



*At this school,  
one girl lives  
forever.*

# THE HOMECOMING MASQUERADE

Spencer Baum

**THE HOMECOMING MASQUERADE**

**Girls Wearing Black, Book One**

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**Part 1**  
**New Girl**

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# 1

Homecoming at Thorndike Academy was different than at other high schools. There were no pep rallies. There was no football game either, as Thorndike's brief experiment with a school football team ended in 1952.

There was no rival school brought in for a competitive celebration. After all, who could rival Thorndike? Located in Potomac, Maryland, Thorndike Academy was the wealthiest high school in the nation by far. Children of congressmen, senators, judges, lobbyists, and corporate bigwigs made up the student body. Annual tuition was well in excess of six figures, and the endowment was larger than the Gross National Product of many countries.

There was a Homecoming dance at Thorndike, but it wasn't in a gym. The Homecoming dance was held in the mansion belonging to Renata Sullivan, chair of the school's Board of Regents. Renata's mansion, located on a fifty-acre plot west of town, housed a ballroom suitable for an affair as prestigious and important as Homecoming.

Like other Homecoming dances, the event at Thorndike was a formal affair, with the guys in tuxes and the girls in gowns. But there was no DJ. Renata wouldn't dream of allowing bumping and grinding to teenage jungle beats or other such nonsense inside her mansion. In Renata's mansion, the dancing was just as formal as the attire, having been codified over the years into rules and routines all students were expected to know. Minuets, waltzes, cotillions – all the great formal dances of the Victorian Age, all of them set to live music, with a small chamber orchestra on the stage playing the tunes – these were the dances Renata liked to have played in her mansion. And the students didn't dare show up to Homecoming without learning all the dances first. Stepping onto the floor for a minuet and not knowing how to do it was a terrible insult to the school, the students, and the hostess, and the last thing anyone wanted to do was insult Renata Sullivan.

Renata Sullivan, who had helped create and maintain the traditions that now governed Homecoming, was a proud graduate of Thorndike Academy.

After her own graduation, Renata moved straight into administration at the school, and had overseen the Homecoming event for nearly seventy years.

Not that Renata was elderly. Despite walking the earth for the better part of a century, Renata looked exactly the same as the day she graduated. Renata, like all the true power players in Washington, was immortal, having earned the honor to live inside her eighteen-year-old body for as long as she could keep it. She didn't age, she didn't get sick, and she wouldn't die until someone managed to kill her.

One of the first traditions Renata instituted at Homecoming was the masks. Starting three years after Renata's own graduation, and continuing ever since, Homecoming at Thorndike was a masquerade ball. The immortals liked it that way. Not only did the masks help Renata and the other immortals blend in when they stepped onto the floor, but masks also made the party into a kind of game, and immortals loved games. They got bored, living so long. They saw normal humans as their playthings. They invited all the high school seniors to one of their mansions and had them learn formal ballroom dances and drink wine and dress up in masks because it all was just so amusing.

And the masks...the masks had become a tradition unto themselves.

For the guys, the masks were simple and plain. Understated pieces of black fabric to match their traditional tuxedos.

For the girls, sky's the limit. Glittered, bejeweled, artistically rendered to match their outfits, some barely covering their eyes, some stretching over their foreheads and into their hairdos. The masks would become treasured heirlooms, reminders for each girl of the night she claimed her birthright and entered adulthood as a member of the power elite. The girls at this ball had been dreaming about their masks since childhood, sketching them on the pages of their math notebooks, talking about them the way some people might talk about their children. When a Thorndike girl first entered high school, her parents began interviewing designers who might bring the dream of a perfect mask to life. By the start of junior year, every girl in school had a portfolio of potential mask designs collected from different artists. Mothers, grandmothers, fashion designers, and respected plutocrats in DC went through these portfolios and selected one design, then the family hired the hottest, trendiest artist they could afford to bring that design to life. The morning after the ball, the masks were put in glass cases protected by magnetic locks and laser alarm systems, and for the rest of

their lives, the girls would look at their masks, displayed as the most prominent, significant works of art in their homes, and remember. Their self-worth would be defined by how good they thought they looked at Homecoming.

A girl's choice of dress was very important as well. Red, blue, gold, green, silver, white (well, nobody wore white) – these were all acceptable colors around which a girl might arrange her outfit. A red dress might go well with a gold mask. A blue dress might do well with silver. Girls in green dresses might highlight their masks with emeralds; girls in red with rubies.

And girls wearing black dresses would cover their masks in diamonds, for a black dress signified something entirely different than the other colors, something special. A black dress at Homecoming was a special privilege, a form of self-selection reserved for the boldest, most daring girls at school. Those girls who wore black dresses entered themselves in Thorndike's prestigious, demanding, and high stakes Annual Fundraising Tournament, commonly known as "Coronation."

In Coronation, the girls wearing black went on to compete in a year-long fundraising contest. They raised money in a series of parties, games, and events. All money raised was collected into a trust, or, in DC parlance, "the pot." Every donation that went into the pot was on behalf of one of the girls wearing black. At the end of the year, whichever girl had the most money donated in her name was crowned Queen at the Senior Prom.

And made into an immortal.

Vampires. That's what Jill Wentworth called them, but only behind closed doors. Vampire was their old name, the one that had identified them for centuries as bloodsucking creatures of the night. Now that they had come out of hiding and taken over Washington, they wished to be known as "immortals." Immortal sounded better. It didn't have that connotation of evil, of Counts from Eastern Europe wearing long cloaks and turning into bats. Vampire was a name for a monster to be hunted down and killed, but immortal was a title one could aspire to. Immortal had better spin to it, and spin was everything in Washington.

Jill didn't care. To her they would always be vampires. Vampires like Renata could join polite society, infiltrate Capitol Hill, point the Washington gravy train their way, and name themselves the new lords and masters of it all, but they were still filthy bloodsuckers. They were still

manipulative, greedy parasites whose eternal life was one side of a coin on whose opposite face was a collage of victims, of innocent people that were now gone because the vampires didn't see them as humans, but as food.

Jill kept these opinions secret, of course. The immortals weren't just held in high regard, they were practically worshipped. They were more than leaders. They were symbols of what everyone wanted to be. They were proof that anything is possible, that, for one lucky girl from the senior class, dreams do come true.

The girl who won Coronation would get everything she could ever want: wealth, status, power, immortality. But if the contest were left at that, every girl in the school would enter. To make it interesting, Coronation also demanded the ultimate sacrifice from the loser. While the winner got a visit in the night from a vampire who made her immortal, the loser got locked in a cage and became the winner's first meal.

Disgusting. To Jill, Coronation was a horrid, vile event that celebrated the worst parts of humanity, and Thorndike was a disgusting place for hosting it. Jill had never wanted to come to Thorndike, but here she was, now in her senior year and on the ballroom floor, waiting for the party to start. For Homecoming, Jill's Aunt Ruth helped her assemble an outfit built around a sleeveless satin dress whose dark green color was, in the words of her aunt, "A nice way to offset your hair." None of her aunts liked Jill's hair. Black, curly, "unruly," it was her mother's hair, and none of her aunts approved of Jill's mother.

The dress went from her chest to just below her knees, and had a silk sash that hugged her waist and "gave some shape to that stick figure of a body" (another trait that came from her mother). Jill's mask was a small gold oval with high relief designs worked into its edges, created by a Brazilian sculptor named Cristiano. Her shoes were green sparkly heels that looked to Jill like something more suited for a St. Patrick's Day parade than a formal dance, but all her aunts declared the shoes to be "just perfect," and, in fairness, so did everyone else who saw the outfit.

Now, having been in the mansion for a little more than thirty minutes, Jill couldn't wait to get out of this crazy outfit. The dress restricted her movement. The mask cut off her peripheral vision. The shoes...well, the shoes were just something a girl had to live with, weren't they? Jill's aunts had ensured that she knew how to wear a pair of heels, as much as she hated to.

They were half-way through the arrival portion of the night, an hour-long look at me celebration before the dancing began. Arrival was the time when the girls showed off their fabulous outfits and the guys stood and stared. It was a time to be seen, to grab a drink, to develop the social skills that would become so important to all of them when they graduated into the world of their parents.

After engaging in all the pleasantries of arrival, Jill went to the bar, where she pushed her way through a throng of her impossibly giddy classmates to order two glasses of wine. The bartender had filled them nearly to the top. Now she was walking to the center of the ballroom with sloshing glasses of red wine in each hand. It was kind of ridiculous, like some test of her womanhood. Spike heels on her feet, a crowd of teenagers in formal wear all about, some of them barely able to see out of the giant showpieces on their faces, glasses of night-ruining stainmakers in each hand – could she make it to her target without spilling a drop?

Her target was Annika Fleming, the daughter of the governor of Oklahoma, and despite all the obstacles in her way, somehow Jill reached her with both glasses of wine intact.

“Thanks, Baby,” said Annika as she took one of the wines.

“You’re welcome,” said Jill.

*Thanks Baby. Sure thing, Honey. What can I do for you, Sweetie?*

This was the way Annika talked. She got away with it because: a) She was a knockout who was extremely well endowed and knew how to dress in a way that showed off her assets. b) She had that cute Oklahoma lilt in her voice that drove guys crazy. c) She was a skillful flirt who had a way of getting what she wanted. d) She was a social butterfly who knew how to party like nobody’s business.

It was that last one that really worked for her. Annika’s ability to bring life to any party was legendary. On this night, as Jill approached, Annika was just finishing up a story about some mishap in the school courtyard involving a freshman and an exploding bottle of soda. She had a crowd of people around her who were struggling to catch their breath after laughing so hard.

For Annika, this was either the second or third glass of wine since the doors had opened. For Jill it was the first, and she had every intention of nursing it for the rest of the night. No one in Thorndike’s senior class was older than eighteen, but silly things like the legal drinking age didn’t apply



in Renata's mansion. The vampires wouldn't think of hosting any party, even one for high school seniors, without red wine. Later in the night, when the vampires stepped onto the floor, their own masks making it difficult to distinguish them from anyone else, all the students feeling tipsy, it would be impossible to tell the difference between a glass of wine and a glass of blood.

"Hey Honey, have you seen Nicky?" Annika asked.

And there it was. The question everyone should have been asking but wasn't. Annika said the words with such innocence in her voice. To Annika, it wasn't even a possibility that Nicky hadn't arrived yet. Nicky Bloom was the new girl, having just transferred in. Nicky filled the vacancy left by Shannon Evans, who had died in a boating accident a few months before school started.

"Yeah, about Nicky," Jill began. "I have something to tell you."

*She's not here yet. She's coming any minute. She's going to blow your mind when she walks through that door.*

Jill couldn't bring herself to say any of those things. She was too nervous. As soon as she spoke the words, it was game on. As soon as she told Annika that Nicky wasn't here yet, the real night would begin.

There was an arrival schedule to Homecoming, as formal and orderly as the dance itself. Boys came first, then girls in colorful dresses, then, late in the evening, just before the dancing was to begin, the girls wearing black showed up.

Having the girls wearing black arrive last added some dramatic tension to the event. With a hundred students in the ballroom, all of them wearing masks, it took a little bit of time to confirm who was present and who was absent. As the minutes passed, and word started to spread that no one had seen this girl or that girl yet, rumors started to fly. Was that girl going to wear black? Was she entering herself in Coronation?

Now, as Jill and Annika stood in the ballroom, nine o'clock approaching, everyone thought all the girls wearing black had been accounted for.

There was Kim Renwick, the daughter of notorious Washington lobbyist Galen Renwick. The odds-on favorite to win, Kim got a round of applause when she burst through the doors wearing a black dress.

Five minutes after Kim arrived, Mary Torrance, the blonde bombshell daughter of a high-powered lawyer from Atlanta, showed up in black. Ten

minutes after that, Samantha Kwan, whose parents were both executives at Ventigen Corp, arrived in her own black get-up.

And that was it. Three powerful, popular girls had put themselves out there and would compete for the crown. The other girls who might have entered, girls like Serena Snow or Terri Weingarten or even Annika Fleming – they all were here and were not wearing black.

Only Jill was aware that one girl from the senior class was still missing. But Annika was curious.

“I’m sorry,” Annika said to Jill. “What was that? You have something to tell me about Nicky?”

Jill took a deep breath. She had a lot to tell Annika about Nicky, but she needed to make it brief.

“Nicky’s not here yet,” Jill said.

Annika looked at her like she was crazy.

“What?”

“Annika, there’s a group of us, of families...we don’t want Kim to win but we knew her father would skewer us if we crossed her out in the open.”

“You’re saying that Nicky hasn’t shown up yet?”

“My parents are part of it,” Jill said. “It’s kind of like a secret club. We want you to join. I know you’d love to see Kim go down.”

Annika held up her hand and spoke in a slow, deliberate voice. “You’re telling me that Nicky is about to walk through that door wearing--”

She didn’t get to finish, for as she was about to say the words, the front door opened one last time, and Nicky Bloom stepped inside. She was wearing black.

## 2

Nicky stepped into the ballroom with all the swagger of an immortal.

The entire senior class of Thorndike Academy, ninety-nine masked faces in all, stopped what they were doing and stared at her. The gleeful pre-party chatter having come to a sudden halt, those who had something to say now spoke in frantic whispers, leaning in close to one another, spitting out short sentences, trying desperately to figure out what they knew about Nicky Bloom.

Watching them whisper, Nicky thought of one thing they *didn't* know. They didn't know she could read lips, and understood what everyone was saying, even those all the way on the other end of the ballroom.

*Who is that?*

*It's the new girl.*

*There's a new girl?*

*She got Shannon's slot.*

*The new girl wore black?*

*Does she know what she's doing? I don't think she knows what she's doing.*

*Kim is going to crush her. She won't last a week.*

*She barely moved to DC last summer.*

*Oh my God, Kim is gonna be so pissed.*

*Who is she again?*

*What do you think Kim's going to do?*

That last question came off the lips of a pudgy kid from Florida named Norman Gayle. He didn't have to wait long for an answer, for out of the stunned silence in Renata's ballroom came staccato, angry footsteps. Kim Renwick had burst from the crowd, her sharp, Italian heels stomping her forward, the look on her face one of absolute fury. She marched into Nicky's path, the rest of the ballroom giving her a wide berth. Nicky kept on moving, knowing it was important not to show fear. As she and Kim approached one another, the whispers stopped and the only noise in the ballroom was that of shuffling feet as everyone jockeyed for a position to watch.

They met in the center of the ballroom and stood face to face.

“Good evening, Kim,” said Nicky.

“You’re dead, New Girl,” Kim responded.

Kim was a near-perfect specimen on this night, looking slender and toned in her custom-made gown. It was a strapless A-line with see-thru features on the sides, its black fabric a sharp contrast to Kim’s ivory skin. Her shiny black hair was pulled back in a tight, wet look that gave a severity to her presence. She looked like a winner. Her mask was black silk with gold highlights and was narrow as a blindfold. Her shoes were custom-made heels with diamond-studded gold straps.

Having turned eighteen two days prior, Kim was the oldest of Nicky’s three competitors for the crown. Of those three, Kim was the only one who mattered. She was everything money could buy. Expensive tutors, personal trainers, a rigorous skin-care regimen that began at birth, and a culture of high manners pounded into her since before she could speak. She was popular at school and around town not because people liked her, but because they feared her. They feared her whole family.

“You act...threatened, Kim,” Nicky said. “Do you feel threatened?”

Kim smirked and let out a don’t-make-me-laugh sort of sound. It was an aggressive, ugly noise. It might as well have been a “yes” to Nicky’s question.

“Don’t worry, Kim,” said Nicky. “The best girl will win, I’m sure.”

“How dare you,” Kim said, almost whispered. “How dare you think you can just march into this ballroom and--”

“Fuck you, Kim Renwick,” Nicky said. The ballroom gasped in response.

It was a line Nicky and her advisers had debated about for weeks.

On the one hand, it was a phrase that almost everyone present wished they had the guts to say to Kim. There were people in the ballroom that had been under the heel of Kim or her father since before they were born, but knew they could show nothing but deference lest they or their families become the next target of the Renwick war machine.

On the other hand, it was vulgar, and not in the spirit of Homecoming. They were in an immortal’s mansion. There was decorum to be followed. Dropping the F bomb here...well...it was just something you didn’t do.

In the end, Nicky decided that the reward outweighed the risk, and she came into the night knowing she would deliver a Fuck You to Kim at the

first available moment. Hopefully she hadn't misjudged. The crowd all around was so stunned that she couldn't tell. Were they happily stunned or were they offended?

Either way, the look on Kim's face was worth it, and made Nicky think she'd chosen correctly. Those who were truly put off by Nicky's vulgar language would never have supported her anyway. Nicky was counting on the fact that many of these students secretly despised the formal etiquette of Homecoming, because, really, when you thought about it, the whole thing was just absurd. While a hundred high school seniors traipsed around inside at a formal Victorian masquerade, Renata Sullivan and the other immortals were out in the yard, doing disgusting, unspeakable things to innocent people. Yes, the students and their families at Thorndike condoned this behavior outwardly, but a part of them had to recognize the disparity. Why was it okay for the immortals to behave like wild animals in the woods while everyone else had to be the model of civility? Why was it okay for Renata to have this fabulous mansion anyway? She already had the eternal existence of a vampire. Wasn't that enough?

They were questions that no one dared speak aloud, which of course only heightened the guilty pleasure of it all. Nicky had said the F word in Renata's mansion, blatantly violating the code of conduct. Secretly, the other students would love her for it. At least, that's what she hoped.

"Excuse me," Nicky said, stepping around Kim the way one might walk past a stranger in a crowd, or around a telephone pole.

"You know there's no turning back now that you've worn black, don't you?" Kim called after her. Her voice was cracking with anger. "You're going to lose, New Girl, and there will be no place for you to hide!"

Nicky kept on smiling as she walked to the bar, and in her mind, she put a checkmark next to the first item on the night's long to-do list.

### 3

“Okay, what was that you were trying to tell me about Nicky Bloom?”

Annika’s voice was a mix of shock and bemusement, the initial surprise still with her, but her ultra-cool demeanor already taking over.

“It’s a secret,” said Jill. She said the words quietly, but not too quietly. In a gathering of students this hyped-up and confused, the words, “It’s a secret,” were like a magnet that pulled on every nearby eardrum, and Jill saw that she already had the attention of Mattie Dupree, Jake Castillo, and Jenny Young.

As had been planned.

Mattie, Jake, Jenny, Annika – these were Jill’s people now. It had taken a lot of patience and months of work, but Jill had pushed her way into this group and was friends with all of them.

She didn’t dislike any of them, but she didn’t really like them either. To her, they were means to an end. They were children from families that were wealthy enough to make a difference in the Coronation contest, but not so wealthy that Kim Renwick had pointed her tremendous resources at getting their support. If Nicky Bloom had a chance of winning the Coronation contest, Mattie, Jake, Jenny, and most especially, Annika, had to be the early adopters, the first members of the senior class to pledge their support to Nicky rather than Kim.

That was why Jill had befriended them. That was why she was speaking with them now. Months of schmoozing, of sending inane text messages, of going to lunch together and listening... good grief the listening! Mattie and Annika in particular could talk for hours if they had a good listener. That was why they were so happy to become best buds with Jill so quickly. Jill just showed up in their lives one day and let them talk and talk and talk and talk.

But now it was their turn to listen.

“I knew Nicky was going to wear black tonight,” Jill said quietly. “But I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone I knew. I’m not supposed to be talking now.”

“What were you trying to tell me about your parents?” asked Annika.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” said Jill. “It’s the wine. I got excited about the night.” She looked up and caught Mattie, Jake, and Jenny with her eyes.

It was unusual for Jill to be the focus like this. Her ability to listen had been invaluable to the Network. Not only did Jill have the patience to hear out the long soliloquies of these girls, but she also had a unique ability to pull out the important information from the noise. She could find the little hints in someone’s voice that might become rumors that might become gossip, and she could put those snippets together into the larger picture. It was the same ability that made her the best hacker in the Network. She found that human conversation wasn’t that different than computer code. Both arrived at a larger meaning one discrete line at a time.

It occurred to Jill that her propensity to listen rather than speak might be why she was getting so much attention at this moment. It was so rare for Jill to be the one talking – she must have something important to say.

“Come closer and I’ll tell you guys, but you have to promise with all your hearts to keep this a secret. I’m only telling you because you’re my best friends, but, seriously, you could ruin everything if you don’t keep it quiet.”

It took only a second for all of them to huddle close enough that Jill could speak in a whisper.

“Have you ever thought it was odd that Nicky got the open spot, even though there were lots of more qualified applicants out there?” asked Jill.

“Of course we’ve wondered that,” said Mattie. “Everyone has. Senator Bryce’s daughter was on the list to get in. There was a girl from the Saudi royal family, too. It was weird that Nicky got in.”

It was more than weird. Nicky Bloom was from Chicago, the only daughter of a family completely unknown and unconnected in Washington. Her parents were rich, but they were new money, not the sort that normally found its way into Thorndike.

“Here’s the thing,” Jill said. “Nicky got in because there are lots of us *who got her in*, if you catch my drift. There’s a revolution happening here tonight and Nicky Bloom is going to lead it. Powerful families, both of current students and of alumni, arranged for Nicky to be here and are backing her in secret. These are people who will do anything to keep Kim Renwick from winning Coronation, but know better than to defy her openly.”

Jill saw nods of their heads, looks of understanding in their eyes. Kim Renwick was the favorite to win this contest because her father was as powerful as a human could get in Washington. Only the immortals held more sway in this town than Kim's father, and even they deferred to his judgment from time to time.

