Something wasn't right about this guy. He was too aggressive when he cracked his knuckles. He walked too slowly. Even without the years of training telling me when I needed to be on edge, and when I *really* needed to be on edge, I would've known that this was a guy you'd see on the sidewalk and immediately cross to the other side.

At least he was on the other side of the room. I sure as hell didn't want him sitting next to me. Everyone seemed to be of the same opinion.

Everyone except for Card Boy. The same one who was disappointed that he'd walked into a sitting room and not a torture chamber.

As the new fellow crossed in front of him, Card Boy kicked his foot out. Scary Guy's foot caught his, and he tumbled forward a couple steps.

Noelia sucked in a breath. Honestly, ditto.

"Oh, sorry, pal." Card Boy clucked his tongue. "Gotta watch where you're going."

Scary Guy's face cracked. There was bloodlust in his eyes. He spun around with a hand headed straight for Card Boy's neck.

“Ack!” The cards Headphones was shuffling shot out into a fluttering rain, scattering everywhere. Lucky Card Boy. It gave him just enough time to scramble away from Scary Guy’s outstretched hand.

“So *that’s* why you said to keep your thumb on the corner.” Headphones shrugged, like that was all just an accident. Had she been trying to save Card Boy? She was so nonchalant about it, I couldn’t tell. If that was her game plan, it worked. Playing cards shooting all over is a dampener on a brawl, I guess. Scary dude clenched his fists and settled into an armchair, arms resting on the sides, fingers flexing and unflexing like some movie sociopath thinking about the hostages in his basement. It immediately gave me Buffalo Bill serial killer vibes, and there was no way I was the only one thinking it, right?

“It places the lotion in the basket . . .” Noelia whispered in French. I couldn’t help my smirk. Noelia was hiding one herself, but after seeing that Ring Girl didn’t get the movie reference, she dropped it.

Headphones started swiping up the cards. “Help?” she asked, glancing at us.

The sociopath was an obvious no. Perfect Hair mindlessly kicked a few her way between his note-typing. Noelia and her new BFF, Ring Girl, looked more annoyed than anything. The only person who went all in was the dancer girl with the braid. She’d caught a few while they were still fluttering, and I watched as she bent her arm at a near inhuman angle to reach a pair that had slipped under a sofa.

I glanced over the side of my cozy sofa, not necessarily intending on helping—maybe Headphones was trying to weed out the weaker links with this stunt—but I saw a single card



facedown. Flicking one back to them wouldn't hurt, and maybe it would throw them off about just how generous I was actually planning to be.

I leaned over to pick it up, but another hand reached at the same time, warm fingers brushing over mine.

My head shot up, and I was breathlessly face-to-face with a new boy. My heart skipped. Another Black person, finally. I hadn't even heard his door open.

With a sly smile, he swiped up the card, turning it over. "Queen of Hearts." His British accent took me aback for a second. It was so smooth. He whispered, and we were still so close it felt like he was talking only to me. "Maybe it's a sign."

I sat back before my stomach started flip-flopping and let him return the card to Headphones.

The new boy was the sharpest dressed of all, wearing a button-down vest with a tie tucked in. His sleeves were folded to his elbows, showing off his Rolex. His hair, though coarse and sponged to perfection, was just textured enough to make me think he had a little something else mixed in him besides Black. That, and his eyes which were just brown enough that I could tell they weren't fully coal.

He was beyond handsome, and judging by the way he stood, and that first line he dropped on me, he knew it. And used it to his advantage whenever he could.

I mentally chided myself. Ross Quest was *not* going to be that girl that started swooning over the hot guy after five minutes. On the to-do list of life, the top priority was winning and rescuing Mom, not falling for some guy who probably flirted with anything that walked as long as it could do him a favor.

No, I was definitely *not* interested.

"Guess I'm late to the fun," Handsome Brit said, and somehow he made that sound sexy too. He approached the sofa I was sitting on. "May I?"

I didn't object, and he sat with his ankle crossed over his knee like a talk show host. He twisted a gold tie pin between his fingers—perfect for lock-picking, then slipped it onto his tie.

"Did I miss the part where we all introduce ourselves?" Handsome Brit asked.

"Who says anyone wants to do that?" Noelia said, her first words to anyone else since her new supermodel BFF walked in.

"I would like introductions." The dancer girl sat next to me, tickling the tail of her braid as she spoke.

"Like on a reality show?" asked Headphones.

Perfect Hair snorted. "This isn't a reality show."

Another domed camera in the corner of the room caught my attention. I gave it a meaningful look. "Sure about that?"

"I'm down." Card Boy's leg was bouncing. He'd gone back to quietly shuffling his own cards.