Kim's father, Galen Renwick, was a Congressional lobbyist by trade, but everyone knew his true profession was "Dirt Digger." Galen was masterful at unearthing the little skeletons that lurked in every closet, then using the threat of those skeletons to drive behavior. That ability to drive behavior made Galen Renwick into a king, or at least a king-maker. Galen cast such a long shadow over Washington that few other families dared even enter Coronation against his daughter for fear of upsetting him.

But even as people deferred to Galen Renwick, they muttered amongst themselves their anger and frustration at how he did things. This was a city where the largest egos in the world came to collide, and all of them had to bow their heads before the mighty Galen Renwick. It was demeaning to all of them, and, given the opportunity, there were hundreds of people in Washington who would love to take down the whole Renwick operation.

"Nicky Bloom made it all the way to Homecoming in a black dress and Kim Renwick never saw it coming," Jill continued. "That in itself is already a big win for her. You guys know what trouble Kim and her dad have gone to in order to have only three competitors this year, right?"

"I can only imagine," said Mattie, inviting Jill to tell her more.

"Let's just say that a certain Senator who fled Washington in a child porn scandal had eyes on the Coronation contest," said Jill. "He had a daughter who was our age and he wanted her to enter, even though Kim's father advised against it. He tried to cross Galen Renwick and got run out of town."

"Wasn't that scandal, like, ten years ago?" said Jenny.

"Shows you how long the Renwicks have been preparing for this night," said Jill. "And how improbable it is that someone like Nicky made it here at all."

"Kim doesn't have complete control over the contest," said Jake. "She wasn't able to keep Mary and Samantha out."

"Mary and Samantha were the approved entrants as far as Kim was concerned," said Jill. "She knows she can beat both of them with ease. She let them enter so she'd have someone to beat."



Jenny shook her head. “So what if Nicky got in the door wearing black? That’s just step one. Now she has to raise a ton of money. How’s she going to do that without any connections?”

“That’s what I’m telling you,” said Jill, trying to be patient with Jenny, who was an exceptional ditz. “My parents are part of a secret consortium that is going to ensure Nicky has lots of funding. Lots of other Thorndike families are in it too but the plan is that no one is going to make themselves known as supporters of Nicky until it’s too late for Kim to stop us. I’m breaking the plan by telling you guys, but I think it was a mistake for the consortium to leave you out.”

“Damn right it was a mistake,” said Jake. “Why weren’t we included? I would love to--”

“The consortium is a small group of really wealthy families,” said Jill, allowing the truth to set in and sting a little. While everyone at Thorndike was fabulously wealthy, some were more fabulous than others.

Despite her extraordinary social skills and ability to capture an audience, Annika’s family was in the rank of millionaires, not billionaires. Her father made his fortune as a televangelist and then swung his money and support into a successful campaign for the governorship of Oklahoma. Mattie Dupree came from a family of Washington lawyers and had a grandmother who was a justice on the Supreme Court, but none of them had wealth that crossed the hundred million mark. Jake’s dad was a former Secretary of State. Jenny’s was a Congressman.

All of these people were rich, but not rich enough to make a run at the Renwicks. Jill’s family, in contrast, had a net worth in the billions, as did a few other families at Thorndike. There were people in the ballroom who had enough money they could swing the entire contest one way or another if it came to that, and their decisions about who to back carried a lot of weight. The fact that Jill was speaking about backing Nicky Bloom was significant, and her friends knew it.

“You’re saying we weren’t rich enough to be invited to the party,” said Jenny.

Jill allowed her eyes to drift downward in an act of penitence, as if the net worth of her father was a terrible sin, and she nodded her head. “If I had it my way, you all would have been invited to the meetings, but it’s the parents who are calling the shots here. I’m just telling you now because

you're my peeps and I don't want you to get stuck backing the wrong horse."

*My peeps?* Jill thought. *Ick. Where did that come from?*

"You don't actually think Nicky Bloom can beat Kim, do you?" asked Jake.

"The consortium's going to wait until the last possible moment. They want to make sure Galen Renwick doesn't have time to put together one of his blackmail operations, but when the moment's right, they're going to pledge enough money to Nicky that it will be hard for Kim to pull this off."

"Holy shit," said Jake.

"Holy shit is right," said Jill, "but here's the deal. You guys have a chance to get in on the ground floor. Nicky's going to win this thing, and she's going to be just like any other girl who's become immortal. She's going to remember the people who helped her get there. She's having an after-party tonight at the Hamilton. I guarantee she'll remember the people who chose to go to her party rather than Kim's."

Just over Mattie's shoulder, Jill saw Kim Renwick looking their way, no doubt wondering what this little huddle was in the far corner of the ballroom.

"We need to quit talking now," said Jill. "And remember, this is a huge secret. I'm risking everything by telling you guys, but I couldn't stand the thought that you were being left out."

Jill tried to put some emotion in her voice, as if the telling of this story was an act of love.

"But if you blab," Jill continued, "I'll deny everything I've just told you. This plan only works if it's a total secret. Some of us will raise some eyebrows when we go to Nicky's after-party tonight, but other members of the consortium are going to remain incognito until later in the year, when the time is right."

"Got it," said Mattie. "Your secret's safe with us."

"Yeah, thanks for sharing," said Jenny.

"No problem," said Jill. "You guys are like family to me."

She gave one more look over the group before they parted ways, and headed to the bar feeling pretty good about how that went. But she couldn't help notice that one person from the group had nothing to say about Jill's secret. Annika Fleming, the leader of this motley crew, and Jill's primary target tonight, had been completely silent once Jill got going.

Hopefully, Annika was quiet because she needed time to process what Jill was saying, and not because she had any doubts. Jill knew that Annika's bullshit detector was notoriously good.

Hopefully, Jill had pulled it off, and Annika's silence meant she was taking it all in, pondering the implications, getting ready to get on board.

Hopefully, it didn't mean Annika was skeptical. For, as much as Jill had rehearsed, as many people had helped her craft the story she just told, there was no denying one simple fact.

The story Jill just told was complete and utter bullshit.

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## 4

The truth about Nicky Bloom was that she had no financial backers for her Coronation campaign yet, other than Jill. The truth was that, while there was a group of smart and powerful people helping her, none of those people were Washington insiders. None of them had the big money necessary for Nicky to win Coronation.

The truth was that Nicky and Jill were in this ballroom under false pretenses. They were pretending to be normal seniors at Thorndike who were excited to wear their masks to Homecoming and eager to join the ruling class when they graduated.

They were nothing of the sort.

Jill and Nicky were members of the Network, an underground movement dedicated to overthrowing the immortals who ruled Washington and the world.

It was no accident that Nicky Bloom, the only child of a mostly unknown family from the Midwest, somehow won the open spot in the senior class, beating out far wealthier and more connected families who had been trying to get their daughters into Thorndike for years.

It was no accident that Nicky Bloom's father, a commodities speculator, hit on a winning streak in the financial markets that turned his family into the sort of power players who could come to Thorndike Academy. Neither was it an accident that Nicky's transcripts, personal history, and entire digital footprint combined into the perfect profile for an incoming Thorndike student.

The Network was behind all of this.

Jill was the Network mole who made Nicky's presence possible. Jill's reports from inside Thorndike had been invaluable to the organization, which had come to see Thorndike and its sordid Coronation ritual as a problem that had to be solved. Because of Jill's intel, the Network knew they had to seize on the opportunity presented by the death of Shannon Evans.

They took that opportunity to get Nicky Bloom into the school so she could enter the Coronation contest.

At first, Jill was displeased the Network was giving the big job to this mystery girl from who knew where. Hadn't Jill earned the privilege of the big job inside Thorndike? Hadn't Jill proved her mettle as an undercover operative?

And in those first weeks of school, when Nicky was lying low, dressing like a total nobody, spending all her time with Ryan Jenson, Jill wondered if the Network knew what it was doing. She was worried if Nicky, as confident and sharp as she was, could really pull off the assignment they had given her.

Now, mere moments after Nicky's arrival at the dance, Jill understood and accepted. Nicky Bloom was amazing.

Jill watched in awe as Nicky strutted across the ballroom with strength and confidence, perfectly oblivious to the stares and the silence. Nicky looked so ridiculously stunning, so completely transformed from the quiet new girl she had played those first weeks at school, that it didn't matter if no one knew her, if she walked alone to the bar. She had an aura about her. Nicky Bloom was pure cool.

And that aura, that cool, allowed the party chatter to resume as if nothing had happened. The confrontation between Nicky and Kim shocked the entire ballroom into silence, but Nicky had brushed it off like it was nothing. She had given everyone else permission to move on with the night, and that's exactly what they were doing. They were moving on because Nicky did, and in that way, Nicky was already inserting herself into their lives as a leader, as the sort of girl who could win Coronation.

Unlike Jill, whose father was a genuine power broker in DC and whose family had many Thorndike graduates in its past, Nicky Bloom was a total fabrication, an alias. Everything about Nicky, from her parents to her history to even her name, was a creation of the Network. The real girl that Jill knew as Nicky Bloom was born as someone else, had lived someone else's life, had somehow involved herself with the Network at an early age and been groomed for espionage of this sort. Nicky Bloom's "parents" were Network agents, also working undercover. Her extended family was a lie, aunts and uncles, grandparents, cousins, and childhood friends scattered throughout the country, all of them ready to play their part when necessary, all of them agents of the Network. Her house, a brand new mansion in Bethesda, was purchased by the Network with money they had moved through various money laundering operations and into the Bloom family

bank account. Her entire life was a fabrication, sprung from the best minds of the resistance, all part of a master plan to turn the tide against the vampires once and for all.

The plan to create Nicky Bloom, to insert her into the Thorndike senior class, to have her wear black to Homecoming, and hopefully, to win the Coronation contest – all of it was aimed at a single end. In order to become immortal, the winner of the Coronation contest had to spend an evening with a vampire. An immensely important vampire named Sergio Alonzo.

Sergio was the reason they were here. Winning Coronation and getting that visit in the night from Sergio was the goal of this operation.

Long ago, the leaders of the Network had identified Sergio Alonzo as the key to everything that had gone so terribly wrong with the world. One of the oldest and most unusual vampires, Sergio was as powerful as he was elusive. Many vampire hunters had dedicated their lives to killing him. None had even come close.

It was Elliott Toffler, Abbot of the Brotherhood of St. Albert, whose brain had hatched the wild scheme in which Jill and Nicky now were players. Break an agent into Thorndike, have her enter the Coronation contest. Throw all the Network's resources behind her. Do whatever it takes to make her win. And then, when the Coronation contest comes to an end and Sergio pays a nighttime visit to the winner, ambush him.

Nicky Bloom's brand new mansion in Bethesda was more than a showpiece home suitable for a new student at Thorndike. It was a house that had been custom built to trap a vampire. The minute Sergio stepped inside, steel bars would fall over the windows and doors, and all the best vampire hunters in the world would emerge at once to kill him.

But all of that only came about if Nicky won, and a winning campaign started tonight. The Homecoming Masquerade would last for two more hours. When it was over, the senior class would leave the mansion in the many limousines that waited for them outside. They would take off their masks and reconvene in more comfortable attire at four separate after-parties, one for each entrant. They would pay more than a thousand dollars each to get into these parties. That money would become the opening balance in each entrant's Coronation account.

Judging by the chatter, Kim's after-party was where most of the class was headed. Kim's father had scored the East Room of the White House, and was charging \$10,000 at the door. Samantha and Mary's parties, in

contrast, would be small affairs at their homes, where family and close friends would gather and show their support, everybody donating whatever they could.

No one knew a thing about Nicky's after-party yet. It was Jill's job to change that. She had started with Annika Fleming and her little band of followers. She had laid the groundwork, telling them the cover story that a secret consortium of wealthy parents was behind Nicky's entrance. That story would make Nicky a more credible candidate. That story played on the hatred almost everyone in the ballroom had for Kim and her family. Even though Jill had sworn the others to secrecy, she knew full well that Annika, Mattie, Jenny, and Jake would spread the story all over the ballroom. She expected that by intermission, the whole class would know that Nicky was the centerpiece of an attempted coup. People would speculate about which families were supporting her in secret. They would start to wonder if this new girl had a legitimate shot at winning the whole thing.

And then they would wonder if they should be supporting her rather than Kim.

"Hey Jill."

It was Mattie, who had broken away from their little huddle and followed Jill to the bar.

"Yes?"

"I know you wanted to quit talking about this, so I'll keep it short," Mattie said. She was lowering her voice now as the two of them walked toward the bar together. "You said Nicky was having an after-party at the Hamilton. Do you know anyone else who's going to be there?"

"I will," said Jill. "And I predict by the end of the night, you will too. In fact, I'm betting that, by the time the masquerade is over, most of the class is going to Nicky's party rather than Kim's. Not only will they get a chance to support the eventual winner, but they'll also be treated to a private concert by Jada Razor."

"Seriously? Jada Razor is going to be at Nicky's after-party?"

Jada Razor, the biggest pop star in the world, held secret sympathies for the resistance. Her sold-out concerts around the globe, where millions of dollars in small bills changed hands every night, were the Network's most effective money laundering operation. When the Network asked her to

interrupt her world tour for a special, private concert dedicated to the cause, she was more than happy to comply.

“That’s right,” said Jill. “Maybe I’ll see you there?”

“Yeah,” said Mattie. “Maybe you will.”

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## 5

“Cabernet, please,” Nicky said. The bartender, a meek little guy with bright blue eyes and rosy cheeks, gave the slightest of nods, a sophisticated, well-rehearsed motion, and retrieved a bottle of '92 Amandi from the rack behind him. Nicky guessed this bartender was fifteen years old. *Fifteen*. Two years younger than the students he was serving tonight. Should have been a sophomore in high school somewhere. Should have been learning to drive, working a first job, playing video games.

Should have had parents who loved him, who looked out for him, who would die before letting him end up here.

The boy had black hair, buzzed short, and wore the same white jacket and black pants as the fifty-some other slaves in the mansion. Nicky watched him pour the wine into a crystal goblet, wondering what was in his mind as he did so. Did some part of him wish he were elsewhere? Was his conscious mind as enslaved as his subconscious?

Did he feel as miserable as he looked?

This was the third slave she had seen tonight. The first was in the driveway, coordinating all the limousine traffic. The second had opened the front door for her. Those two were both middle-aged men, the sorts of slaves an immortal kept around for continuity's sake. The older slaves taught the younger ones what to do, a job that was continuous since younger slaves were constantly being replaced. Those older slaves were the exception. Most of the prisoners in Renata's mansion were like this bartender. Kids. Brought in from the Farm to work until Renata decided they were ripe.

Nicky leaned against the bar and took a sip of the wine. Deep and dry, the wine was an absurd choice of drink for this crowd. Seniors at Thorndike were sure to become wine snobs one day, but on this night, they gulped down the expensive vintages like two-dollar tequila. Sure, these students liked to pretend they recognized “blueberry and tropical notes” or “hints of oak and chocolate”—the sort of claptrap their parents were teaching them to talk about—but it was all for show. The masquerade ball would last only two hours, during which time everyone here had to be sophisticated and

coy. Then everyone would hop in their limo and go to the after-parties, where they would get thoroughly wasted.

Nicky stood alone, her back to the party, her eyes looking down at the bar. As she listened to the chatter all around her, she wondered what sort of perversion allowed these people to party and play while so many suffered. She wondered how they justified it in their minds. The immortals used mind control to trap young people in their mansions, holding them as slaves until they smelled just right, at which point they ate them. All these students just looked away from this madness, choosing not to see it for the evil it was. They chose to ignore the evil because their families were a part of it. The immortals relied on the wealthy and powerful to hold the system together. The families of Thorndike Academy protected, defended, and enabled the immortals in exchange for their piece of the pie.

Nicky waited for the conversation to reach its peak, then she turned away from the bar and re-entered the party. Keeping her ears open for her own name, she heard someone talking about being in Nicky's second period class but never noticing her. Someone else said, "Every time I saw that girl last week she was all dumpy clothes and glasses and shit," which made Nicky smile. She had put together an understated look during those first days at school, but she hardly would have called her clothes "dumpy."

She overheard Jill working a small crowd with her own script. *Nicky Bloom made it all the way to Homecoming in a black dress and Kim Renwick never saw it coming.* It sounded like she was doing well with it. In a way, Jill's job tonight was more difficult than Nicky's. Jill Wentworth was the best hacker in the Network, maybe in the world, but she wasn't a great field operative, even if she fancied herself as one.

Nicky knew this because of the briefing book, a thousand-page document prepared by the Network for Nicky to study. The briefing book began with a history of the immortals and Thorndike, then went on to give descriptions of everyone and everything Nicky might encounter while on assignment. It was a collection of all the Network's intel on every student, every family, every teacher...

The authors of the briefing book were uncredited, but for the most part, Nicky could tell which Network operatives had written which parts. The historical research was the work of Phillip and Helena Fischer, the wealthy benefactors from Colorado who were playing the roles of Nicky's parents in this assignment. The section about the wider connections, the way the

immortals and power players in Washington interacted with the larger world, was the work of Nicky's mentor and trainer, Gia Rossi.

The student descriptions belonged to Jill, who was a master of keeping her ears open, both on campus and on the Internet. At times, these were the most informative parts of the book. At other times, they were downright useless.

A section about Art Tremblay, for instance, was spot on.

*Eldest son of property magnate Merv Tremblay, Art has a chip on his shoulder that undoubtedly comes from being a disappointment to his macho father. He became a gym rat when he hit puberty, but even his big muscles can't hide the truth about him. Art wants everyone to think he is the manly type, but the truth is he is about as macho as a goldfish.*

The section about Ryan Jenson, in contrast, was a mess.

*Listless and without a moral compass, Ryan Jenson is a true product of Washington. He can be kind and approachable, but it's all fraudulent. Ryan has his own agenda and it's only about him.*

Ryan Jenson, the richest member of the senior class, was Nicky's primary target in this assignment. She'd been working on him since the first day of school. In the first minutes of her first meeting with him, when she "accidentally" ran into him in the hallway, Nicky could tell that Jill's description of Ryan was way off. Hardly the "listless product of Washington" Jill had called him, Ryan Jenson was the only student at Thorndike with a true sense of self. He was a kind, decent person, who understood right and wrong. He didn't belong in Washington's upper crust and he knew it. He was trying to find a way out.

When Nicky had pressed Jill for more about Ryan, Jill said, "He's a flirt who likes to use people."

That told Nicky all she needed to know. Jill, who'd had a thing with Ryan during their freshman year, was still hung up on this guy, and her feelings had found their way into the briefing book. They had disrupted Jill's work, and they made Nicky wonder what other parts of the briefing book were inaccurate.

Still, for whatever shortcomings Jill had as an operative, she more than made up for them with her brilliant mind and her courageous spirit. And the things she could do with a computer bordered on the miraculous.

Nicky glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner of the room. Five minutes before nine. People were already lining up for the first dance.

Nicky needed to find a place. She took stock of the entire room once more, trying to place all three of her competitors, the other girls wearing black.

Samantha Kwan was in the far corner, talking to Josh Manson.

Kim and her minions were in the middle of the party, the largest clique in the ballroom.

Mary...well, Mary was just standing where everyone could see her, acting aloof and oblivious.

Was there anyone else? No, Nicky was the only surprise entrant this night. Everything was on schedule. The clock would chime in a few minutes. The dance would begin, and Nicky would get to work on the next part of the plan.

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## 6

On the other side of the ballroom Kim Renwick watched as the new girl stepped away from the bar, a goblet of wine in her hand.

“What the hell is going on tonight?” Kim said.

She was surrounded by groupies who were more than eager to tell her everything she wanted to hear. But to this question, none of them had an answer. Pauline Wabash, Amy Thayer, Rosalyn Smith, and Andrea Peterson, four girls Kim allowed to hang on her like a cloud of dirt, four daughters of families who pledged their loyalty to Kim’s parents many years ago, and not a one of them knew what was going on.

Useless. All of them, useless. The girls, the lawyers, the consultants, the private investigators, the accountants, the stylists, the designers, the models, hell, even the student interns. More than a decade of planning to get Kim into the ballroom as one of three girls wearing black. Useless!

Not four girls wearing black. Kim was to be one of three, dammit. Kim, the winner. Mary, the girl who only wanted to come in second. Samantha, the girl so desperate for attention she’d enter the contest knowing she would probably die in the end.

And then *she* showed up. Nicky Bloom. The name rang in Kim’s ears and bounced off her tongue. She whispered it to herself over and over again, listening to the words clatter like a rumbling train. *Nicky Bloom Nicky Bloom Nicky Bloom Nicky Bloom Nicky Bloom*. What in God’s name was Nicky Bloom doing? Who just walks into the Homecoming ball at Thorndike Academy, having been at school barely two weeks, knowing no one at all, and wears a black dress?

“Who does that?” Kim said. “Who does she think she is? Who does she know?”

“She doesn’t know anybody,” said Pauline. “Her family just moved to DC this summer.”

“She knows someone,” said Kim. “It’s a conspiracy. A goddamned conspiracy.”

“What a stupid bitch,” said Andrea.

The other girls giggled but Kim remained solemn. It would be a comfort to think that Nicky Bloom was some crazy renegade who didn't know what she was doing, but that wasn't the case. Kim could tell from that little confrontation in the center of the ballroom. Nicky had looked Kim in the eyes without any fear and said Fuck You. It was the way she said it—there was no bluff in her voice at all. She was inviting Kim to retaliate.

Nobody did that to Kim. Nobody did that to any of the Renwicks, which was precisely why Kim had lost her temper, making a fool of herself in the process.

Nicky Bloom totally played her. She caught Kim by surprise and made her look weak in front of everyone. Then she walked away, knowing full well there was nothing Kim could do about it.

And the way she walked. She moved with the sort of regal confidence that the mothers of every girl at this party tried to teach their daughters. It was something you either had or you didn't. You can train a girl to glide across the floor with a book on her head, but you can't train her to move the way Nicky Bloom did. That girl walked like a winner, and people noticed.

Nicky was wearing a vintage Francesco dress, the sort that was all over the Paris runway in the late sixties. It was the kind of look Kim wanted for herself. Vintage. Classy.

The god-damned stylists had told her not to do it.

*"You're not a throwback, Honey,"* her stylist had said. *"You're cutting edge."*

And while it was undeniable that Kim looked outstanding in her ultra-modern see-through print, she couldn't help but wonder if the immortals would prefer the more classic style of Nicky's outfit. Especially Sergio. Tonight was the only chance any of them got to be in front of Sergio. If anyone at the party sensed that Sergio had taken a liking to Nicky rather than Kim....forget it.

The more Kim looked at her, the angrier she became. Nicky had a weathered look about her that matched her style. Freckles on her arms, a cream-colored sheen to her legs, a hardness to her body.

Whereas Kim was the product of a daily regimen at the gym, Nicky looked more like a girl who liked to play outdoors. She looked rugged. She looked real.

No, Nicky Bloom wasn't a stupid bitch at all. She was just as prepared for this contest as Kim. She'd been preparing for it for years, in secret. She

was a ringer brought in specifically to ruin Kim's night and her presence had changed everything.

"This new girl is here to defeat me," Kim said. "Someone powerful is behind this. Someone who wants to take me down. But who?"

"Yeah, who?" Andrea echoed.

*Who?* was a silly question, practically rhetorical. Everybody in Washington wanted to take down the Renwicks. It came with the territory. They were the top of the pyramid, at least among the humans. That position made them a target, but it was nothing the family couldn't handle. On the contrary, the reason the Renwicks were on top was because everyone knew not to mess with them.

Kim's parents began scouting out potential competitors fifteen years ago, when Kim and the other girls now standing in this ballroom attended the high-end preschools of the world. By the time Kim was in fifth grade, her parents had the names of twenty girls on a list. The prettiest, wealthiest little girls in the world, girls who might land a spot at Thorndike and think they were worthy of wearing black to Homecoming. They were girls who fit the profile. The Renwicks went down the list, one by one, and made sure anyone who had a real shot at beating Kim chose not to enter. They arranged ambassadorships, cabinet posts, and golden parachutes for the parents who agreed. For those who didn't, they arranged for a knock on their door from the IRS, or a few pictures of naked children on their hard drive.

"Word is there's something going on with Nicky and Ryan," said Amy.

"Ryan Jenson?" said Kim.

Amy nodded.

"How come I didn't know this?" said Kim.

"Because until just now Nicky was the new girl who wore cotton slacks and denim shirts and nobody cared," said Amy.

"And Ryan ceased being somebody a long time ago," Pauline added.

*Of course.* Of course Ryan Jenson was involved. If anyone at the school had an axe to grind with Kim it was Ryan. Fortunately, he was a problem easily resolved. Kim had been holding the goods over Ryan's head since freshman year. She'd have to make sure she got a dance with Ryan tonight so they could have a little chat.

"What time is it?" Kim said, having neither a watch nor a cell phone to check. Dangling gold earrings and a matching pendant were the only

accessories her stylist had allowed.

Rosalyn's outfit included a watch precisely so she could answer this question for Kim. "Eight fifty eight," she said. "Dancing begins in two minutes," she added, as if any of them needed a reminder of the night's agenda.

Kim's mind was spinning now. Nicky Bloom, Ryan Jenson, the dance, the year ahead – she would have her dad get to work on Nicky's whole family the minute the dance was over, but even that wasn't soon enough. Nicky Bloom was already here. The Homecoming Masquerade had started. Sergio would come out later to dance with the girls wearing black. Somehow, she needed to ensure that Sergio's first impression of Nicky Bloom was a poor one.

"Rosalyn, you're done drinking for awhile," Kim said. "Your next glass of wine won't be until ten o'clock."

"How come?" Rosalyn asked, or rather, whined.

"I'll explain later," Kim said, now looking around the room at all the guys. The scheme brewing in her mind required help from a boy. It was too obvious a ploy to have Rosalyn act alone. Somehow, the incident she now imagined needed to look like it was Nicky's fault.

Who among the guys would be most eager to help?

Her eyes stopped at Art Tremblay, the former pipsqueak who had turned into quite the little he-man. Art Tremblay, with his protein shakes and three-a-day workouts....the loser had always been desperate to break into the most popular tier at school. He would love the opportunity to do Kim a favor.

"We don't want to act too soon, but we'll need to get moving before ten thirty to make sure we nail her before Sergio comes out," Kim said.

"What are we going to do?" Rosalyn asked.

"We're going to watch as Nicky Bloom accidentally spills a glass of wine all over her vintage Francesco dress."



The clock struck nine and the musicians on the stage raised their bows. A slow-moving, already drunken muddle of students began to form itself into two lines, one for guys and one for girls. Nicky took her place on the far end of the line, finding a table against the wall on which to set her wine goblet. When everyone was in place, the orchestra began the first notes of a Beethoven minuet. The two lines approached one another to break into couples and the formal dance began.

As was the case with everything at Thorndike, ritual and tradition dictated all facets of Homecoming. The dance always opened with a Beethoven Minuet. On this night, it was from his String Trio in E flat. For the first two dances, everyone was on the floor. It wasn't until the third dance that people were allowed to sit out. When they did sit out, they were expected to congregate at the bar and give generously to the tip jar as they drank.

Polite conversation with one's partner was allowed, but Nicky's first dance partner, a tall, burly fellow named Vince Weir, had nothing to say on their first tour of the ballroom. Nicky took advantage of his silence to get a good look at the place. She and Jill were the first Network operatives to get inside Renata's mansion. Although a raid on the mansion was not planned anytime in the immediate future, the higher-ups in the Network would want a report on the place to keep on file. Nicky took careful mental notes of what she saw.

The ballroom, like the outside of the mansion, had a Greco-Roman flair to it. Marble pillars on the edges matched the enormous columns of the front entrance. Large mahogany doors lined the walls, leading to who knew where. Maybe the mansion beyond those doors was a more livable space of human-sized proportions. Maybe there was an alternate entrance that allowed Renata to skip this massive ballroom every time she came home.

Or maybe there wasn't. Maybe Renata liked to come home every morning to visual proof that she was among the wealthiest people on earth. There certainly was enough opulence on display to remind her. The walls, the floor, the molding, the dual staircase in the back— all were made of

shiny white marble. Nooks with life-sized statues filled the walls, their edges lined with gold. High on the walls sat a collection of paintings easily worth millions, and these weren't even the most prized pieces in the collection. Somewhere behind one of those mahogany doors was a private art gallery, with Picassos, Rembrandts, Van Goghs and others, the greatest works of art in all human history, stolen away from humanity to be viewed only by those Renata deemed worthy to see them.

Nicky's dance partner mumbled something.

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that," Nicky said.

"I said, wow, right out of the gate I get a girl wearing black."

Nicky smiled at him.

"Nicky, right?" he said.

She nodded. Pretending to know nothing about him, she asked for his name.

"Vince," he said.

*Vince Weir, only child of a Vegas real estate tycoon with the same name. The words from the briefing book rang in Nicky's mind. She imagined them spoken in Jill's quiet voice. Participated in junior football, basketball, and wrestling leagues growing up, now a member of Thorndike's boxing club. Has a 'friends with benefits' sort of understanding with Mattie Dupree, even though she'd like something more.*

It was that last part that was of the most interest to Nicky. According to Jill, Mattie was desperate for Vince to treat her like a real girlfriend, rather than a makeout partner, and was known to follow Vince around like a little puppy. If they could get Vince to attend Nicky's after-party, then Mattie would come along as well.

"It's nice to meet you, Vince," Nicky said. "Tell me something about yourself."

"Tell you something? Like what?"

"Whatever comes to mind."

"I'm in the boxing club," he said, or rather, boasted.

Nicky gave his bicep a friendly squeeze. "I'm not surprised," she said.

Despite his enormous stature, Vince was graceful on his feet, and when they changed direction and spun at the end of a stanza, Nicky sensed him suck in his stomach and flex his chest muscles.

"I didn't expect you to be wearing black tonight," Vince said.

"I didn't want anyone to expect it," said Nicky.

“You’re pretty bold for someone who squeezed into a spot left behind by a dead girl.”

There was a phony bravado in Vince’s voice. Behind his mask, Nicky saw his eyes darting around, as if scared to look at her face.

“Some things are just meant to be,” Nicky said. “I was meant to be here tonight, wearing black. Maybe you were meant to dance with me.”

“Yeah, maybe,” said Vince. “Did you know anything about your competitors before you just showed up in black? Do you know how connected Kim’s father is?”

“I know how much everyone in town hates him, just like we all hate his daughter.”

Vince raised his eyebrows.

“You know it’s true,” Nicky said. “Kim has everyone so scared that they won’t say a mean word about her, but I know you hate her. I know you’d love to see someone else win. That’s why I entered.”

“But none of us even know who you are. What do your parents do?”

“My dad’s good at investing,” Nicky said, following her script. “And I’m tired of talking about myself. I want to hear more about your boxing club.”

“Don’t you know about the boxing club?” Vince asked, in the tone of voice one might use when speaking with a child. This was a guy who grew up being a bully and didn’t know how to interact with people any other way.

“I know a few things,” Nicky said, “but I want to hear an actual boxer tell me all about it.”

Not one to let an invitation to brag go to waste, Vince spent the remainder of the dance telling Nicky about the history of the boxing club at Thorndike, how it had become a way for the athletes at the school to participate in Coronation through their “Brawl in the Fall” fundraiser, how Vince had earned the right to be one of the fighters in the brawl.

Nicky listened intently to every word, all the while pulling herself closer to Vince, acting the part of the girl infatuated with the jock.

“If you were smart, you’d bet on me at Brawl in the Fall,” he added. “A lot of people are picking Brian to win, just because he’s big. But I’ll tell you something. Brian’s slow and kind of soft. I expect to win that event.”

The Network already had a plan for that event, and it didn’t involve Vince at all. But Vince didn’t need to know that.

“Maybe I already know this about you, and I expect you to win too,” Nicky said, quietly. He was too tall for her to whisper in his ear, so she pulled in close and allowed her breath to tickle his neck. “Maybe I positioned myself in line so I would have the first dance with you. Maybe I thought you were someone I should get to know.”

As they continued the dance, Nicky pressed her body right up to Vince’s. She allowed her right hand to roam up and down his back, climbing as high as his neck where her fingers toyed with his hair. When the music began to slow, Nicky slid her hand all the way down Vince’s back. On the final note, she pressed her body right up against his, and gave his butt a friendly squeeze.

The music stopped. Vince had a goofy grin on his face.

“Aren’t you supposed to bow at me?” Nicky said.

“Oh...yeah,” said Vince.

Totally flustered, he leaned forward in a clumsy, awkward motion.

Nicky knew why he was having trouble with a simple bow. She had felt it when they squeezed close together.

And she checked the next item off her to-do list. Vince Weir was now officially curious about Nicky Bloom.

The musicians went straight into the Viennese Waltz and Nicky turned to her new partner, a broad-chested boy with thick brown hair and dark, penetrating eyes. With those eyes, he looked at Nicky like a connoisseur checking out a work of art. The edges of his mask hid under the curtain of his hair, as if lost in the shadows, and this effect only heightened the beauty of his eyes.

“Hello, Ryan,” she said.

“Hello, Nicky. Shall we dance?”

## 8

Jill's first dance was with Terry Reese who, in the larger scheme of things, wasn't that important.

The Network had classified the students of Thorndike's senior class by the estimated wealth of their families. In that classification, Terry Reese ended up in the bottom tier, the families whose net worth was measured in ten million dollar increments. Terry's father, an investment banker, was worth twenty million at the most, making him wealthy enough to hang with the uber-rich, but below the poverty line at Thorndike.

Sitting in that bottom tier with Terry were about twenty other non-players, people who got the invite to Thorndike because their families were legacy graduates, or because the admissions committee saw potential in the kids even if the parents weren't terribly rich.

The next tier up was the hundred millionaires, where the children of politicians and corporate bigwigs resided. This tier included all the people who served as Kim Renwick's lackeys, like Pauline Wabash, Rosalyn Smith, Andrea Peterson, and Brian Kingsbury. It also included most of the people the Network had identified as possible targets for Jill and Nicky's subterfuge. Vince Weir, Mattie Dupree, Jenny Young, Lonnie Best, Sam Featherstone, and most importantly, Annika Fleming—these were people whose net worth was large enough to be relevant, but not so large that the Renwicks were all over them.

The tier above them belonged to the billionaires. This was a smaller tier, and the one in which Jill's family resided. Thorndike ensured that no child of a billionaire was left behind, but even still, there were only so many billionaires in the world, and this tier was always an exclusive club. Occupying this space with Jill were Mary Torrance, Montgomery Oppenheimer, Veronica Gregg, and Richard Nguyen. In this tier, you were either committed to a Coronation candidate or you were one. Veronica and Richard were supporters of Kim. Mary had her own candidacy. Montgomery came from a family that owed the Renwicks a favor.

And then there was Jill.

Kim Renwick had taken Jill's support as a given until tonight. Jill's father had lunch with Galen Renwick from time to time, and Jill's family was the sort that didn't make waves. The little lie Jill had told her friends about her parents being part of a consortium that supported Nicky Bloom was certain to cause major waves in DC by tomorrow.

*If you blab, I'll deny everything I've just told you.*

That line from Jill's story about the consortium was crucial, and served as fair warning to her friends. Even as she admonished them all not to say a word, she was counting on at least a couple of them spilling their guts before the night was over. There was simply too much excitement and too much wine for people like Mattie Dupree and Jenny Young to keep quiet.

And by tomorrow, when all of Washington was abuzz about Nicky Bloom and the "secret consortium" behind her entry, a consortium whose only known members were the Wentworths, Jill would have to deal with the fallout. She'd have to deny she ever said anything about a secret consortium, even as she insisted with Annika and the rest that the consortium was real. She'd have to tell her father that she never said a word, that someone was playing with them. She might even have to speak with the Renwicks.

It was about to get very interesting.

She and Terry made the turn on the far wall as they rounded the dance floor. She was glad that Terry didn't want to talk. She had a lot to work through in her mind. Just thinking about the can of worms she had opened was making her shiver, and she had to remind herself that this was what she wanted. Adventure, intrigue, and the knowledge that she was fighting the good fight.

When Jill enrolled at Thorndike as a new freshman, she knew that something wasn't right with the world, and that her parents might be a part of it, but she never imagined that two short years later she would be an agent of the Network, actively working to overthrow the established order.

The Wentworth family fortune started in the 19th century in the tobacco business, and then exploded in the 20th when Jill's great, great grandfather bought a ranch in Western Virginia that was dripping in oil.

By the time Jill's father was of age to receive his inheritance, the fortune was large enough that no one in the family had to work. But Jill's father, Walter, worked anyway. He started a software company, and asked his new wife to be the first employee.

His new wife, Carolyn, was only nineteen when they met and got married, twenty when she started writing computer code for her husband's company, and twenty-one when she became pregnant with Jill.

The Wentworth family company was called Black Dart Enterprises. It provided "classified software and security solutions." It sold a single product: a software suite called *Clean Street*. It had a single customer: the United States government. It made Walter Wentworth a billionaire, and it bought Walter Wentworth a close friendship with Daciana Samarin, the most powerful immortal on earth.

Rich, well-mannered, talented, useful: this was how the immortals viewed the Wentworths. Carolyn Wentworth was widely viewed as the most talented programmer in the world, and her *Clean Street* software allowed the immortals to stay ahead of their enemies. *Clean Street* had become ubiquitous, its code freely flowing throughout the entire digital realm. The software read every word that was written on the Internet. It listened to every phone call. It was embedded in satellite signals, bank transactions, text messages—it was in the full-body scanners at the airport and the x-ray machines at customs. It connected together all the many surveillance devices the government put in offices and homes, it made sense of millions of hours of conversation, and reported it all to the government. *Clean Street* identified enemies of the state so they could be found and removed. It was Walter's favorite child, and Carolyn's obsession.

Their daughter Jill was just an afterthought.

Her mother obsessed with work, her father obsessed with being fabulous, Jill grew up not really knowing either of her parents. Not that she didn't try, especially with her mother. When she was little, Jill sat in the second story office of their mansion in Brandywine, Virginia while her mother worked. She wasn't allowed to talk, but she stayed in the room anyway, listening to her mother's fingers clatter on the keyboard. She drew pictures while her mother typed. She looked out the window while her mother thought.

An old growth forest surrounded the Wentworth family mansion. From inside her mother's office, little Jill used to gaze into that forest, looking for activity, taking particular interest in a family of hawks that lived in a nearby tree.

On some afternoons, the hawks would glide above and around the house for hours, waiting for prey to show up on the ground below and swooping

to the earth in breathtaking displays of strength and speed. Jill imagined that the rabbits and field mice in the surrounding forest were actually little gremlins trying to attack the Wentworth mansion, and the hawks were their only protection. She came to think of the hawks as her pets, even though she never stood within ten feet of one.

Noticing that Jill had lots to say about the birds in the forest, the nanny bought Jill a pair of binoculars and a field guide, tools that allowed Jill to identify the majestic birds as Northern Harriers, also known as Marsh Hawks.

With binoculars and field guide in hand, Jill spent spring and summer outdoors, tracking those hawks. She went on daily expeditions to find them. She learned to distinguish the males, whose feathers were white on the underside, from the females, who were totally brown. She gave names to every hawk she saw, and learned the distinct markings and behavior of each one. She even found a nest with five eggs under one of the bushes that served to mark the southern edge of the Wentworth property.

When Jill was nine, her father hosted the software buyers from the Pentagon at the house for a weekend retreat of sorts. One of the men wore a hairpiece that was obvious even to Jill's inexperienced eye. At the end of the weekend, Jill's father took his guests for a walk in the woods and one of the hawks decided it wanted the man's hairpiece. Maybe it thought the hairpiece was a rodent, or it would go nice in the nest. Whatever the reason, the hawk swooped low, took the hairpiece away, and left a gash on the man's scalp.

The following day, Jill's dad hired a specialist to come and drive all the hawks away and place special netting on every tree to ensure they never returned.

Jill never forgave her dad for removing the hawks, but she did move on. Her forest friends removed, Jill's fascination with nature eventually gave way to a genetically inevitable fascination with computers. Her mother had written *Clean Street*, after all.

Strangely, it was at age 10, itself a combination of one and zero, that Jill's brain seemed to open up to a natural understanding of binary logic. Nested command structures, object-oriented analysis, compilation, execution – Jill began to see the world as inputs, algorithms, and outputs. At age eleven, she coded a video game from scratch. At age twelve, she



hacked into her school's mainframe, and fiddled with her grades and attendance records.

When she was fourteen, and a freshman at Thorndike, Jill briefly stepped away from the keyboard to indulge an interest in Ryan Jenson, but that didn't go very well, and she went back to her computer.

At age fifteen Jill found herself disillusioned, lonely, and bored, so she wrote a program that intercepted the cell phone data of her classmates, streaming their phone calls and text messages onto the computer screen in her bedroom. For one dreary, depressing night, she eavesdropped on all the personal conversations of her classmates. She didn't like what she saw. Backstabbing, lying, nastiness, a total lack of authenticity – her peers at Thorndike reminded Jill of her father, and sent her looking for something different. Something that wasn't totally fake. Careful to hide her virtual tracks, Jill began wandering the dark alleys of the Internet, making contact with people who gave her passwords to the encrypted message boards and chat rooms where forbidden topics were discussed.

She found herself reading posts from people who named themselves *Bloodsucker Nightmare* and *VanHelsingXX*, people who spoke openly about their hatred for the immortals, and their longing for a revolution. At first, the posts shocked her, sometimes to the point of turning off the computer and swearing she would never go back to those forbidden sites again.

But she couldn't stay away. It was the truth of it all, the war between good and evil that was playing out in the world, and the fact that Jill and her family were on the wrong side – it made her come back. When she went to the chat rooms, Jill was doing right by the world, atoning for the sin of being a Wentworth, if only for a few minutes. She knew she was risking her life every time she logged on, but was confident in her own ability to remain hidden from the many spiders and bots looking for troublemakers like her.

Jill observed as people traded information on suspected locations of the farms where slaves were grown, and read the desperate pleas for help from people whose loved ones were stolen away in the night. She read about the Network, the secret organization whose goal was to overthrow the immortals, and fantasized about being a part of it. She adopted her own handle in this secret world, coming to be known as *Marsh Hawk*.

*Marsh Hawk* quickly earned a reputation as someone in the know. Her stolen data stream at Thorndike was useful for getting more than just school

gossip. Thorndike students were the children of politicians, lobbyists, and corporate titans. Paying close attention and reading between the lines, Jill used the stolen text messages and phone calls to infer whose stock was rising on Capitol Hill and whose was falling, who was slipping the goods to which politicians and who was about to get squashed. The virtual gossip at Thorndike, so boring and disheartening to Jill at first, turned out to be more informative than any news service or web site. She came to understand the importance of information, of “intel” as they called it in the chat rooms, and Jill was happy to have something to contribute to the cause, however small.

While she fantasized about being one of those Network agents who went undercover to get close to the immortals, who stormed the mansions to take on the vampires and free the slaves, Jill never actually imagined herself being anything more than a snoop at her school. All that changed the winter of Jill’s junior year, when her mom was late on the “deliverables” for version 2.0 of *Clean Street*. Walter had promised a new, improved version of the software to the immortals, but Jill’s mom was having trouble pulling it together. As the deadline neared, Walter became increasingly belligerent toward his wife. Carolyn took to eating and sleeping at her desk, working eighteen to twenty hours a day. Walter started staying home from the office, pacing the rosewood floors of the living room all day, drinking wine straight from the bottle.