Handsome Brit smiled. "We're going to learn each other's names sooner or later. And I'm sure most of us could find out on our own if we wanted."

He stood and pressed a hand over his heart. "Devroe Kenzie. England."

"Countries too?" I asked.

"Why not?" Devroe sat back down. "It'll save us the trouble of guessing each other's accents."

"Okay." Headphones spoke up next, her upbeat music still playing. "I'm Kyung-soon Shin. I'm from Korea. South, obviously." Her oversized shirt had an image of some K-pop band I

wasn't familiar with printed across it in pastel pink Korean lettering. Damn, I should have noticed that before.

Kyung-soon passed the metaphorical mic to Card Boy. He ran a hand over the unshaved side of his head. "Right. The name's Mylo Michaelson. Some people call me M-squared. Most people don't. If you hate on the eyeliner, we can't be friends. Oh, and I'm from Vegas. That's in Nevada, USA."

"We're aware," Perfect Hair said.

Kyung-soon giggled.

"A gambler, then?" Devroe asked.

Mylo sat back, looking scandalized. "I'm not old enough to gamble, sir."

I cracked a smile. If he was faking the nice-guy thing, he was doing a really good job.

Next in line was the brawler buff dude. He seemed like he was debating with himself whether to say anything, then ground out, "Lucus Taylor. Aussie. Next please."

On to Perfect Hair. He planted his elbows onto his knees and steepled his fingers under his chin.

"You may call me Taiyō. I will not tell you my last name unless the organizers ask me to. I'm from Japan."

"You're not going to tell us your last name?" Ring Girl flipped her ponytail while her rings twinkled; it was honestly one of the most effortlessly glam things I'd ever seen. "Come on, we won't tell anybody. Or are you scared?" She flashed a wicked smile.

Taiyō didn't even flinch. He started typing again on his phone, which seemed to irritate Ring Girl.

"What the hell are you writing?" she demanded.

Taiyō didn't answer. Ring Girl might have pounced on him, but Noelia stopped her with a delicate hand on her shoulder.

She cleared her throat and stood. "My name is Noelia Sophia Boschert. I'm from Zurich, Switzerland." She brushed the wrinkles out of her skirt. "Let's see, I prefer rubies to emeralds, enjoy moonlit walks, and I hope none of you take it personally when Adra or I beat you."

With that, she sat back down as the room collectively rolled their eyes. Except for Ring Girl, Adra, who looked smug to be included. All part of Noelia's playbook. Make it seem like it was you and her against everyone else.

"The Boscherts are the one of the oldest families in the industry, right?" Adra announced, and I wondered if Noelia asked her to say that.

"That's true." Noelia blushed. Somebody strangle me, please.

Ring Girl gestured to herself. "Like Noelia said, I'm Adra. India."

Kyung-soon's mouth fell open. "Didn't you just call out Taiyō for not revealing his last name? Tell us yours!"

She shrugged, but her eyes sparked with mischief. Adra clearly couldn't help but mess with people. "I changed my mind. She pointed at the lithe dancer girl from the plane. "You're next."

She held herself with perfect posture, and I thought she looked something like a swan. "Yeriel," she said. Her accent was thick and luscious, but her voice wobbled. Was that nervousness? "Yeriel Antuñez. Nicaragua."

She didn't add anything else.

And that left me.

"Last but not least?" Devroe offered.

Sighing, I flipped back my braids. "Ross Quest. The Bahamas."

"Quest?" Mylo almost fell out of his chair. "Your family is legendary! I didn't even think you guys were real! Is it true some-

one in your family swiped a necklace from the crown jewels and the royal family's been trying to keep it a secret ever since?"

Everyone was watching me, but it wasn't all warm attention. Noelia in particular looked furious that my last name had gotten more fanfare than hers.

"I assume Granny exaggerated that," I said.

He nodded and stroked his chin. "Still a hell of a bedtime story."

He wasn't wrong there.

A dozen alarms chimed. The remaining three timers stopped counting, frozen at twenty-two minutes. Time was up, but their doors remained shut. The door without a countdown clock swung open instead.

From a dark hall, a white woman entered carrying a tablet in the crook of her arm like it was a clipboard. Her pixie-cut hair was a dark red like her pantsuit. If hell had a concierge, this woman worked at the front desk.

"Good to see you've already gotten acquainted." The door shut behind her. There was an empty sofa between Kyung-soon and Lucus. I expected her to sit, but she remained standing. Looking down on all of us.

"Was that your way of saying you've been spectating?" Lucus asked. "How many people have front-row seats to this game?"