On a Sunday night in December, the deadline for *Clean Street 2.0* only twenty-four hours away, Jill’s father burst into her bedroom in the middle of the night, reeking of alcohol, a crazed look in her eyes.

“You have to help her,” he said. “You’re good with computers. You could do it.”

Jill sat up.

“I don’t know how to help her, Dad,” she said. “She’s been working on that software for years. It would take me all night just to read the code.”

“Jill, we are going to miss our deadline and the shit is going to hit the fan!” Walter shouted. “Do you know how many hotshot young startups want this contract? Do you know how quick the immortals would cast us aside if they thought there was someone better out there than your mother? Do you know what will happen to us when that day comes? The minute your mother and I stop being useful to Daciana, we become a problem for her because we know too much. We cannot miss this deadline.”

“Well you should have thought about that before you got us all into this mess,” Jill said. “Mom’s been working by herself for all these years. You should have hired some help for her while there was still time.”

“We can’t hire help, Jill. The immortals don’t want a bunch of people knowing how Clean Street works. Every person who has access to the source code is a person who can help the rebels beat it. That’s why we got the contract in the first place. One person. Your mother. One loyal, dedicated, talented person, who gets it right every time. That’s who your mother is. They must not know that she is struggling. We have to give Daciana a working piece of software by Tuesday, and it has to look like your mother did it alone.”

Jill sat for a moment, pondering those words.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

She found her mother crashed out on the couch in front of her computer, snoring. The poor woman had been pushed farther than her body could go.

On the screen was *Clean Street 2.0*, in all its glory. Jill sat down, her father’s voice ringing in her ears. *Every person who has access to the source code is a person who can help the rebels beat it.*

Looking at the code, Jill felt a kinship to her mother for the first time ever. This woman, who had been so distant from Jill for so long, who had left her daughter to be raised by hired help, who ignored that little girl who used to sit in her office, gazing at the hawks outside—this woman was an amazing programmer. Reading the lines of code, watching how the command structure came together, Jill felt like she wasn’t looking at a piece of software, but at a work of art.

All night long Jill looked at the code. She printed it out and made notes on the paper. She used her mother’s white board to draw diagrams of what the routines were trying to accomplish. And as she came to understand the nature of the problem, the reason why version 2.0 wasn’t finished, she felt like she and her mother were communicating. She felt like her mother had come to her for advice, and she was able to offer it.

The problem was with the way the software taught itself to learn and grow. Jill’s mother had written routines in the program that helped it understand when hackers were trying to beat it, and taught it to learn and grow on its own based on what the hackers were trying to do. Hackers were human, and *Clean Street* was not, but Carolyn Wentworth had written the software to learn the way a human does, and it simply wasn’t able.

It turned out to be an easy fix. Jill simplified the learning algorithms, so rather than trying to comprehend what humans were up to, the software simply observed and reacted, the success or failure of those reactions informing the software's next steps, making it learn. By sunrise, Jill had completed *Clean Street 2.0*.

But in the completed version, hidden deep inside the code, was a loophole. It was a loophole Jill put there to spite her father, who had taken Carolyn Wentworth's miraculous mind and aimed it at the most hideous outcome imaginable. Here was a woman whose brilliance could be changing the world for the better. Instead, because of Walter, Carolyn's genius belonged to the immortals.

The loophole was named The Marsh Hawk Protocol. Whenever *Clean Street 2.0* encountered a certain encryption signature, the same signature Jill had been using all this time to hide her own tracks on the Internet, the loophole kicked in. The loophole would allow Jill, and anyone else who knew the encryption, to roam free in the digital universe, with *Clean Street* purposely looking the other way. It would allow the Network to hide from the software specifically designed to find them.

Jill went to the couch and kissed her sleeping mother on the cheek.

"It's done, Mom," she said. "Your program works now."

Then she went to the laptop in her bedroom, got into the chatroom, and asked if anyone there could point her to an operative from the Network.

Six months later she was sitting in the safe house with Gia Rossi and Nicky Bloom. Shannon's tragic death in a boating accident had opened a spot in the school, and Jill's ability to break into the admissions database had given the Network an in. With Jill's help, the Network created a fictional teenager who was exactly what Thorndike was looking for. They gave this teenager so many advantages over her peers she was sure to get the invite for the open spot.

"And once you're in," Jill said to Nicky, "we'll have to work quickly to get people excited about you."

"Nicky's goal will be to get into the popular cliques right away," said Gia.

"No," said Jill. "That's exactly what we don't want her to do. Nicky must be bland to the point of invisible until the night of Homecoming. Anything more might put her on the radar of the Renwicks, and if they start

attacking her before Homecoming they'll ruin everything. I will lay the groundwork for Nicky. I am working on Annika Fleming as we speak."

"Annika Fleming?" Gia asked with skepticism. "The governor's daughter?"

"Yes, the governor of Oklahoma is her father, and she isn't one of the richest kids in school," said Jill. "But she will be the one to bring a big crowd to the after party. With Annika, if you get her, you get a bunch of other people too. Mattie, Jenny, Jake, Vince – probably ten more – Annika has this whole crew of people who follow her wherever she goes, and I don't think she likes Kim Renwick at all."

"That all sounds great, Jill," said Nicky. "But there must be something I can do before Homecoming."

"There is," said Jill. "We need a big money donor, someone with potential to swing the whole contest. Even with me, Annika, and her group, you won't be able to beat Kim if she has all the wealthiest families. We need to hook a big fish. And I know just the one to approach. I'd do it myself, but he and I have a history. It would be better if he was talking to you."

*A history. He and I have a history. Get off it, Jill. What you and Ryan had was hardly enough to call a history.*

In the wealth classification of the Thorndike senior class, there was one more tier even above billionaires like Jill. Two families, and two families only, occupied this tier. These families were more than normal billionaires. They were billionaires whose wealth was so astronomical they had the potential to swing the entire Coronation contest by themselves. In a world of the super rich, these were the top 1 per cent.

One of these rich upon rich kids was Art Tremblay, who was so firmly in the Renwick camp the Network hadn't even considered him. Even now, as the Viennese Waltz was nearing its finale, Art was glaring at Nicky. He had been watching her the entire dance, and he had a shifty, nervous look in his eyes.

The other member of the top tier was Ryan Jenson, the beautiful loner of the senior class, the one and only boy with whom Jill had been more than friends. She and Ryan never talked anymore, but she knew enough from their time together to know how he would respond when Nicky arrived in a black dress. Ryan had no love at all for Kim Renwick.

If Nicky was to have any chance of winning, she needed Ryan's support.

Now, as the Viennese Waltz hit its final bars, and it was time for a partner change, Jill watched as Nicky stepped right into the perfect spot. Ryan had no choice but to dance with her.

Jill shook her head, amazed at how good Nicky was.

“Are you rejecting me?”

“What’s that?” Jill said.

She was standing in front of Brian Kingsbury, a six-foot behemoth, who apparently wanted to be her next dance partner.

“You were shaking your head,” Brian said.

“Oh...no. Sorry. Of course I want to dance with you. I was just thinking about something.”

“Something interesting?” Brian asked.

Jill stepped forward and let Brian take her hand.

“I was thinking about Kim,” Jill said, “and how happy I am that she’s not such a sure thing anymore.”

## 9

“Are you serious?” Brian asked. “You really think this new girl has a chance?”

Brian Kingsbury was the biggest guy in school, and the best athlete. He was a black belt in karate and taekwondo. He studied mat wrestling with an Olympic gold medalist. In the summers, he went to Thailand to train with a kickboxing guru. As such, Brian was the favorite to win at the Brawl in the Fall fundraiser in two weeks.

“I think Nicky Bloom has more than a chance. I think she’s going to win,” said Jill. “Everyone’s talking about her. You should think about getting to know her. If you win the brawl, you’ll have to donate your prize money to one of the girls wearing black.”

“Not if I win,” he said.

“Oh, silly me,” Jill said with a giggle. “*When* you win. Of course you’re going to win.”

Brian didn’t smile or otherwise acknowledge Jill’s vote of confidence. To him, her prediction wasn’t a compliment, just a statement of truth.

He was a cocky bastard.

“Everyone keeps asking me about the prize money,” Brian said. “And I tell them all the same thing. Just wait and see. I’m not in anyone’s pocket. I’ll give the money to whichever girl has the most to offer me.”

Clearly, Brian loved all the attention he got as favorite to win the brawl. He really wanted to believe that he was a free agent, that once he had the prize money in his pocket, he would contribute it to the campaign of whatever girl was best to him. He didn’t like to think of himself as being just another lackey for Kim Renwick.

But he was. The Network knew it, Kim knew it, and most of the school knew it. Brian’s mother was a White House attorney who was as corrupt as anyone in town. She had sold her son’s pending victory to the Renwicks many years ago. The prize money for Brawl in the Fall would be seven figures large, and it might as well be in Kim’s ledger already.

Such a shame too. Jill had watched the boys play rugby on the north lawn after school last spring, and saw firsthand what a beast Brian was. He

was bigger, stronger, and more agile than any of the other boys, including Nicky's pick to win the brawl, a quiet kid from New Hampshire named Marshall Beaumont.

"People are infatuated with Brian's size," Nicky had said to Jill in a meeting over the summer. "But size and strength only get you so far. Brian doesn't have any fire in his eyes. He's been groomed since birth to win the brawl, and that's exactly the problem. Fancy weight rooms and afterschool wrestling practice do not make a fighter. All it will take is one good punch to the gut, one bit of real pain, and Brian will go timid."

Nicky had put Marshall Beaumont on her list of targets tonight, which was wasted effort as far as Jill was concerned. Fortunately, Nicky wasn't dancing with Marshall right now. She was dancing with Ryan, and looked to be having a great time.

Despite the borderline dreary getup Nicky had put together for herself those first two weeks of school, she had managed to strike up a relationship with Ryan right away, as was the plan. Those weeks were harder for Jill than she thought they would be. She didn't enjoy watching from afar as Nicky flirted with her ex. She didn't like hearing the briefing report about Nicky's successful lunch dates with Ryan. And even though Jill knew that Nicky was only doing her job (doing it well, in fact) she couldn't help but feel a little ill whenever she saw them together.

Jill and Ryan were together for thirty-eight days during freshman year. They were the thirty-eight craziest, most blissful days of her life. Then Ryan dumped her for no good reason and had given her the cold shoulder ever since.

Ryan said they had to break up because he had some personal things to work out and he was sorry. When Jill pressed him on this, she got nothing. Whatever it was he had to work out was a total mystery, which of course drove Jill batty wanting to know.

And that's when things got ugly. Her attempts to get him to talk just made him more distant. He started pissing her off. The last time Jill spoke with Ryan was in the freshman parking lot at school. That conversation had ended with Jill calling Ryan an asshole and walking away.

Jill hadn't had a boyfriend since. Ryan too became a total loner, which was odd, considering that he was the best-looking guy in the class. Jill had lost track of the number of girls who tried to make a play for him. His long wavy hair, his deep, dark eyes, his strong chin, broad chest, and killer smile



– when you combined this with his mysterious and brooding manner, Ryan was too good to resist.

But he always turned them away, and over time, they all came to hate Ryan. *Too-good-for-us Jenson* was what they called him. *Be glad that asshole dumped you*, is what they said to Jill. *What a jerk*.

It was all so strange, and despite her best efforts to move on, Jill spent most of freshman year wondering what happened, and most of sophomore year dealing with the anger that came from the fact that she'd never know.

Was it another girl? Probably not. Despite months of online and real life stalking, Jill had seen no evidence that Ryan was with another girl. Was it something Jill had said or done? Maybe. If Ryan would just talk to her, she might have known. Was he gay? He did say he had some personal stuff to work out. If he was gay that would be a comfort to Jill, to know it was nothing to do with her. She kind of wished this was the answer.

But she knew it wasn't. The way she and Ryan were with each other during those thirty-eight days – he most certainly was not gay.

And if there was any doubt left at all as to Ryan's sexuality, his response to Nicky's advances these first two weeks of school had squashed it.

Not that Jill cared about any of that now. She and Ryan were ancient, irrelevant history, so old it was practically from a former life. Hell, she should be thanking Ryan. It was his betrayal, the frozen tone of his voice when she tried to get him to talk to her, the complete lack of personal decency and simple human kindness on his part that convinced Jill the world was broken and needed to be changed. Already, Jill had been feeling like there was no one at Thorndike who understood her. When Ryan pushed her away, he sent her right out of polite DC society and into the Network.

Now Ryan was dancing with Nicky, and they were laughing like best buddies. What an ass. For years, a part of Jill thought, or maybe hoped, that the real Ryan was hiding underneath that mysterious outer shell, that he would come back around again and open up to her one day, and she could help him sort out whatever was troubling him.

But the way he took to Nicky was proof that he had no need for Jill. Sweet, seductive Nicky Bloom, who could just ooze sexy whenever she wanted, walked right up to Ryan on the first day of school and made him smile. Barely a week went by and they were little besties, going to lunch together every day, and now giggling as they danced around the ballroom at Homecoming.

Pathetic. Ryan Jenson was totally pathetic, and Jill was glad for the opportunity to play him. Ryan would give enormous sums of his family's money to Nicky, she would win Coronation, the Network would kill Sergio, and Jill and Nicky would disappear in the night. Good riddance to Ryan Jenson and everybody else at Thorndike Academy. Jill couldn't wait.

There was, however, some worry in the Network about how Ryan would react upon Nicky's surprise entrance in a black dress. Would he still be interested in Nicky even after she entered herself in the Coronation contest?

Watching the two of them dance, their foreheads together, their beautiful white teeth gleaming in the soft light of the ballroom, Jill could answer that question.

Nicky looked up for just a second and caught Jill staring. Jill turned her gaze back to her own dance partner.

"Are you even listening to me?" said Brian.

"Yes," said Jill, a total lie. Brian had been talking for awhile now, and Jill hadn't heard a word of what he had said.

"Everyone's all high on the new girl tonight, as if she even had a chance," Brian said. "Seriously, how does that girl think she can possibly raise enough money to come out of this alive? Is she even having an after-party?"

*Maybe not*, Jill thought. Nicky might be over there with Ryan, making him laugh, continuing her perfect night, but it all was for naught if Jill didn't figure out how to get this after-party cooking. Annika, Jenny, Mattie, Vince – had Jill done enough to get them to bite the bullet? Would they really be brave enough to betray Kim Renwick?

Jill had done everything she knew how to do. She had become friends with Annika and her gang. She had started the rumor about the secret consortium behind Nicky Bloom. She had made it known that Nicky's after-party was at the Hamilton and that Jada Razor would be there. Now, according to the plan, Jill just needed to dance and let the rumor mill do the work for her.

She felt like she should be doing more. Watching Nicky Bloom work, seeing the ease with which Nicky manipulated Ryan, got him to smile and talk to her and be interested in her – Jill wondered if she was good enough to hold up her end of the deal. If the Network had two undercover agents in this ballroom who were as skilled at manipulating people as Nicky was, the whole class would be theirs already.

But they only had one Nicky Bloom. One Nicky Bloom, and one Jill Wentworth.

It angered her to think about it. At one time not too long ago, the entire Network was enamored with Jill and the work she was doing. She was the superstar operative at Thorndike Academy, who not only could spy on the other students, but could hack into their computers. The world was going to be saved, and Jill was the one who was going to do it.

Then Nicky came along.

*“We’ve got this operative, she’s going to blow your mind,”* was what Gia had said to Jill about Nicky. *“You have laid the groundwork for something huge, Jill. With your work, we might be able to put our new operative in the school with you, and hit the immortals where it hurts them most.”*

It bugged Jill that her great achievements were merely “groundwork” for Nicky Bloom, superspy extraordinaire. It bugged her that she had become another supporting cast member whose only purpose was to set things up for Nicky Bloom to come in and save the world.

It bugged her because it was true.

Nicky was everything Gia had promised, and more. Nicky’s assignment was to create such an incredible first impression that the senior class was willing to accept her as a viable candidate within two hours of seeing her in a black dress. It was an absurdly difficult assignment, and she was nailing it.

Jill’s job, in contrast, was simply to riff off Nicky’s success, to get the word out about the after-party in such a way that everyone wanted to ditch Kim’s and go to Nicky’s.

She felt like she was doing a lousy job. She felt like she belonged in front of a computer screen, and should leave the real work, the work that landed you in the arms of Ryan Jenson, for Nicky Bloom to do by herself.

“She is,” said Jill.

“She is what?” said Brian.

“You were asking about an after-party,” Jill said. “Nicky is having one. At least, that’s what I’ve heard.”

“Where did you hear about her after-party?” said Brian. “I was just asking someone and they said they didn’t know.”

“Then you weren’t asking the right person. Believe me, it’s everywhere. After that little confrontation where Nicky told off Kim, everyone wants to

know where her party is. I was standing over next to Isabella and Chelsea earlier tonight, and they couldn't stop talking about it."

"Really? Isabella and Chelsea?"

"That's right," Jill lied. She hadn't been anywhere near Isabella or Chelsea at any time since the masquerade began.

"Where is the party?" asked Brian.

"At the Hamilton. She's rented out the whole nightclub on the top floor."

"The whole club? She's not going to have enough people to fill up the whole club."

"But she is," said Jill. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. We're all ditching Kim's party, but obviously we're not telling her."

"You're being serious, aren't you? You're really going to Nicky Bloom's party rather than Kim's."

Jill nodded. "The new girl is where it's at. No one else is going to tell you though, because they think you'll rat us all out. We know your family's already committed whatever money you have to Kim, including any prize money from the brawl."

"How does everyone know that?" Brian said, anger in his voice.

"Listen, I'm just telling you this as a friend. I don't want you to be stuck in Kim's corner after everyone else has left. There's a big movement going on here tonight. We're all ditching Kim and we're going with Nicky. Only you and Kim's other really devoted supporters are being left out. It starts with the after-party. By the way, I heard that Jada Razor is going to be there. She's giving a private concert at midnight."

"Fuck me," said Brian. "Jada Razor? Well, this is just...this is just crazy. People should tell me the truth. Yes, my mom and Kim's dad have been talking, but I get to choose where the prize money goes, not them. If there's some mass movement going on, my mom would want me supporting the girl who's gonna win."

"Let's dance over towards Christine so you can partner with her next," said Jill. "She's going to pretend like she doesn't know about the party, but keep trying her. Tell her you're ready to ditch Kim. Tell her you know everyone is going to Nicky's party and you want in."

The music began to slow. Jill raced Brian across the floor until they were right next to Christine Archibald, a bottom-tier girl who would believe anything Brian told her.

“She might deny it to the end, Brian,” said Jill. “But I guarantee you she knows about Nicky’s party. She’s supposed to keep it a secret from you. If you can’t get her to talk, just keep your ears open tonight. You’ll hear the truth eventually. The place to be tonight is the Hamilton, not the White House.”

As the music came to a stop and Jill separated herself from Brian, she caught the look on his face. Utter confusion. What a buffoon.

But he turned to Christine and began the next dance, just as Jill had told him to. Hopefully, when Brian starting blabbing about some secret rebellion against Kim, Christine would believe it, and help spread the word.

Jill turned to her next partner, Jerome Lucero, and began to dance. A few steps in, she asked him if he’d heard about the mass exodus from Kim’s party, about how amazing Nicky’s party promised to be, and what he was going to do.

## 10

Nicky and Ryan had lapped the floor twice without a word between them. Nicky wanted to open the conversation, but knew she wouldn't get anywhere with him if she pushed him into speaking. Ryan wasn't someone who liked to be pushed. So she waited.

Eventually, he broke the silence, saying, "I had no idea you were planning to enter the contest."

"I wanted to tell you," Nicky said, truthfully. "But it was important that nobody knew."

"You didn't trust me to keep your secret?"

"No, that's not it," Nicky said. "With you it was different. With you, I didn't tell you because I was worried it might mess things up between us."

"Well, here you are tonight wearing black," said Ryan. "I'd say things are messed up."

"You don't want anything to do with me anymore, do you?"

"Nicky, I don't understand why you entered. It doesn't seem like you at all. I never would have expected this. I thought you were different."

It was heartbreaking to hear him say the words. A part of Nicky wanted to take him outside right now and tell him he was right, that she was different, that she was playing a character and this was all an act.

That the real Nicky hated the immortals, but liked Ryan Jenson.

Such a tricky little devil this one had turned out to be. In the two weeks between the start of school and the Homecoming Masquerade, Nicky's primary objective was to cozy up to Ryan, to get him interested enough that he would throw his tremendous wealth behind her. And while it took Nicky a little bit to figure him out, once she did, she and Ryan really hit it off.

Ryan had no interest in social status, gossip, or any of the other things that mattered so much to the students of Thorndike Academy. He liked to relate to people in a more substantive way.

So Nicky had to become more substantive. Unfortunately, real substance wasn't something you could fake, so she had resorted to playing herself. For two weeks, she and Ryan hung out every day at lunch and after school, being themselves.

Nicky loved it. A part of her wished she and Ryan could just go on being themselves for the rest of the year.

The problem was, the real Nicky, the one she showed for Ryan, would never wear black to Homecoming. The real Nicky saw Coronation as the atrocity that it was. Even though she didn't speak with Ryan about her hatred for the immortals, for Thorndike, for Coronation, it all was implied. She was being herself, after all. So when Nicky walked through the door of Renata's mansion in a black dress, Ryan was confused and disappointed. He had to be. He knew the real Nicky, and the real Nicky would never have entered this contest.

"Can I tell you something if you promise never to tell anyone else?" she said.

"You can tell me whatever you want, but I'm not promising you anything," said Ryan.

"Okay, I can understand that. You trusted me once, but now you don't. I don't blame you. But here's the thing. I still trust you. I trust that you'll understand why what I'm about to tell you needs to be a secret."

Ryan looked at her with skepticism.

"I really enjoyed spending time with you these past two weeks, and I know that wearing this dress has--"

"Is this what I'm not supposed to tell anyone? That you enjoyed spending time with me?"

"No, I'm just trying to..."

Nicky was stumbling over her words on purpose. She had allowed Ryan to get so close that he might know she was lying if she didn't make it good.

"Just trying to what?"

"It wasn't my choice, Ryan. None of this was my choice."

Ryan pulled back so he could get a better look at Nicky's face.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Nicky leaned in close and whispered in Ryan's ear.

"I have backers. People who want to ensure Kim doesn't win, but have to be secretive about it."

It pained her to lie to him, but it was necessary, and part of the plan. "The secret consortium" behind Nicky Bloom was both Jill's and Nicky's script tonight.

The secret consortium story was Jill's idea, and it was a good one. Not only did it give credibility to Nicky and her campaign, but it did so in a neat

little package that practically sold itself. It was such a juicy little story that people couldn't help but spread it around. The notion that people in this very room had become fed up with the Renwicks and tried to take matters into their own hands was a compelling one, and every time a person passed on the story, it became that much closer to truth. In DC, truth had nothing to do with reality and everything to do with what other people said.

"I figured as much," said Ryan. "Some insider types who can't stomach the thought of a Renwick who lives forever, but are terrified to take them on directly. They've put you here, right?"

"Exactly," said Nicky. "They've put me here to win."

This was the other thing that made the secret consortium such a good ploy. It gave Nicky an out with Ryan. It removed culpability from her. She was just another victim of the Washington machine, forced to enter the Coronation contest against her will.

"Let me guess," Ryan said. "The Crenshaws from North Carolina are a part of this. And the Hernandez brothers."

"You know I can't give you any names," Nicky said. "The whole point is that they wanted to do it in secret. They want to beat the Renwicks, but in a way that they remain invisible while it's happening. My backers are scared of Galen Renwick."

"Your backers are right to be scared," Ryan said. "But if you're going to win, at some point they're all going to have to come out of the woodwork, aren't they?"

"Yes, and that's why my first task was to build a relationship with you."

Ryan's feet started dancing out of rhythm. Nicky pulled him back to the beat.

"That really pisses me off, Nicky," he said.

"I'm sorry."

They danced a few beats. The music was a slow tempo waltz.

"You're telling me I was just a pawn in your game," Ryan said. "I can't believe – these past two weeks..."

"Ryan, I was only pretending in the very beginning. I knew that first day when we went out to lunch that there was something between us. I felt it, and I quit playing the part. I really like you and it kills me--"

"Don't talk about this like it's not your choice. You're the one wearing the dress tonight. You're the one who becomes immortal if you win."



“I know all that, and I’ve made my own peace with how it has to be,” Nicky said, reciting a line she had rehearsed in her head before falling asleep the night before. “But I never chose this. I was chosen. Powerful people in Washington found me and decided I was the one they were looking for. My family was broke, Ryan. We were deep in debt, on the edge of slavery for all I know. My parents couldn’t resist. We were nothing when they agreed to this plan where I enter Coronation to beat Kim Renwick. Now we’re millionaires. But if I blow this, well, I don’t know what will happen to me or my family.”

They danced in silence for a time before Ryan said, “So I was supposed to be your first big donor.”

Nicky was crying now. The tears were faked, but they were easy to come by.

“Yes,” she said. “My backers thought that you were the one with the courage to stand up to Kim and lead the way.”

Ryan smiled, then began to laugh. “What?” Nicky said, laughing back at him. At that moment, her eyes caught Jill looking right at her. Jill looked away.

“I’m just laughing at how fucked up this whole world is,” Ryan said.

“I’m glad you can laugh about it. I can’t.”

“Here’s the deal, Nicky Bloom. I’m not donating on your behalf. Ever. And it’s not because I’m mad at you for using me, even though I am. And it’s also not because I don’t want you to win. Hell, if somebody’s got to win, it might as well be you rather than Kim. But I don’t get to make that choice. I’m like you. My choice has been made for me.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that powerful people in Washington have a hold on me too, and, just like you, I’m acting against my will.”

Powerful people? Who in the world was powerful enough to tell Ryan Jenson what to do? His family was one of the wealthiest in the history of the world.

“Ryan, are you saying...do the Renwicks have something on you?”

Ryan nodded. Nicky’s shoulders slumped. She used the mother of all curse words for the second time that night, showing the very real frustration that she felt.

This was bad news, and a big error on the Network’s part. The Network’s intel officers were certain they knew of every single

blackmailing scheme that Kim and her father were running. They didn't know of anything being held over Ryan's head.

The music was starting to slow. The song was coming to an end. It would be awhile before Nicky had another chance to talk to Ryan in private. She needed to pull herself together and try to figure something out.

"I can help, Ryan," she said. "I have powerful friends."

"You can't help me with this one. There's not a thing you can do or say that will keep Kim from getting my money this year."

"Maybe if you just told me a little bit. I swear you'd be amazed at what these people--"

"Forget it, Nicky. You have your secrets and I have mine. And I'm sad that things have worked out this way, but that's kind of how it goes, isn't it? The immortals take our money, play with our lives, enslave little kids, and eat people for dinner, and we all just have to sit back and watch it happen. Sometimes the bad people win, and the good people have to do whatever is necessary just to stay alive."

The music came to a stop.

"Good luck, Nicky," said Ryan, then he turned to dance with someone else.

# 11

When Kim Renwick was four years old, her daddy taught her a new game.

“This is a pretend game you play with your teacher,” her daddy said. “The person who wins is the one who doesn’t stop pretending.”

Kim’s teacher, Mr. Arsano, was a bald man who wore fuzzy sweaters and big glasses. Mr. Arsano was the headmaster at Mount Claremont, the most expensive, exclusive preschool in Washington.

“Mr. Arsano doesn’t like me,” Kim said. “He makes me sit in timeout every day.”

“Mr. Arsano likes this game,” said her daddy. “And I want you to play it. I want you to win at this game and make me proud of you.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

Most of Kim’s memories from her time at Mount Claremont preschool were faded, incomplete scenes. She remembered teasing a boy named Jacob who had peed his pants. She remembered getting angry during snack one day and throwing her cup of grape juice into the wall. She remembered feeling jealous of Carmen Cook, whose mother, not her nanny but her actual mother, give her a big goodbye squeeze every morning.

The game with Mr. Arsano was the only memory from Mount Claremont that Kim could recall in complete detail. It was naptime. Kim never fell asleep during naptime. She lay on her mat, waiting until Jacob started snoring. Then she sat up and called for Mr. Arsano.

He came over and squatted down next to her mat.

“What is it, Kim?” he asked.

“Mr. Arsano, do you remember when I asked you to help me go potty the other day?” Kim said. That was the line she and her daddy had practiced. Saying that line meant the game had begun. She remembered what her daddy had taught her about Mr. Arsano’s response.

“*Mr. Arsano will say he doesn’t remember,*” her daddy had told her. “*That’s how you know he’s playing too.*”

Sure enough, Mr. Arsano said he had no idea what she was talking about, that Janelle was the one who took girls to the potty.

“No, it was just a few days ago,” Kim said, continuing the game. “You said it was your turn to take me potty because I was special, and I said yes, even though I didn’t have to go, and then we went into the potty and you locked the door and told me you wanted to show me something. That’s the day I’m talking about.”

“Kim, I think you’re remembering some time with someone else,” said Mr. Arsano. “I never took you to the potty.”

Her daddy said that Mr. Arsano might start to act angry. It was all part of the game. He was trying to make her stop pretending. If she stopped, she lost.

“I wanted to tell you, Mr. Arsano, that I didn’t like it when you showed me that thing between your legs,” Kim said. “I thought it was ugly. And I’m not going to touch it again, even if you ask me to.”

“Kim Renwick, I don’t know what you are talking about, but I assure you I did no such thing. Did someone else do this to you Kim?”

“My daddy told me that what you did was a bad thing,” Kim said, proud of herself for remembering all her lines. She was going to win at this game. “My daddy said that I should tell someone about this, but here’s what I think. I think I will have so much fun in kindergarten at Lincoln Hills I won’t even remember what you did. I am going to Lincoln Hills, right? Daddy said that I only get to go there if you tell the teachers I’m smart enough. Do you think I’m smart enough?”

The next year, Kim was enrolled in kindergarten at Lincoln Hills, Mr. Arsano having written a glowing letter of recommendation.

It wasn’t until third grade that Kim began to comprehend the meaning of the game she had played with Mr. Arsano. But even during those years when she didn’t understand what she had done, she knew she had beaten him. She remembered the fear in his eyes. She knew, even at four years old, that she was more powerful than he was. That she was a winner.

Now, as Kim danced with Marshall Beaumont, her heart still racing from her confrontation with Nicky, she thought about another time she had won. In ninth grade, she needed something very specific from Ryan Jenson, and he didn’t want to help. Just like she did with Mr. Arsano, Kim outsmarted Ryan. She played on his fears and made him conform to her will.

But here they were at Homecoming, and already Ryan had danced with Nicky. What was going on with those two? Ryan and Nicky had been seen

going off to lunch together more than once in the past two weeks. Now they had danced together at Homecoming, and when they did, Nicky had a lot to say. She had looked so at ease in Ryan's arms, and they had talked and talked, right up until the dance ended and they parted ways.

Kim pushed Marshall along the floor, trying to get in position to dance with Ryan, but she couldn't get close enough, and when the music came to a stop, she found herself facing Dan Stearns instead.

"Ms. Renwick, it truly is an honor," Dan said with a little bow.

"Shut it, Dan," said Kim. "And get close to Ryan."

"Ryan Jenson?" said Dan.

"Is there another Ryan in this ballroom?" Kim snapped.

Dan's father ran a hedge fund which, of late, was deep in the red. To ensure his clients got a consistent cash flow even as the fund bled money, the Stearns family had dipped its toes into the drug and sex trades, and left a paper trail that was easy for Kim's daddy to sniff out.

As such, Dan was going to pledge lots of money on Kim's behalf this year, regardless of how she treated him.

"Go slowly. You're being too obvious," she said as Dan dragged her across the floor. "We've got plenty of time to work over to them. Just stay on their left."

Dan did as he was told, saying nothing.

Ryan Jenson was dancing with Gloria Castillo now, and appeared to have returned to his usual sullen self, a far cry from the Chatty Cathy he became when he was dancing with Nicky. Kim hadn't seen Ryan speak that much since freshman year.

Since she had paid him a visit to have a little chat.

*A little chat.* Kim had adopted the phrase, but they were her daddy's words. They were three words that terrified everyone in DC. A little chat with Galen Renwick meant the end of careers, the end of wealth and power, the beginning of a life of servitude.

Kim had witnessed many little chats over the past few years, but she only had the opportunity to say the words herself one time. In Ryan's case, a very unique case indeed, Kim had decided that she would take the lead.

And on this night, when the arrival of a new girl wearing a black dress had ruined years of planning, Kim took comfort thinking back on that cloudy October day from freshman year when she went to Ryan's house and told him it was time for a little chat.

Ryan had never been a problem since that day, or at least, that's how it appeared. It might be that he was playing her all this time, that he was pretending to behave, all the while orchestrating the surprise arrival of Nicky Bloom in a black dress.

If Ryan had broken their deal, so help her, she would make him pay. Oh, would she make him pay.

The dancers were moving counterclockwise around the floor. Kim made Dan work to the inside track of the circle, where they could make up some ground. As they passed Mattie and Brian, Kim heard one of them mention Jada Razor. As they passed Jill and Jerome, she heard Jada Razor's name again.

"Why is everyone talking about Jada Razor?" she asked Dan.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe she has a new album coming out?"

"Who cares if she has a new album coming out? We're at the Homecoming ball for Christ's sake."

"You were the one who asked."

"Just forget it. Stay close to Ryan. The music is slowing down."

As they slowed to a stop, Kim took the lead, and pushed herself next to Ryan and Gloria, so when the music stopped, Ryan had no choice but to turn to Kim for the partner change.

He gave her a brief, dismissive look, then said, "I think I'm going to sit this one out."

"Well then, I suppose I am as well," said Kim. "Shall we go to the bar?"

Ryan sighed, and walked off the dance floor. Kim slid her arm inside his and accompanied him to the bar.

## 12

The first two hours of the Homecoming Masquerade were unsupervised. That was part of the game. It was a way the immortals could make the lowly humans show their subservience. Here were a hundred high school seniors from the richest families in the world, who were accustomed to doing whatever they wanted to do and living a life largely without consequences, yet for two hours they came together and followed the rules of a strict Victorian dance, all without any supervision.

Thorndike students were so well trained, so terrified of what the immortals might do to them, that they behaved like little puppets at their own school dance. In fifty-plus years, the unsupervised portion of the ball had always been smooth. Nicky's confrontation with Kim was probably the least couth behavior in the history of Homecoming.

Unsupervised didn't mean without security. There was plenty of that. Just because the Thorndike students behaved didn't mean the rest of the world could be trusted. There were humans all over the world who were poor, who were hungry, who were desperate, who might choose to sabotage a gathering of power and privilege like Thorndike's Homecoming. There were rival clans from other parts of the world who were jealous of the powerful American vampires and always on the lookout for a moment to strike. Plus, there was the Network to worry about. All of this made Homecoming a major security concern, and Renata spared no expense ensuring that her guests were safe.

The first line of defense was Renata's own army of slaves. Sure, they were young and weak, but they were trained to fight to the death if necessary. Private contractors added another layer of security, monitoring the forest immediately surrounding Renata's property and barricading all roads in a three-mile radius. Police, National Guard, and Secret Service rounded out the security detail, each group assigned specific tasks to protect the mansion and its occupants.

All of this security was necessary whenever it was known that immortals would be gathering in one place, and on this night, there were many immortals in attendance. Renata and her invited immortal guests went

on a ceremonial hunt outside the mansion during the first part of Homecoming. During the third and final hour of Homecoming, Renata and her guests would come inside to join the party. In their formal dress and bejeweled masks, these immortals would step onto the dance floor with everyone else, cutting in for a dance wherever they wished. Those lucky students who got to dance with an immortal would remember the experience for life.

Nicky was guaranteed at least one dance with an immortal, as Sergio Alonzo himself came to the party to dance with the girls wearing black. Initially, the Network considered a strategy where somehow Nicky and Jill took a stab at killing Sergio right there in the ballroom, foregoing all this convoluted business of winning Coronation. But they thought better of it. As complicated and difficult as winning Coronation would be, the odds of success were far greater with that plan than with any scheme to try and kill Sergio in plain sight.

Killing a vampire was a risky, messy business. While it was true that a heavy stake to the heart or a complete decapitation would indeed take down the creatures, actually making that happen was harder than it seemed. Vampires were too fast and cunning for a single person to take them out with a sword. Every kill the Network had made was done by two or more people, and a lot of weaponry. The key was getting a few good shots in with some hefty hunting ammunition to slow them down. The most successful vampire hunter in the Network, Elliott Toffler, had made all his kills as part of a team of ten, where they first trapped the creature, then filled it with lead, and only then, when it was too slow to get away, chopped its head off.

There was some debate though if an approach like that was even viable with Sergio. Vampires grew stronger as they aged, and only Daciana Samarin herself was older than Sergio.

As Nicky changed partners for the fourth time, she thought about Sergio. How many more dances until she was in his arms? How many more minutes before she was face to face with the vampire she was meant to kill?

It was nine-forty now. There was time for two more dances before the intermission. Nicky had been aiming to dance with Marshall Beaumont, but he had stepped away from her at the last minute, and she ended up with Sam Featherstone.

Sam's mother was a Hollywood starlet and his father was a baseball player. Both of his parents had magazine-cover faces, so it had to be a



disappointment to them that their son was such a plain-looking boy. Sam's high cheekbones, boxy frame, and stringy hair were an unusual mix. When combined with his brat-like, ultra-entitled personality, it all made for an ugly kid.

"I'm hearing something about a party at the Hamilton," Sam said shortly after the dance began.

"That's correct," said Nicky. "Are you coming?"

"Well, I had planned on going to Kim's, but..."

"Hardly anyone will be at Kim's," said Nicky. "Jada Razor is performing at my party."

"Really? How'd you get her?" His tone of voice was dismissive and insulting. Nicky and Jill had a lot of work to do.

Clearly, word was getting out about the party, but no one really believed yet that Nicky's party was the one to attend. Nicky wondered how Jill was coming along with Annika Fleming, thinking about how her own work on Ryan had come unglued. If things didn't start improving here soon, Nicky's after-party would be a dud, and the entire mission would be in jeopardy.

She worked on Sam for the remainder of the dance, reminding him that he hated Kim just as much as everyone else, telling him that this was a once in a lifetime chance to get it right.

As she spoke with Sam, she looked at the bar, where Ryan and Kim were talking, or rather, Kim was talking and Ryan was listening.

What did Kim have on Ryan? The Network had combed every aspect of his life and found nothing. He was clean. His parents were clean. His grandparents were clean. All the Jenson wealth could be accounted for in legal transactions. No one in the family had trouble with the law or relationships with shady characters of any sort.

They had to find a way to free Ryan from Kim's grasp or the entire plan was ruined. In a city full of rats, Ryan was meant to be the Pied Piper. He was to come on board as Nicky's first major donor, and after he'd pledged his mega millions, others would follow. Without him, Nicky might as well run out the door right now and never come back.

Nicky tried to get a read on what Kim was saying, but between the constant turns of the waltz and the position of Kim's wine glass, Nicky couldn't see her lips. She looked at the other people at the bar, watching to see if someone might be eavesdropping on Kim and Ryan's conversation, someone who could be probed for info about what Kim was saying, but it

didn't look like anyone was listening. Zoe was telling some drunken story to Xavier, waving her arms all over the place. Chelsea, Isabella, Annika, and Jenny were gathered in a circle, giggling about something. Rosalyn was walking away from the bar, a very full goblet of wine in her hand.

It occurred to Nicky that Rosalyn was walking in a straight line without the slightest lilt in her gait, which was odd, since Rosalyn had a reputation of being the class drunk. Rosalyn was one of Kim's most devoted lackeys. If she was choosing to drink responsibly, surely it was at Kim's behest.

She'd have to file that little oddity away for later. There were more important things than Rosalyn's blood alcohol, and right now, the top of the list was getting a dance in with Marshall Beaumont.

Hearing the waltz move into its Trio section, Nicky pushed Sam in Marshall's direction, determined not to let him get away this time. When the musicians hit the final bars, she was in perfect position for Marshall to turn her way and ask for the next dance.

But right as the piece ended, another couple crashed into them from behind, knocking Sam sideways, and pushing Nicky away from Marshall.

"Sorry Bud," said the boy who had collided with Sam.

"No problem," Sam mumbled. He bowed to Nicky and turned to the girl who had just run into him. Nicky now had no choice but to dance with the boy from this clumsy couple. The boy was short, with sandy brown hair combed into a severe part over his left ear. He was beefy under his tux, clearly someone who worked out a lot. And he was smiling big, his eyes glassy, his cheeks flush. He was drunk as a skunk.

"What's up, Nicky?" he said, holding his hand out for a dance.

"Hello Art."

## 13

Art Tremblay was having a hell of a night.

It began at home while he was getting ready and his mother told him she had agreed to a settlement in the divorce.

The divorce, a long, contentious battle between Art's parents that had gone on for nearly a decade, had Art splitting time between mansions in Bethesda and Potomac. More importantly, it prevented the family business from bringing on anyone else as a full partner.

Now that Art's mom had agreed to a buyout, her share of the business would be held in trust for the children. Upon his eighteenth birthday, which was only a week away, Art would inherit a one quarter share of Tremblay Property Management LLC.

That share was worth four billion dollars.

Yes sir, four billion. B-b-b-billion, the youngest billionaire in the world. And that wasn't all that was going Art's way this night. Shortly before the dancing started, Kim approached Art with a "special assignment." She could have chosen anyone in the ballroom to do it, but she chose him.

*This new girl needs to be snuffed out tonight, Kim had said. You and Rosalyn are going to work together. On the last dance before intermission, you will be Nicky's partner. As you come around the far side of the ballroom, Rosalyn will step into the aisle with a glass of wine in her hand. You are going to push Nicky into Rosalyn. Make it look like she tripped. Rosalyn will make sure the wine spills all over Nicky's dress. Wait until the music is almost done before you act. The immortals come out after intermission. We want to give Nicky as little time as possible to clean up before they arrive.*

It was a bold, frightening idea, pushing the new girl right into a wine spill, but Art was ready. What good were all those hours in the gym if he wasn't? This was it. This was the moment when fortunes were made.

This was his own Bullhead Creek.

Bullhead Creek was a small village in the Adirondacks where, in 1935, a stroke of luck and a bold decision forever changed the fate of the entire Tremblay family. Art's grandfather, Reginald Tremblay, was hunting deer in

the forests on the northern edge of town. He'd been tracking a buck all day when he heard a moaning sound off to the east. Expecting to find a fox or other small prey caught in someone's trap (and planning to steal whatever he found – the Depression hadn't been kind to the Tremblay family), Reginald abandoned the buck he was tracking and followed the moaning sound.

He was half-way down the mountain when he realized the sound wasn't coming from anyone's trap, but instead from inside a rickety waterwheel shack on the far side of the river. Letting his curiosity get the best of him, Reginald crossed the river and pushed open the back door of the shack.