"You should assume we're always watching." She smiled. "You may call me Count. I'll be your contact for this year's competition. You've each been selected because you've caught the attention of our organization."

"What about the people in the remaining three rooms?" Taiyō asked.

"That was a pretext. A competency exam, if you will They

failed," Count said. "Don't worry about them, they're no longer in the competition."

Twelve to start, and three down already. They weren't playing around.

Count continued. "Let me clarify the rules. The Thieves' Gambit is divided into three phases, with various tests in each phase. Any of you may be eliminated at a moment's notice if our judges deem your performance to be . . . underwhelming."

"So even if we pass a phase, we can still be eliminated for not doing it well enough." Noelia said it more than asked. Not that she sounded worried or anything.

"Correct," Count said. "In addition, if you're injured to the point of incapacity, you will be disqualified."

I shifted in my seat. Auntie told me this thing could get bloody. Who was doing the injuring, though?

"I should add"—Count's face twisted into something stronger and more serious—"you cannot win the Gambit by killing your competitors. Violence outside of the phases is prohibited."

"And *during* the phases?" Lucus asked.

"If your paths should cross, and force—even deadly—is required, then that's acceptable. But attacking your fellow competitors for no reason isn't looked upon favorably. This is a thieving competition. Outclass your opponents with your mind and skills, not your fists. Our contracted victor should be sharp of mind and—"

"Contracted?" The word fell out of my mouth.

Count turned to me. "I suppose that brings me to the next point. In addition to your wish, whichever of you is victorious will have the honor of becoming our organization's primary thief for the year. You'll do any job we ask of you, and you'll be

paid well for it." She smiled deviously. "Better than you're used to, I assure you."

A year as a contracted thief. I didn't know this was part of the deal. Was it such a bad thing, though? I'd wanted to leave . . . before. But I had a feeling this wouldn't be anything close to the freedom I'd imagined. "You mean *if* we want that job."

"The position is mandatory," Count said. "You *will* work if you win. If you have a problem with that, you may leave."

She paused, challenging us. No one moved. Not even me.

There was no future without Mom. This was the only way.

Mylo sighed dramatically. "Let's get to work. No one's backing out. When does the first phase start?"

"It already has."

Everyone tensed. Next to me, Devroe looked hyper-focused as he leaned onto his knees.

Count swiped across her tablet. An image appeared on the table in the middle.

"Whoa . . ." Kyung-soon studied the lit-up table. She had a greedy luster in her eyes that made me think she was imagining she could steal this too. Schematics of a building oscillated on the screen. Three floors, few windows. At least four exits that I could see at first glance.

"We're sitting in the basement storage of the privately owned Museum of Historical Fashions just outside of—"

"Cannes, France," Adra finished for her. She gave Noelia a pleased look. Guess this wasn't her first time at this museum.

"Correct," Count went on. "There are fifteen items you should note."

A series of objects blinked quickly across the screen. A miniature portrait of a well-made up French aristocrat, a gilded

music box, a sculpture of a Roman emperor in full regalia. Most of the targets looked small enough to fit under an arm. I flagged the centurion as a possibility. People don't tend to display sculptures behind glass. Once all fifteen items had been shown, they organized themselves in three rows of five.

"Your task is to bring one of these items to the Graphe Hotel in Marseille by ten this evening. Tell the receptionist you're with the Spaggiari party."

Spaggiari party? As in—

"The *Albert Spaggiari party*?" Taiyō asked. No one else seemed to get the reference. At least I wasn't the only one who knew Albert Spaggiari was the mastermind behind the famous Nice bank heist. He was a personal icon of mine, partially because his determination was hardcore enough to spend months burrowing a tunnel through a sewer under a bank vault, but also, there was something charming about a thief who undertook his first job to afford a diamond for his girlfriend.

Count only nodded in response. "The current time is 4:02 p.m. The museum closes to the public at seven on Saturdays. You'll find a staircase to the first floor behind the door to my left." With that, Count stood, leaving the items up on the screen. "Only eight of you will move on to the second phase."

"Excuse me—" Kyung-soon jumped up. "What about my stuff? I brought some bags with me on the plane. The flight attendant told me I'd get them back."

At least I wasn't the only one who'd had her stuff snatched.

"We're well aware of what you're all missing," Count said. "Consider the lack of your belongings a test of your ingenuity. They will be returned at a later time. Any other concerns?" She



scanned the room. Nothing. "Good. Happy hunting. Oh, and one more thing." She stopped just before crossing through the doorway. "They say the wife of a Mafia boss owns this gallery. The security is . . . tight. Best of luck."

My fingers twitched.

The first phase had begun.