What he found inside was a little girl, no more than five, with bright orange hair, tied to a support beam. A dirty rag was stuffed in her mouth. Her forehead was covered in blood. It took Reginald a long time to untie all the knots that attached the girl to the beam, and before he was finished, the door swung open again, and a man stepped inside. He was naked, save a thick layer of mud that covered his entire body, almost like he had gone out into the forest and rolled in the muck.

The man, who, according to the way the story was told in the Tremblay family, "had a look of plumb crazy in his eyes," turned to run. Reginald shot him in the back, and then again in the head after the man fell to his knees. Then Reginald took the girl to his truck, drove her down the mountain, and went to the police.

The girl was a young Renata Sullivan, daughter of one of the wealthiest families in New York, gone missing the night before from the Mohawk Summer Camp twelve miles down the river. Thirteen years later, Renata became the first girl from Thorndike Academy to get a visit in the night from Sergio Alonzo. Becoming an immortal member of the Samarin Clan, Renata was instantly made into a millionaire many times over, and one of the first things she did with her money was find Reginald Tremblay and set him up for life.

"When I look at Reginald, I see safety," Renata said in a newspaper interview many years later. "I see the man who killed the bad guy and made everything right. I don't just want to reward Reginald, I want to keep him close so I can always feel safe."

Renata invited Reginald and his young family to move to the suburbs outside DC and oversee the security detail on the mansion she was having built. It was Reginald's job to do background checks on every contractor

who had access to the blueprints, every plumber, mason, and electrician who stepped into the home, every artist and craftsman who made the gorgeous house come together. When the mansion was finished, Reginald's approved list of contractors became the full time staff of Tremblay Property Management (TPM), and he became the go-to guy not just for Renata, but for all the immortals living in and around Washington. Fabulous mansions like Renata's required upkeep, maintenance, and security, some of which could be provided by the slaves, but some of which had to be outsourced. As devoted as the slaves were to their masters, their young, brainwashed minds weren't capable of high level problem solving. Slaves were good for making dinner, keeping house, and tending to the landscape. Anything beyond that required someone with at least a modicum of free thought. Someone who could be trusted near the million-dollar paintings, the ancient relics, the centuries of secrets that might be hidden in an immortal's mansion. Over time, TPM developed a background check that was more rigorous than those given by the military or the CIA. TPM contractors were expected to submit to regular "debriefings" in which an immortal would interrogate them to ensure all was on the up and up. TPM headquarters in Washington became an impenetrable fortress.

When Art's dad took over the business in the late sixties, it was a multi-million dollar enterprise. Art's father expanded the business even further, turning it into a full-service contracting firm that did anything and everything the immortals wanted. From private security to financial matters to accounting to home maintenance and upkeep – TPM's trusted staff provided it all and was handsomely rewarded for the effort. By the time Art was born, the Tremblays were one of the wealthiest and most respected families in all of Washington.

And while Art now stood to inherit a good chunk of the wealth thanks to his parents' divorce settlement, the respect still eluded him. The respect stopped with Art's father and brother, who hoarded it all, leaving none for Art. It didn't help that Art was a shrimp, and the first Tremblay in memory who wasn't a natural outdoorsman. Art's father made no attempts to hide his disappointment in his youngest son. Art got used to being bullied, not only by his classmates, but by his father. He internalized his father's commands to "toughen up," and "quit being such a girl." No longer invited on the family hunting and fishing trips, Art took to the gym, where he thrust his anger into every bench press, and imagined his father's face on the

punching bag. The gym never made him any taller, or any tougher really, but by his senior year, it had made him buff.

Buff enough that Kim knew he was up to the task. Having pushed his way past Marshall Beaumont (and oh, wasn't it nice to body check that asshole), Art now stood before Nicky Bloom, ready to be her dance partner.

He bowed, they greeted one another, their hands joined, and they were off. Their dance was Chopin's Waltz in C-Sharp Minor. A few bars in, Art caught sight of Rosalyn, making her way into position, a goblet of wine in her hand.

Yes, indeed, things were looking up for Art Tremblay. It was a hell of a night.

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## 14

Nicky didn't even try to strike up a conversation with Art. He was one of Kim's little lapdogs, eager to follow her wherever she went, do her bidding, and kiss her ass. Anything Nicky said to him would be reported to Kim, so it was best not to say anything at all.

Art didn't seem to mind.

As they made the first turn, Nicky thought about Jill's description of Art in the briefing book.

*A chip on his shoulder...a disappointment to his father...a gym rat...big muscles, but about as macho as a goldfish...*

Nicky had never met Art's father, but she had heard all about him. A notorious trophy hunter, Merv Tremblay used his extraordinary wealth to fund safaris all over the world, and brought home lots of exotic work for the taxidermist. The Tremblay mansion in Potomac was known for being a zoo of dead animals. Buffalo, elk, antelope, wild boar, rhinoceros – even an African elephant stood in the Tremblay estate, a stuffed relic of a once majestic creature, killed not because nature demanded it, but because a man thought it would be fun.

*Vampire Envy.* It was something the Network saw all the time with these insider types. Regular interaction with vampires made them into pathetic imitations. They couldn't hunt humans, so they hunted rhinos. They couldn't own slaves so they hired full-time servants and treated them like dogs. They couldn't stay young forever but used plastic surgery to try. Some sufferers of vampire envy ran afoul of the law, thinking they should be allowed to do whatever they pleased, just like the immortals.

Some did far worse. The Network had its suspicions about Merv Tremblay and the sorts of things he did on his round-the-world hunting trips. There were places in the developing world where rich people could pay large sums of money to gain some of the privileges of an immortal, even if only for one night. A quick glance at the stamps on Merv's passport suggested he might be frequenting such places. If he was, then Art had a truly heinous man for a father.

Nicky felt bad for Art, growing up in the Tremblay house. It was bad enough that they all were the immortals' playthings. To have some sick immortal wannabe as your father – the poor guy was born to be rotten.

They had been dancing for two minutes now, and Art was really starting to lose his way. His feet were so far from the rhythm that Nicky tried to take the lead, eliciting the first words from Art's mouth since the dance began.

"Stop it" he said. "The guy leads."

He was so drunk she could have lit his breath on fire. Apparently, he wasn't done hitting the booze either. With every turn around the ballroom floor, he was glancing over to the bar, as if he couldn't wait to get back there at intermission and have another. Nicky tried to follow his eyes, but saw nothing of interest back there. All the girls wearing black were on the dance floor, as were most of the Renwick groupies Art liked to hang out with. The only person from Art's group of friends who wasn't dancing was Rosalyn. She was standing alone in limbo-land, half-way between the bar and the ballroom, cradling her unusually full goblet of wine with both hands.

"I'll let you lead when you start leading," Nicky said.

Art grunted and shook his head. *Stupid drunk*, Nicky thought.

She had fallen into the habit of looking for Marshall on the dance floor, but realized it wasn't necessary this time. Intermission would follow this dance, so it didn't matter how close she was to Marshall when the music stopped. She couldn't spot him on the crowded floor anyway.

She did, however, find Ryan. He was dancing with Pauline Wabash. As they swayed in front of the band, Ryan and Nicky's eyes met for a second. He made no effort to look away.

God, he was beautiful. It was a testament to how messed up this school was that a guy who looked like Ryan Jenson could somehow become an outcast. Now a few minutes removed from the revelation that Kim was blackmailing him, Nicky was more puzzled about Ryan than ever.

Before tonight, Nicky had convinced herself that she had Ryan all figured out. She thought the reason he had no friends was because he refused to make any. She thought he was different than the other students because he didn't care about the popularity games, about the things that drove every interaction at school and informed the behavior of every student. Ryan didn't care who was going to win Coronation, or how he could get an in with that person. He didn't care about increasing his social



standing, or counting the number of people above him on the popularity ladder.

Or so Nicky thought. The fact that Kim was blackmailing him made her wonder. Blackmail only works if the victim doesn't want the information released. If Ryan didn't care about his social status, then he wouldn't care if some embarrassing bit of info leaked into the gossip current.

Which meant that Nicky had misjudged him, or whatever secret Kim was holding over him was bigger than school gossip. It meant Ryan did in fact care about his social standing, or, if he didn't, Kim had found a way to make him care. She had something on him so good he wouldn't even consider Nicky's offer.

Whatever it was, it was a problem Nicky had to solve right away. Either she had to figure out how to free Ryan from Kim's blackmail, or find another mega-billionaire to court. And the only kid in school whose wealth was anything close to Ryan's was the doofus she was dancing with now.

Nicky and Art started their third lap of the ballroom. As they made the turn, Nicky's eyes, which had been on Ryan this whole time, caught sight of Rosalyn. Her face, hidden behind a gaudy golden mask in the shape of a butterfly, became visible over Ryan's shoulder, and gave Nicky pause.

Rosalyn had been looking right at her.

What in the world was up with that girl? Rosalyn had been standing there the entire dance, just holding onto her wine.

Her totally full glass of wine, from which she, the class lush, hadn't taken a single sip.

As they rounded the bend on the other side of the ballroom, coming towards Rosalyn, Art's steps fell out of rhythm again. And he wasn't letting Nicky turn. It was a waltz. They were supposed to turn. But Art, who had been dancing correctly just a few steps ago, was now moving in a very non-dancelike motion. He was pushing Nicky in a straight line going backwards.

Even as her back was turned, Nicky saw the whole thing come together in her mind. Art Tremblay had come out of nowhere at the end of the last dance and pushed Marshall out of the way, forcing Nicky to be his partner. Rosalyn had ordered a full goblet of wine at the beginning of this dance, and then held it in place as she hovered near the dance floor. It was the final dance before intermission, meaning there would be no time to arrange an outfit change before the immortals hit the floor.

The grandfather clock, the orchestra, Ryan and Pauline, the bar – Nicky used all of these to orient herself and get ready for what was coming. Art intended to push her into Rosalyn. Sure enough, as they got closer, he leaned in and tried to put his hands on her shoulders. Nicky grabbed tightly onto his wrists. She found it all to be surprisingly easy.

*Big muscles, but about as macho as a goldfish.*

Allowing Art's own momentum to do the work, Nicky leaned hard to the inside, and Art swung around behind her, crashing into Rosalyn. The wine spilled all over them both. Nicky didn't get hit by a single drop.

"What the fuck?" Rosalyn yelled.

The music and dancing stuttered to a stop. The ballroom went silent. All eyes were on Nicky. It suddenly felt very familiar, like the opening moments of the night happening all over again.

Nicky looked around the room. When she found Kim, she smiled at her, and said two words. She directed the words right at Kim, but spoke them loud enough for everyone to hear.

"You missed."

**Part 2**  
**Her Name Was Celeste, But Her Dad Called**  
**Her Nicky**

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## 15

Before the Homecoming masquerade, before her first day at Thorndike, before the Network, before there even was a Nicky Bloom, there was a girl named Celeste. Celeste Nicole Allen, but her dad called her Nicky.

*Celeste is just too beautiful a name to throw around willy nilly*, her dad had said to her once.

Celeste was her mother's name. And her grandmother's. Nicky never knew either of them.

When Nicky and her dad hit the road, she had to leave the name Celeste behind.

"It will always be our secret," said her dad, "but never more than a secret. We'll never tell anyone else, okay? Starting now, Nicky isn't just your nickname, it's your real name."

Nicky's first memory was when she and her dad went to visit the man with the scar and the eye patch. She was five. In later years, she would discover that most children had at least some memories from before they were five. Frankie could remember a day all the way back to when he was three.

But for Nicky, everything before age five was a blank. The timeline of her life began with the man with the eye patch. They were in a cluttered room with two chairs and a desk. The man gave Nicky's dad a shoebox full of papers.

Those papers were their new identities. A birth certificate for Nicky, a driver's license for her dad, Social Security cards for both. Nicky's new name was Nicky Jennifer Crenshaw. Her dad's new name was Bruce Crenshaw. They were from Windsor, Connecticut, wherever that was.

"Why do we have to change our names?" Nicky asked her dad.

"Because there are bad people in the world who don't like us, but they'll never be able to find us so long as we don't use our real names."

This is what she remembered about her dad. He was a tall man with the same reddish-brown hair that she had. He had big, strong forearms. He kept glasses in his shirt pocket and pulled them out whenever he needed to read

something. He didn't talk a lot. He trusted Nicky to do whatever she wanted to do with her time, and he almost never scolded her about anything.

She remembered when her dad told her that she did have a mother, once.

"You're going to look just like her some day," her dad said.

After they said goodbye to the man with the eye patch and left, they went to a big parking lot full of RV's. Her dad bought one. He and Nicky drove it off the lot, onto the freeway, and across the country.

They went from town to town, parking in open fields with other nomads, doing what was necessary to survive, and moving on. When Nicky started her thieving habit, it wasn't from need, but desire. She was a kid. She saw stuff and she wanted it. She and her dad walked through grocery stores and she put candy in her pockets. She followed her dad into the thrift store with a bare neck and came out wearing a scarf. The first time she picked a pocket was at a bus stop in Atlanta, taking some guy's wallet while he spoke on the phone. The first time she burgled a house, she was eight years old.

As she grew older, she came to understand that her life wasn't normal, that most people would find her way of living to be crude and frightening. She knew that when people spoke of "jackals," they were talking about her. A jackal was the nickname for all the many homeless or near-homeless thieves who roamed the streets. It was spoken with disdain, with pity, even.

But to Nicky, it was a marvelous life. Sneaking into people's pockets, their cars, their homes, and taking what she wanted—it was a game to her, and the better she played it, the more they had to eat that night. Life was a joy, and after they picked up Frankie it got even better.

Frankie Velasquez was an eight-year-old jackal they found walking along Highway 44 in Connecticut. It was raining, so Nicky's dad pulled over to give him a ride. When Nicky's dad asked Frankie where he was going, Frankie shrugged his shoulders.

"Alright then," said Nicky's dad. "If you have no place to go, you'll ride with us."

In Frankie, Nicky had a partner in crime, a playmate, and a brother. Together, they discovered that a two-person team could do more than just burgle homes. Two people working together could pull off a heist.

Finding that convenience store clerks were mistrustful of Frankie with his dark hair and skin, Nicky concocted a technique where Frankie stood in

the back of the store, drawing all the cashier's attention, while Nicky roamed the aisles filling her pockets. Growing bolder, the two of them executed a heist in Missouri where Frankie shoplifted in plain sight, causing the shopkeeper to chase him out of the store, and leaving the cash register available for Nicky to empty. Growing bolder still, they broke into the cleaning closet of an old hotel, stole the master key, and went room to room, announcing themselves as housekeeping, and opening the door to any room where no one answered. They hit the jackpot in Room 1402, finding a big wad of cash and a pair of diamond earrings in an open suitcase.

Their boldest heist ever came in Dallas. Nicky and Frankie were roaming through alleys and backyards in a wealthy neighborhood, watching families come and go, getting the lay of the land. They got a little careless in the yard of a particularly large house, and a little boy poked his head out the second story window to get a better look at them.

"Run," Frankie whispered.

"No, wait," Nicky said. She and the boy were looking right at each other now. She waved at him. He waved back. A minute later, the boy came down, and the three of them played tag in the boy's backyard.

The little boy's name was Timothy. He was six. Completely fascinated with Nicky, Timothy didn't find it at all strange that she and Frankie were roaming around behind his house. When he invited them inside, Nicky told Timothy they would only go in if he agreed to tell his parents that Frankie and Nicky went to his school.

"But you don't go to my school," Timothy said.

"Yes we do," said Nicky. "We hang out with the big kids. You've seen us before. We're on the playground all the time."

She spoke with such authority in her voice that Timothy immediately agreed, saying, "Oh yeah, now I remember you."

"So you'll tell your parents we go to your school, right?"

"Yes."

Nicky and Frankie shared a look as Timothy let them inside his house. Without a word between them, they both understood how this heist was going to work.

Timothy introduced Nicky and Frankie to his mother, saying in a loud, clear voice, "They go to my school. I've seen them on the playground with the big kids."

Nicky convinced Timothy's mother that she lived in one of the mansions down the street, that Frankie was her classmate from a few blocks away and was spending the day with her. She talked about how much fun it was to play with Timothy in the back yard, and said nice things about the décor in the house.

"May I use your restroom?" Frankie asked, in an exceptionally polite voice.

"Of course," said Timothy's mother. She pointed Frankie down the hall and to his right.

While Frankie was gone, Nicky talked about anything and everything that might keep Timothy's mother from stepping out of the room. She asked about her job. Timothy's mother said her job was to raise Timothy.

"What about Timothy's father?" Nicky asked.

"He's a doctor."

"So he saves people's lives?"

"Sometimes. Mostly he helps people."

"I bet he's a really nice person. You seem really nice too. I knew Timothy had nice parents. Everyone at school gets along real good with him. Do you like school, Timothy?"

Nicky went on like this for ten minutes, keeping Timothy and his mother trapped in the sitting room until Frankie returned.

"Nicky, I forgot. My mom's coming to pick me up at two. We have to go," Frankie said.

"Oh, okay," said Timothy's mother. "Do you kids need a ride?"

"No, thank you ma'am," said Nicky. "Like I said, just down the street."

And with that, they were gone, stepping out the front door, Frankie's pockets stuffed to the gills with stolen jewelry and cash.

Among the loot was an oversized silver cuff bracelet with a rugged texture hammered into the metal. Nicky really liked that bracelet. When the end came, she was sad for the loss of her family, of course, but she was also sad for the loss of that bracelet.

Nicky didn't understand the way the world worked back then. She didn't know anything about Washington, the Samarin clan, Thorndike Academy, the Farm, or the many institutions the immortals had set up to take honest people's money and give it to the bloodsuckers. But she did know that people like her weren't safe, that children who didn't live in actual homes had a tendency to disappear in the night.

Still, when the end came, it surprised her. They were in Danville, Vermont, continuing their northward trek after Nicky and Frankie's fabulous heist in Dallas. Nicky and Frankie went into town that day to spend the money they had stolen. They returned to the RV at sundown and played cards. Nicky's dad came back just before midnight. They locked the door, got in their respective beds, and said good night.

Nicky remembered having terrible, vivid dreams that night. She dreamt about monsters with poison fangs, prison cells with burning hot walls, thousands of spiders eating her skin...when she woke up, she wasn't in the RV anymore. She was tied to a chair in a small room with cinderblock walls and a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. A beautiful girl with short blonde hair, her body only eighteen or nineteen years old, sat across from her.

"Hello, Nicky," she said. "My name is Melissa."

As Melissa spoke, she didn't look at Nicky, she looked into her. She gazed in Nicky's eyes, as if Nicky's pupils were tiny windows to the brain.

Nicky had never seen a vampire before, but she'd heard about them. She knew they could control your thoughts, and when they wanted to get inside your head, they looked in your eyes. The way this girl was looking at Nicky, the way she was speaking...

Was Melissa a vampire? It seemed like Nicky should have felt something different if she was.

Melissa started saying the strangest things. She told Nicky a list of rules or something, and after every statement, she asked Nicky if she understood.

*There are yellow lines painted on the floor that mark the borders of the farm. You will not cross the yellow lines unless a supervisor tells you to. Do you understand?*

"Yes," Nicky said. What else was she going to say? If this girl was a vampire, Nicky certainly wasn't going to argue with her.

*You are to control your emotions, never allowing yourself too much joy or sadness. Do you understand?*

Nicky never had a problem controlling her emotions. "Yes," she said.

*You will tell me your full name now as it is written on your birth certificate.*

Which birth certificate? Nicky thought, and almost smiled. "Nicky Jennifer Crenshaw," she said.

*You will not speak unless spoken to. Do you understand?*



“Yes.”

And on and on Melissa went, staring at Nicky and giving these odd commands. Nicky said yes to all of them. Then, as suddenly as the session had begun, it was over. Melissa got up, untied Nicky, and walked out, leaving the door open behind her. Nicky waited until the sound of Melissa’s footsteps had faded into silence, then walked out of the room, down the hall, and out the front door, stepping over a yellow line without the slightest feeling of hesitation or remorse. She ran down the hill and into the wetlands below, expecting to find her dad and Frankie out there waiting for her.

Search lights, barking dogs, wet, mucky marsh, alligators, snakes, and lots of mosquitoes. There were pursuers on the first day, but she lost them in the night and they never caught up with her again. At dusk on the second day, she stepped on a water moccasin and the snake responded with a sharp bite just above her ankle. That night, sick and delirious, she collapsed under a tree, where she almost certainly would have died were it not for a young Network Operative named Gia Rossi, who found her in time to provide life-saving first aid and get her out of the swamp.

“You were on the Farm,” Gia told Nicky many days later. “You were meant to be enslaved. That blonde woman who spoke to you is an immortal named Melissa Mayhew. She was trying to reprogram your brain. Somehow, it didn’t take. That’s why you were able to leave. Had the reprogramming worked, you never would have been able to step across the yellow line.”

“Why didn’t it work on me?” Nicky asked.

“I don’t know but I’m quite curious,” Gia said. “As far as I know, you are the first person who ever escaped from the Farm.”

\* \* \* \* \*

After nursing Nicky back to health, Gia tried to get a look inside her mind.

“Melissa Mayhew is notorious for leaving little traps in people’s heads,” Gia said. “For all we know, Nicky, she might have arranged it so you could walk out, and at some point today, tomorrow, or in ten years, some hidden programming that you can’t remember will kick in and you’ll be her slave.”

Gia had Nicky sit in a cushy blue chair and try to clear her mind. At Gia’s instruction, Nicky took slow, deep breaths, one after another. She

stared at a single spot on the ceiling while Gia spoke soft, simple commands, telling Nicky to relax her body and mind.

It didn't work.

"Funny," Gia said. "I've never had that happen before."

"I was trying to relax," Nicky said. "Trying to do what you said."

"Maybe you were trying too hard," said Gia. "Let's start over. Just sit back and relax. Listen to me, but don't try to do what I'm telling you to do. Just relax and listen."

The second time didn't work either. Neither did the third. Gia declared Nicky's mind to be locked shut.

"We use hypnosis to get at your subconscious, because that's where the vampires put their commands," Gia said. "But your subconscious is completely inaccessible. That must be why Melissa's reprogramming didn't work."

Gia had an old man with white stubble on his chin come to the house and look at Nicky. He too had her stare at a spot on the ceiling and relax. He tried waving a watch in front of her face. He turned out the lights and repeated short and simple phrases. He worked with Nicky all day, and declared her a lost cause.

"The girl cannot be hypnotized," he said. "Either she has an unusually great distance between her conscious and subconscious minds, making it impossible for anyone to get inside, or else Melissa has done something to her."

"Melissa didn't do anything to me," Nicky said. "I remember every word of our conversation. She was trying to get in my head but she couldn't, just like you."

"Oh child," the man said, "Melissa Mayhew is nothing like me. We humans have to take the long way to the subconscious. The vampires don't. If indeed you are unaffected, then Melissa was being lazy and inattentive to her work. If she really wanted to get into your head, she would."

Nicky could tell that the man thought she was trouble. But Gia didn't. Gia liked Nicky. And after the man left, Gia told Nicky not to worry about what he said.

"I'm with you," Gia said. "I think Melissa tried to reprogram you and it failed. I think there's something special going on in your head. I think you have a gift and we need to work together to figure out the best way to use it."

Nicky's entry to the Network was that simple, that accidental. Gia Rossi had been spying on the Farm. She saw Nicky escape. She rescued her. She nursed her back to health. She took a liking to her, and saw her as a future agent of the Network, a girl who was immune to the mind control that was such a powerful weapon for the enemy.

Nicky, however, had other plans. She had no interest in going off to save the world while Frankie and her father might be enslaved. Gia proposed a compromise that met both their desires. Gia would take Nicky on a search for her missing loved ones, and along the way, Gia would teach Nicky what it meant to be a Network spy.

They started at the lookout post in the Florida swamp where the Network watched the Farm from a safe distance, the post where Gia had been when Nicky walked out the front door. With binoculars in-hand, Nicky looked at the drab gray building where a vampire named Melissa Mayhew had tried to brainwash her, and hoped that by some miracle, Frankie and her father would show up.

They never did, of course. But as Nicky sat on the platform in the tree and watched for them, Gia taught her about the Farm, about the slave system that provided a constant source of food for the vampires.

Gia told Nicky that every vampire in the Samarin clan had a large "pantry" of slaves who did service work at the mansions until such time as their master decided to eat them. She explained how the Farm was where the slaves got their first dose of heavy brainwashing, and how, under normal circumstances, a reprogramming session like the one Nicky went through left the individual completely devoid of free will.

"The majority of slaves are born and raised on the Farm," Gia said. "Jackals like you and Frankie make up the overflow population, stolen off the streets at night whenever there aren't enough farm-grown slaves to meet the demand in the various mansions across the country."

"And my dad?" Nicky asked.

"Your dad is someone they would call 'collateral,'" Gia said. "They don't want to leave adults hanging around after their children have been stolen. Parents whose children have been taken would draw too much negative attention to the clan and their activities."

"So what did they do with him?"

"I don't know, Nicky. But I'm not going to lie to you. Most of the adults who are taken off the streets are killed on the Farm."

“My dad wasn’t killed,” Nicky said. “He’s too smart for that.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Gia.

For three days they went back to that lookout post, and Nicky watched as lines of black vans came and went from the Farm, dropping off jackals from the street, filling up with newly reprogrammed slaves.

Nicky remembered becoming enamored with Gia during those first days of spying. Here was a girl who was maybe twenty years old, and she spoke with such authority about the enemy – it was like she’d been doing this her entire life. Never once did Gia say or do anything to suggest to Nicky that she feared the vampires they were spying on. Never once did she seem put out in the slightest that she was now caring for an eleven-year-old girl.

“The distribution system is elaborate and enormous,” Gia told her on the third day. “Some slaves from the Farm will go to Talahassee, some will go to Moscow. Sometimes vampires come to choose their own slaves; sometimes they don’t. They leave here in vans that take them to a trucking depot twenty miles north. That’s where we lose track of them. Thousands of trucks go through that depot every day, and only one of them carries the shipment of slaves. The slaves might go anywhere from that depot – we’ve never found out. At some point they get dropped off and distributed via smaller vehicles to the vampires all over the country and the world.”

Gia always referred to them using the forbidden word. Vampires. Nicky liked that. She liked that the two of them could say the word over and over again in defiance of the unwritten rule, and nobody told them to stop.

“But we know that when the vans roll out of here, they are full of slaves,” Nicky said. “Can we follow those vans and ambush them on the highway?”

“That used to be part of the Network’s strategy,” Gia said, “but the vampires came up with a solution. Every one of those vans has a bomb underneath it. The drivers are programmed to detonate the bomb if the van is threatened. The vampires know that we want to save the people inside, so they’ve arranged for all of them to be killed instantly if we try to intervene.”

“What about the Farm itself? Why don’t we just run in there and get those people out?”

“Because the vampires have protected the Farm in the same way. The supervisor is programmed to blow the entire Farm to kingdom come, killing every innocent person inside, if the Network or anyone else tries to break in. They don’t care if the slaves in there die. They’ll just get more. That’s

the difficulty we've run into. Even when we have successfully freed a group of slaves, they just get replaced. The vampires consume the same number of humans regardless. If they lose some from their mansions or from the Farm, they just go get more off the streets that day. That's why we're no longer focusing on liberation efforts. Now we're thinking about the big picture. We're gathering intelligence and trying to learn if the vampires have a weakness we can exploit."

"There has to be something we can do," Nicky said. "What if Frankie and my dad are in there?"

"They aren't in there," said Gia. "People off the streets never stay for more than a few days."

"Then where can we look next?"

"There are hundreds of vampires around the world," said Gia. "We'd have to stake out every mansion, one by one."

"I'd like to do that," Nicky said.

Gia took a minute before answering.

"Okay. We can go on a little field trip," she said. "But I can't leave my post just yet."

"Why not?"

"Melissa Mayhew runs a side business out of the Farm," said Gia. "The Network has intercepted some emails suggesting that one of her clients is on the way, and he's bringing guests. My job is to be here when he shows up."

That night, Gia saw who they were looking for. Just as the sun was going down, a black town car pulled up at the Farm and three men stepped out. Melissa Mayhew came out to greet them.

"This is where it gets interesting," Gia said. "The rest of the Samarin clan doesn't know about these nighttime visitors Melissa hosts on the Farm from time to time."

The first man to step out of the car was short and stout, with a face that glowed bright red in the compound's spotlights. The second had a long black beard and wore a white robe and headpiece so that everything but his face was covered. The third was a beanpole of a man in a blue suit.

"Those first two are Merv Tremblay and Sultan Amir," said Gia. "Merv is one of her best clients. The Sultan is new. So is the tax accountant."

"Tax accountant?"

“Don’t you think that man in the blue suit looks like a tax accountant? Not at all like the others – it’s weird. These men who do illegal business with Melissa, they have this look about them, like they’re just waiting to find the next person they can crush, like they don’t want to be rich so much as they want to be powerful. The tax accountant doesn’t look like one of them. What do you bet he’s just some assistant for the other two or...”

Gia didn’t finish her sentence, for at that moment, Melissa came down on the tax accountant like an attacking cobra, moving with such swiftness Nicky barely saw it happen. One minute Melissa was shaking hands with the Sultan, the next she was on the tax accountant, her fangs deep in his neck, his body going limp.

It was the first time Nicky had ever seen someone die.

“Well, I guess that explains why he didn’t look the part,” Gia said. “He wasn’t one of them. Probably someone who was causing trouble and got brought along so he could be disposed of.”

Nicky watched in horror as a team of children came out and lifted the dead body onto their shoulders, carrying it into the compound like little pallbearers. Once the body was gone, Melissa led the other two men inside.

“Merv Tremblay frequents Melissa’s vampire fantasy camps in South America,” said Gia. “He’s probably taking the Sultan along on his next trip. Together, they’ll pay her at least a million bucks, money that she’ll pocket directly rather than give to Daciana for dispersal among the clan. The vampire fantasy camps are one of her businesses. Illegal human trade is the other.”

Gia went on to explain how the Network had learned from years of watching the Farm that Melissa wasn’t just giving her progeny to other vampires. Some of her slaves, particularly among the population that was brought in off the streets, were brainwashed and then sold to wealthy humans.

“Obedient wives for rich men who don’t like their women to talk back,” Gia said. “A hard-working, compliant labor pool for your sweatshop. Melissa brings them in, hypnotizes them for a specific purpose, then sells them for a mint. The rest of the clan doesn’t know a thing about this. Transactions like the one we’re seeing tonight are done in total secrecy. They only happen at night, and there is a very small client list made up of the wealthiest humans on earth.”

“Do you think it’s possible that Frankie got sold off?” Nicky asked.

“No,” said Gia. “A boy his age is someone they want in the mansions. They’ll get a couple good years of work out of him before he’s ripe.”

It made Nicky sick that someone would think of Frankie this way, that the vampires saw him not as a person, but as a piece of meat.

When Merv Tremblay and the Sultan left the Farm, Gia and Nicky left their post and drove after them, trailing their black town car all the way to Tampa. The car drove into the airport and the two men boarded a private jet. From the parking area outside the concourse, Gia made note of the make and model of the plane, the departure time, and the course heading, and sent that info to her superiors at the Network. Then she started the car and took Nicky to their next destination, Melissa Mayhew’s South Florida mansion.

They staked out Melissa’s mansion for a week, trying to get a view of every slave in the place. Then they moved on to another mansion, then another. Through the winter, into the spring and summer, they went across the country, setting up shop at a safe distance from every known vampire residence and looking to see who was being held inside. Sometimes they got clear views through the windows. Sometimes they had to wait until a slave came outside to take out the trash or tend to the landscaping. They took pictures of every face they saw. Gia sent those pictures to the Network who used facial recognition software to try and identify the slaves.

They stayed in safe houses with Network sympathizers. Gia introduced Nicky as if she were already a Network operative, as if the mission they were on was official Network business. Their hosts not only provided shelter, they also provided food, clothing, gas money, companionship. They had a Thanksgiving feast with their hosts in Boston. They celebrated Christmas with their hosts in Philadelphia.

And all the while, Gia was teaching Nicky how to be a spy. Nicky learned how to use line of sight to see without being seen. She became hyper-aware of her surroundings, learning how to take detailed mental photographs of everything and everyone in her vicinity at all times. Already skilled at blending into a crowd from her years as a jackal, with Gia’s help, Nicky learned how to become completely invisible.

In addition to the skills of a spy, Gia taught Nicky the history of the conflict between vampires and humans.

“There was an uneasy balance that existed for centuries,” Gia told her one night in Richmond, Virginia. They were in the guest house of an estate owned by a wealthy patron of the Network, sitting on the floor in front of

the fireplace. “The vampires have always had the power to enslave us all, but their own in-fighting and strange customs kept them in check.”

“But then something changed,” said Nicky.

“It was Daciana and Sergio,” said Gia. “They changed everything.”

With the light from the fireplace dancing across her face as she spoke, Gia told Nicky the story of a seminal moment in the history of the conflict.

“It was some time in the late 15th century,” Gia said. “A young vampire named Daciana Samarin, having just broken her bond and killed her ex-lover, fell in love with a nobleman from Andalucía. His name was Sergio Alonzo.

“She made him a vampire, the first bond that she chose for herself. But with Sergio, something went wrong. The bond didn’t take. Sergio was an aberration, a kind of vampire the clans in Old Europe considered taboo. He was a Libertine.”

“What’s a Libertine?” Nicky asked.

“A kind of vampire gigolo, if you will,” said Gia. “Had Sergio been normal, he would have bonded with Daciana and the two of them would have fallen madly in love for decades. But with Sergio, there was no bond to be had. Sergio was defective. He was a Libertine, a vampire that doesn’t bond. And according to their custom, it was Daciana’s responsibility to kill Sergio the minute she realized he was different.”

“But she didn’t kill him,” Nicky said.

“No, she didn’t. She took pity on him, knowing that doing so would make her an outcast among her own kind. She helped him escape, and they both became fugitives.”

“But Daciana is here now, in America, right?” Nicky said. “I’ve heard of her.”

“Daciana lives in Washington, yes,” said Gia. “She and Sergio both. They came to America together some time in the early twentieth century. Daciana found her place in the underworld, and by the 1940’s, she was a feared mob boss in New York.”

“But now she’s not a mob boss, is she?” Nicky said. “She’s in the government.”

“Is there a difference?” Gia said. “And no, Daciana is not *in* the government. She *is* the government. Sure, there’s a president and congressmen and governors and judges and the like, but all of them answer to Daciana in the end. She and her clan allow the people to elect whomever



they please and delude themselves into thinking they are free. But the minute an elected official takes office, he belongs to her. They all do. All the power players in America belong to her, and if not to her, then to whatever immortal lives closest, and all the immortals answer to her.”

“How did she go from an outcast to a mob boss to--”

“To queen of us all? It’s a good question,” said Gia. “The answer is Sergio. With Sergio, Daciana figured out a way to game the system. The two of them have worked together to break all the old rules and create a new world to their liking. The key is Sergio’s ability to create a new vampire whenever he wants.”

“Because he doesn’t bond,” Nicky said.

“Precisely. For all the rest of the world, a new vampire is only created within the sacred rites of a vampire bond. For a normal vampire like Daciana, it’s the only way they can do it. They have to be in love to make a new one of their kind, and for a vampire, love is serious stuff. A typical vampire bond is fifty to a hundred years of passionate love, followed immediately by passionate hatred.”

“Passionate hatred?”

“In Europe, when a vampire bond comes to an end, it is customary for the weaker of the two to run away, knowing that its lover has now become its enemy. Sometimes, the weaker vampire is too slow to act, and is killed.

“This little quirk of their kind, more than anything else, is why their numbers stayed small and steady for centuries. But Daciana changed all that with Sergio. Not only did she allow him to live even though their bond didn’t take, but she arranged for him to use his unique talents to their mutual advantage. Sergio makes a new vampire every year, a vampire to whom he has no sort of bond whatsoever. And because Daciana is Sergio’s maker, all the vampires he makes are part of her bloodline.”

“How many vampires has Sergio made?”

“Seventy,” said Gia. “Every single vampire you and I have seen was either made by Sergio or is the bond of one of Sergio’s creations. Every vampire in America is part of the Samarin clan. That is why Daciana is the most powerful woman in America, and the Samarin clan is the most feared in the world. No other clan out there can approach their numbers.”

“What other clans are there?”

“Just the old clans, in the Old World, stuck in their old traditions. There are the Dillingers in Europe. There is Fu Xi and his small and splintered

family in China. There are clans in Australia and Africa and Central Asia whose numbers are so small that they are hardly clans at all. These vampires are disgusted at what Daciana has done, but there is nothing they can do about it. Not unless one of them is lucky enough to create a Libertine, and smart enough to keep it alive, like Daciana did.”

For Nicky, the story of how Daciana Samarin took over America only served to heighten her sadness. It was the explosive growth of Daciana’s clan that made it necessary for the vampires to steal innocent people off the streets, to grow a population of slaves to take care of their needs and serve as their food. If their numbers continued to grow, then more innocent lives would be lost. More children would be stolen away in the night, never to return.

Yes, never to return. Although Nicky wasn’t yet in a place where she could say it aloud, deep down she knew it was the truth. With every mansion they visited, every new set of slaves, Nicky allowed herself to inch towards the realization that she was on her own now. They weren’t going to find Frankie. They weren’t going to find her father. As they got farther along in their journey, Gia explained why the task was so difficult.

“Their eating patterns are irregular. For a vampire, feasting on a human is a very emotional act. If a vampire is in a mood, he might eat four slaves in one night. If he is busy, days might go by without him eating anyone. And at any given time, a vampire’s slave population covers a wide range of ages. Children like Frankie, newly off the Farm, get put into the slave population to work. They won’t be eaten until they turn eighteen. During that time, Frankie may get moved all over the place, depending on which vampire needs some ripe, ready-to-eat slaves, and which one needs some helpers.”

“You’re telling me we aren’t going to find him,” Nicky said.

“I think he’s gone, Nicky. But we can keep looking for as long as you’d like.”

And so they did. A year came and went, and still they were looking. They headed west, staking out the mansions of “the younger, less powerful members of the clan,” as Gia called them. Nicky was amazed that, even as they got to more remote, rural parts of the country, Gia knew where to find people to help them at every stop. In Indiana they stayed with an elderly woman named Barbara Huffington, who cooked them a delicious breakfast every morning. In Pennsylvania, they set up shop in the spare bedroom of a

funny fellow named Patrick Hall, who had a terrible pun for every occasion. In Minnesota they stayed with Alvin Green, a comic book enthusiast and computer hacker extraordinaire. Ordinary people with ordinary lives, all of them willing to risk everything for the cause, all of them deferential to Gia and Nicky, treating them like heroes on a secret quest to save the world.

Along the way, Gia taught Nicky all the things a Network operative knew. Fencing, martial arts, history, ballistics, languages, archery – somewhere along the way, the Network began to take great interest in Nicky and Gia’s cross country trip. Not only were the two of them amassing huge stores of data on every vampire’s mansion, but a new operative was being made. As Gia sent back all the photos they took of the slaves trapped inside each mansion, all the notes of how each vampire behaved in their home, the detailed timelines of the comings and goings of each vampire and the guests they received, she also sent reports on Nicky’s progress.

“I’m telling them you are the fastest learner I’ve ever seen,” Gia said. “We’re expecting big things out of you, Nicky.”

“Big things, huh?”

“That is, whenever you’re ready to call off the search.”

Nicky was ready after they finished their tour of California.

Maybe she’d just missed it at their earlier stops. Maybe she was lucky, or maybe Gia was protecting her. Whatever the reason, Nicky saw much more death during their run up the California coast than she had seen on the rest of the trip. She saw a vampire named Alexander Chapman bite into the neck of the young girl who opened the car door for him. Alexander drained the girl dry then left her corpse in the driveway for the other slaves to clean up.

She saw a vampire named Bernadette Paiz leap down from the trees and kill one of her slaves as the poor guy tended to her flower garden, letting what blood was left in him fill the flower bed when she was done.

She saw a vampire named Lena Trang, sitting out on her balcony, reading a book in the moonlight. One of Lena’s slaves stood behind her for more than an hour, as if commanded to do nothing but stay present until Lena got a craving for a midnight snack. When the moon was at its apex, Lena put down her book, fed on her slave, then threw the corpse into the bushes below and went back to her reading.

It changed Nicky to watch this. She imagined Frankie as that slave in the flower garden, her father as the body just pitched over the ledge. She

developed a hatred for the vampires, a hatred for the world they had created.

And she knew it was bigger than her. Bigger than the people she had left behind. Every day, throughout the world, hundreds of innocent people, people like her father, like Frankie, were sucked dry, killed by some ever-living monster that fed off the lifeblood of others.

Her desire to rescue the people she loved had become a desire to avenge them, and she told Gia she was ready to stop their search.

“I’m ready to join the Network full-time,” she said. “If I can’t rescue my family, maybe I can prevent others from suffering their fate.”

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## 16

The Network used her as a thief at first. It was a welcome return to her old life, even if she didn't have her old partner.

A teenager now, Nicky became a professional burglar. She broke into the homes of Washington royalty, the offices of global corporations, the halls of power. She worked with teams of Network agents who disabled alarms, security cameras, magnetic locks, and whatever else was in her way, and when she got inside, she stole data.

In Virginia, she broke into the home of a former Congressman and gave the Network access to his computer. In Los Angeles, she broke into the house of a Hollywood producer known for hosting lavish parties that frequently included members of the Samarin clan, and she bugged the place, giving the Network clear-as-crystal audio surveillance of the entire house. In Houston, she sat outside the Ventigen pharmaceutical plant and took pictures of everyone who came and went.

For four years Nicky traveled the world doing secret ops for the Network, and while she couldn't really say she was happy with the life, at least she was satisfied. She felt like her work honored the memory of Frankie and her father, like it was what she was meant to do.

She was in Seattle when Gia called her about the Thorndike assignment.

"Nicky, an opportunity has opened up to do something tremendous," Gia said. "We want you to do it. This job is, without question, the most important one the Network has ever assigned. I need you to come to Washington right away."

Another new town, two new parents and a new extended family, a new house, new cars, a totally new life to learn and absorb as if it were her own, and another new name.

"We keep your first name in your alias," Gia explained to her. "Your first name is so closely tied to your brain's vision of who you are that a vampire can sense if you're faking it. Even when we rework your identity, you'll still be Nicky. For as long as you work for the Network, you'll always be Nicky."

Nicky thought about asking Gia if it mattered that her real name, her birth name, was Celeste, but decided to say nothing. She'd stared down Melissa Mayhew as Nicky and lived to tell about it. She could do the same for whoever else she encountered at Thorndike.

That summer before Nicky's admission to Thorndike was as fast-paced and purposeful as the search for Frankie and her dad had been agonizing and slow. The entire energy of the Network was aimed at securing the surprise opening in the Thorndike Senior Class for Nicky, and she was in the middle of everything. She had to meet with the Network's computer hackers, who were creating the paper trail for Nicky Bloom and her fictional family. She had to work with Network strategists who, with lots of input from Jill, gave this fictional family the perfect history to draw the attention of Thorndike's Admissions Committee.

She and her make-believe parents had to attend private dinner parties, in character, to grease the palms of the people on the Admissions Committee who made the final decisions. She had to help spy on her competitors for the open spot, as the success of the entire mission rested on the Network's ability to stay ahead of the many wealthy families who would give anything to get their daughters into Thorndike.

It was Jill's idea to turn the Renwicks into unwitting allies on that front.

"Rather than all of us looking for dirt on the other girls competing for the spot, dirt which their families are certain to have hidden away where we can't find it, why not have the best dirt digger in Washington do the work for us?" Jill said. "What we need to do is make the Renwicks suspect that Nicky is the least likely of all the applicants to enter the contest. We need to make it clear to Kim and Galen Renwick that Nicky is the only girl in the game who couldn't possibly wear black to Homecoming."

One by one, Jill slipped little bits of fiction into the lives of the other girls vying for the open spot, putting those tidbits in places where Galen Renwick would see them and hopefully act on them. For the daughter of a Senator from Illinois, Jill used a phishing scam to steal her social media passwords, then quietly put mentions of Coronation, Sergio Alonzo, and a desire to live forever into her online history. For a wealthy girl from South Carolina, Jill cut and paste the girl's face onto a security camera photo from a shop on Rodeo drive, making it look like the girl had flown across country to try on expensive black dresses. Jill sent that photo anonymously to a gossip blogger with the subject line, "Planning for Homecoming Already?"

Nicky would have loved to watch all these shenanigans play out – she got a kick out of watching Jill work. But Nicky had her own tasks to attend to, and of those, one of the most important was assembling her look for Homecoming.

“We need to put something together that you really like,” Gia said. “If you feel beautiful, you’ll look beautiful. So, imagine that money is no object and you can have any dress, any accessory, any look at all that you want. What would you choose?”

Nicky didn’t hesitate. For her, the ideal of beauty was the silver cuff bracelet she had worn many years ago after robbing little Timothy’s house in Dallas. Of all the trinkets and keepsakes she had lost when Melissa Mayhew stole her away in the night, she missed that bracelet most.

The Network hired a silversmith to create a new bracelet for her. Nicky had the silversmith make earrings and a necklace to match the bracelet, and she let that jewelry guide the creation of her outfit.

“I wonder if the silver jewelry implies you are second best to Kim,” Gia said. “Kim will be wearing gold. If you’re wearing silver, I just wonder if students will think of gold and silver medalists.”

“Or maybe that’s what we want them to think,” Nicky said. “The other students will see Kim wearing her gold jewelry and think about how this contest has been hers to lose since birth, about how her family crushed anyone who might have challenged her and now she stands alone, higher than everyone else, like a gold medal winner on a podium. If I’m wearing silver, they’ll see some humility. But more than that, they’ll know that Kim already sees herself as the winner. They will be excited at the thought of knocking her off the medal stand. Besides, I really like this bracelet.”

“Fair enough,” said Gia, “but that bracelet....it seems too old for you.”

“It’s not. It’s perfect for me.”

“Just my opinion. Take it or leave it.”

“I’ll leave it.”

“I figured as much.”

Gia was learning not to argue with Nicky. If the Network wanted her in on this operation, then they had to let her do it her way.

Besides, the bracelet wasn’t old, it was classic. A tasteful silver cuff never went out of style. Nicky could have built an attractive, contemporary outfit around it.

But she didn’t. She went retro.

With the Network's help, Nicky found a vintage clothing specialist in Arlington named Tommy Yuen, who was thrilled to help Nicky create a throwback look for the Thorndike Homecoming.

"I think it's a brilliant idea," Tommy said. "I've heard that the Thorndike masquerade ball is quite the affair, and students get totally decked out. We'll find you a dress that will be unlike anything anyone else has on, that's for sure."

"Sounds great," Nicky said, "so long as we're discrete. I don't want anyone to know who I am or what I'm looking for."

"Girl, I know how this goes and you can count on me. I never disclose the names of my clients, and my sources know better than to ask. No one wants to be the bitch who wore someone else's dress."

A month later Tommy found the Francesco.

"In the fifties, Francesco Rivelli dominated the runways of Milan and Paris," Tommy said, holding up the dress. "For my money, no dress he ever designed topped this one. He called it 'Midnight.'"

*Midnight* was a sleek, sleeveless V-neck that tied at the waist and begged to be worn.

"Where did you find this?" Nicky asked.

"A collector in Paris had it in storage," said Tommy. "When he died, his niece inherited it. She knew it was something special, but based on what she was asking for it, she didn't know how special."

"How much was she asking for it?" asked Nicky.

"A thousand," said Tommy, "but I couldn't do that to her. This dress is worth fifty times that much. I gave her five."

"And I'll give you ten if you can find me some shoes to match," said Nicky.

The shoes Tommy found more than matched. More than complemented even. They expanded on the whole look. They added a flair to the outfit that Nicky knew would stand out in the ballroom.

The shoes were black suede ankle-strap pumps with six-inch heels and bright red soles.

"Red, huh?" Nicky said, looking at the bottoms of the shoes and wondering what the other students would think.

"Red from behind," Tommy said. "Red to catch the eyes of those people who are checking out your backside. This red is for the boys in the ballroom whose eyes start at the back of your neck, pause on your butt, and gaze



down your legs. Right when their eyes reach your feet, they get a big surprise. Totally sexy, like a red light telling them to stop where they are because you're too hot for them to get any closer."

Nicky laughed. "I don't know if I'm going to be able to walk in these shoes," she said, gazing at the heels.

"Take them home now and practice," said Tommy. "I'll get to work on your makeup."

"You do makeup?" Nicky asked.

"I do a lot of things," said Tommy. "And, at this point, I'm not letting anyone else touch you. I've got a vision for you, and some other makeup clown might not understand what we're going for here."

"What are we going for here?"

"Audrey Hepburn in a mask."

"I like that," Nicky said.

"Everyone else is going to like it too," said Tommy.

As August rolled around, everything started coming together. With a lot of help from the Renwicks, who viewed Nicky as the safest choice for the open spot, Nicky was enrolled at Thorndike. Tommy completed the final details of Nicky's outfit for Homecoming. All the secret additions to the Bloom family mansion in Bethesda, additions like steel bars that fell over the windows once Sergio was inside, were completed. With only a few weeks left before school started, Nicky's final task was to hide in her beautiful bedroom and memorize the enormous briefing book that told her anything and everything the Network thought she needed to know.

She was seated at her antique mahogany desk, reading Chapter One, when Gia interrupted her.

"May I come in?" Gia asked.

In her right hand, Gia carried a little booklet, which she now handed to Nicky.

"You're not giving me another book to read, are you?" Nicky asked.

"This is important info that isn't in your briefing book," Gia said.

Nicky sighed as she opened the booklet. The title page read *The Notes of Abbot Edward Schneider*.

"Nicky, at the Homecoming Ball, Sergio Alonzo is going to dance with you," Gia said. "And when he does, he's going to want to get in your mind."

“I thought that was why you chose me,” Nicky said. “Because he won’t be able to get in.”

“Yes, but what if he realizes you’re keeping him out,” Gia said.

“Melissa Mayhew never did.”

“Melissa Mayhew sees and reprograms twenty little kids a day. To her, they come and go, and it probably never entered her mind that it was even possible that one of those kids would be immune to her charms. Sergio is different. Homecoming is the only time he is ever called upon to do any mind control.”

“What’s he going to try to do to me, anyway?”

“His job is to make sure the loser shows up for the Coronation ceremony. Sergio dances with all the girls wearing black, and puts a command in each of their minds that, even if they lose, they will see this through to the bitter end.”

“He makes them come to their own funeral,” Nicky said.

“Exactly,” said Gia. “It’s so important to Daciana that he does this that the dance cannot end until Sergio has been with every girl. When he’s done dancing with you, he’s going to pin a white corsage to your chest. That’s the orchestra’s signal that his work with you is done. The orchestra won’t play the final song until all the girls wearing black have a corsage.”

“So, this book, The Notes of--”

“Nicky, when I tried to hypnotize you, I knew right away that I wasn’t getting in,” Gia said. “A skilled hypnotist knows what signs to look for. Your eyes dilate, your pulse slows down, your breathing becomes slow and rhythmic. With you, nothing like that happened. But there are ways of getting those effects while still operating entirely with your conscious mind. In that book, Abbot Schneider describes how he used meditation to bring about the physical effects of hypnosis, even when he wasn’t hypnotized. He used a mantra, a three-word phrase, and taught his brain to slow down his heart rate and his breathing whenever he repeated the phrase to himself. He would do this when he was in the room with vampires. He said it makes them implicitly trust you. He would approach the vampires as a friend and they would let him get close when his body was in this state. Something about a slow heart rate and deep, regular breathing puts the vampires at ease. Abbot Schneider said it was like their own bodies were mimicking his, and the vampires would let their guard down. This was how he was able to get close enough to stab them in the heart.”

“Okay,” said Nicky, flipping through the pages of the booklet. It was a very strange text, written almost like an autobiography.

*On the fourth day of the third month I had an appointment with the Duchess of Canterbury, Nicky read. I knew that she was ever-living, but she did not know that I knew.*

“How easy is this skill to learn?” Nicky asked.

“A lot of operatives like to study this book, and some claim they can bring down their heartrate, but only the Abbot was able to do it when he was in the room with a vampire. We don’t need to master this skill anymore. The Abbot had to get really close to make a kill. He didn’t have the automatic weapons or the computer-controlled traps that we use now. But for you, Nicky...I don’t know, I think this might be something useful for you to learn. I think you were lucky that Melissa wasn’t paying close enough attention to realize her reprogramming wasn’t working. I don’t want to count on you getting lucky again. I’d rather have you prepared.”

“Alright then,” Nicky said. “I’ll read the book.”

# **Part 3**

## **Intermission**

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*Breathe in me.*

*It is a phrase from many centuries past, read Page 4 from Abbot Schneider's book. The clerics spoke the words to themselves to call upon the Holy Ghost. They wanted the spirit to breathe in them, to take away their fears and give them the strength to fight these monsters from hell.*

Abbot Schneider began and ended every day with the words, repeating them to himself until he was in a sort of trance. He claimed to have trained his mind to respond to the words so quickly that he only needed to say them to himself once and his heart rate would slow down.

Nicky too said the mantra every morning and night. She sat up in bed and focused on the words, listening to their sound in her mind, trying to let them relax her body. She wore a heart rate monitor Gia had given her to check her progress. According to the monitor, the words had no effect on her at all.

As August rolled into September and the school year began, Nicky got too busy to spend any more time on the Abbot's little mantra, and she gave up.

Now, having made it through the first hour of the Homecoming Masquerade, moments removed from Art and Rosalyn's attempted wine-spill sabotage, Nicky found the words rolling around in her mind as she walked.

*Breathe in me breathe in me.*

She was approaching the bar. Ryan was sitting alone. Nicky was eyeing the empty stool right next to him.

*Breathe in me breathe in me.*

She was nervous, that's why the words had popped in her mind. She was trying to calm herself down.

*Breathe in me breathe...oh stop it, Nicky. Why in the world are you nervous now? The hard part of the night is over. You came in wearing black, you stood up to Kim, you worked the room, now you're going to talk to Ryan.*

But why? There was no good reason to talk to Ryan. He had rejected her, definitively and without hesitation. He wouldn't be coming to her party tonight. He wouldn't be supporting her in the contest. She needed to cut him loose from the plan and move on to somebody else.

So why was she making a beeline for that empty seat right next to him? And why did the thought of speaking with him now make her feel nervous, so nervous that she felt compelled to speak Abbot Schneider's mantra to herself as she walked?

Nicky's butt was barely on the empty stool before Ryan was standing to leave.

"Don't go yet," Nicky said. "I came here to talk to you."

"I think it would be best if we just stayed away from each other," Ryan said.

"Is that you talking, or Kim?" said Nicky.

Ryan looked straight ahead for a second, then got back in his seat.

"Who do you think it was?" he asked.

"Those were Kim's words, not yours," Nicky said. "She's told you to stay away from me, hasn't she?"

Ryan nodded.

"What in the world does she have on you that would make you behave like this?" Nicky asked.

"Nothing you need to worry about," said Ryan. "Just know that you're not going to change my mind, no matter what."

"I get that. I didn't come over here to change your mind," Nicky said.

"Then why did you?"

It was a good question. Why did she come over here? To be seen with him? Maybe. But whatever value there was in that was offset by the risk. Ryan had nearly stood up and left the moment Nicky arrived. With all the people watching – a snub like that would have been disastrous. It was only because Nicky had challenged his manhood, reminded him that Kim was holding him on a short leash, that he was still here.

"I didn't know where else to go," she said, a lie. She knew lots of other places she could have gone. With Ryan out of play, she needed to be spending her time on other prospects. The trouble was, she wanted to talk to Ryan.

"You should figure something out," Ryan said. "You need somebody with money taking an interest in you. Right now it's not me."

“That’s just it,” Nicky said. “If it isn’t you, I don’t know who it is.”

“We need to come up with somebody pronto, because if we don’t, you and an immortal version of Kim Renwick are going to be put together in a cage next spring, and I don’t care how much of a bad ass you think you are, you’re not going to survive.”

“We need to come up with something?” Nicky said.

“Yes, we do. Just because I can’t help you doesn’t mean I want to see you lose. Tell me who you’ve got so far. Who is going to support you? Who is going to your after-party?”

No one yet, Nicky thought. The plan was structured so that intermission was the time that Jill made her big move, and tried to close the deal with Annika.

“I don’t know,” Nicky said. “The truth is, I’m telling everyone that lots of people are coming to my party, but I don’t know if anyone is really planning to.”

“That’s a problem,” said Ryan.

“I know it is,” said Nicky.

“What about Marshall Beaumont?” Ryan said. “He’s not rich enough to swing the contest, but he’s somebody.”

“He’s on my list,” Nicky said.

“Then you should go find him now,” said Ryan.

“I don’t want to.”

Ryan smiled. “Yeah, I don’t want you to either. That guy’s weird.”

They laughed. Ryan, who was the only person at the bar who wasn’t gulping from a wine glass, took a sip of water. Nicky looked around the ballroom to see who was where.

She saw Marshall off by himself in a corner in the back, perfectly placed for her to approach him right now. But she stayed put. Marshall would become important later, after Brawl in the Fall, but he wasn’t crucial right now, and she didn’t want to leave Ryan. As useless as he was if he was going to support Kim, it was nice to talk to him. It was nice to take a break from all the espionage.

She saw Annika, a near-empty wine glass in her hand, a crowd all around her. Annika was telling a funny story, and had everyone in stitches.

She saw Jill, standing just outside Annika’s crowd, waiting for her moment to strike, and thought about how much better it was to be Nicky Bloom, a fictional character, rather than Jill Wentworth, having to play

herself. Nicky got to stay in full play-acting mode, which made it easy to present all the lies she was telling as truth. Jill, in contrast, was straddling the line between fact and fantasy. She had been Jill Wentworth, the rich daughter of a rich family, long before she was a Network operative, and had to reconcile the person she was with the person she now pretended to be. When she told her story about the secret consortium behind Nicky's entrance, she did so knowing full well that it would have repercussions in all facets of her life. It would cause waves with her parents, with her aunts and uncles, her cousins – people she had known since she was a little child. People with whom she once had been truthful, but now had to lie. Lying to people you know was so much harder than lying to strangers, and to Nicky, most everyone in this ballroom was still a stranger.

“You know, that was really awesome what you did to Art Tremblay,” said Ryan.

“Thanks. It was surprisingly easy.”

“You made Kim so angry. Did you see her stomp out the front door? She knew she was going to blow her top at you, and she knew that wouldn't help her cause at all, so you made her flee. Good grief that was sweet. Serves Art right for trying that crap. How much you wanna bet that Kim is reaming that guy a new one outside as we speak?”

“I'm sure she is,” said Nicky, “and he'll just put up with it. It's so sad.”

“Where else is he going to go? He has to support Kim, because if she wins this and he was supporting someone else, then he'll have an immortal who hates him.”

“He needs to believe that someone else can win this,” Nicky said.

“We all do,” said Ryan. “You're doing okay in here tonight, Nicky, but I don't think you've got anyone convinced yet that you really have a chance. You need to get out of this corner where we're hiding and work the room some. I expect people are interested in talking to you, if nothing else than to hear your take on what just happened with Art and Rosalyn.”

“I suppose you're right,” Nicky said. “Can you come with me?”

“No, I'm already being careless just talking to you,” Ryan said. “If people tell Kim we were sitting together...well, you know how it goes. We need to separate. See you around, Nicky Bloom.”

Ryan pushed himself away from the bar. As he turned to leave, he allowed his hand to brush against Nicky's, and, ever so quickly he gave her fingers a squeeze. It was a tiny gesture, the most he could do without being



seen, but to Nicky it was huge. At that moment, she wished all of this silliness could just go away, that Thorndike Academy, the immortals, the Network, and everything else that had Nicky and Ryan going in opposite ways could be pushed aside so she and Ryan could keep on talking. So she could keep on being herself, even if it was only for a little while.

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## 18

“Yes, Nicky Bloom. The one who got Shannon’s spot. The girl we worked so hard to get in here. We totally screwed up on that one. We practically handed her the opening on a silver platter, and this is how she repays us.”

Kim was half-way down the drive in front of the mansion, holding a phone to her ear, weaving in between the array of stretch limousines parked all around.

“You’re saying the new girl wore black to Homecoming?”

“Yes, Daddy. The new girl. The one you and all your investigators thought was the safest bet. The only girl from all the applicants that you were certain would have no interest in Coronation. How much money have you thrown around to make sure you knew who was entering? How could you miss this?”

“Interesting.”

*Interesting?* What the fuck was wrong with him? This wasn’t interesting. This was disastrous.

As a girl wearing black, Kim’s limo was parked close to the mansion. She opened the back door and stepped inside. Her driver turned back to see if she needed anything. She slammed the privacy screen closed.

Rockwell Transport had a fleet of stretch limos they kept on reserve just for Thorndike events. Fifty of them in all, custom made to cater to the unique needs of the girls in Thorndike’s senior class.

While the guys could come to Homecoming in whatever transportation they desired (and most of them selected more flashy ways to drive about than stretch limos – it was not uncommon for their parking area to be full of Italian sports cars) it had become tradition for the girls to arrive in limousines. A single limo for every one of them. The backs of those limos were designed to serve as mobile dressing and storage rooms between Homecoming and the after parties. There was a rack on which to hang their clothes, automatic blinds to cover up the windows, a vanity area with a large mirror and a complete supply of makeup, a locking jewelry chest, and, most importantly, a combination safe where the girls could put their masks

during the after-parties. In addition to all this, the drivers of the limos were professional security and ex-cops. They were armed and ready to defend the property inside, a necessity since the value of the gold and diamonds in some of the masks exceeded a hundred grand.

“How does this girl seem?” Kim’s father asked.

“Like a total bitch,” Kim said.

Her father laughed.

“I don’t know what you think is so funny.”

“Kim, you’re telling me that a new girl who isn’t even from town has just waltzed into the Homecoming masquerade wearing a black dress and is acting like a total bitch. I don’t understand why you’re even upset. This might be a good thing. Clearly, this girl doesn’t know what she’s doing.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. She does know what she’s doing. They’re all talking about her. She’s messed up everything. Don’t you get it? Nobody wants me to win. They’re only supporting me because they think I’ve already won and are scared of what I might do to them once I’m immortal. But this new girl already has everyone excited. People are talking about going to her after-party rather than mine.”

“Where’s her after-party?”

“At the Hamilton. Jada Razor is performing there.”

“I find it hard to believe--”

“Believe it! Jada Razor is performing at Nicky Bloom’s party. Why didn’t you get a pop star for my party?”

“Kim, we got you the White House.”

“Who gives a flying fuck about the White House?”

“People aren’t going to skip your party just to see Jada Razor.”

“No, but when they hear she’s coming to Nicky’s they wonder, don’t they? Hell, I wonder. Who is backing Nicky Bloom? Where did she come from? And if she can get Jada Razor to perform at her after-party, what else can she do?”

“That’s a good point.”

“Damn right it’s a good point! I swear, I’m the only one with my eyes open. You and mom and all your investigators and lawyers and other bullshit and you didn’t even see this coming. It’s clear as day what’s happened here. We thought we had this whole contest wrapped up because nobody was challenging us...in the open. But all this time, there’s been this

secret group with their own candidate, and they got her in right under our noses.”

“Who is it? Who’s behind her?”

“How should I know? That’s your job. The problem, Daddy, is that you and mom got lazy. The problem is you got all cozy with Daciana and thought it meant--”

“Kim, you need to stop. You’re panicking over nothing.”

“Easy for you to say! You don’t get locked in a cage if you lose!”

“If you lose, I’m just as dead as you are. The way I’ve behaved these past ten years, anything less than first place for you and I’m a dead man. Whoever wins would make sure of it. So don’t speak to me like I’m not as vested in this as you are. I have just as much to lose.”

Kim didn’t argue. It was true, of course. There wasn’t a soul in Washington who wouldn’t love to see Galen Renwick go down in flames. It was only their fear of him, of what he could do, that kept the Renwicks safe. If people began to believe there wasn’t reason to be afraid, it was over for all of them.

Thinking about all this made her feel better. Not that she was any more confident in her daddy’s ability to fix this mess. It just felt good to know that she wouldn’t be the only one killed.

“We will adapt, Kim. You may have thought this would be an easy road from start to finish, but I’ve always known otherwise. Nothing is easy in Washington.”

“So what do we do?” Kim asked.

“We start with this after-party. We make sure people come to your party rather than hers. You’re going to get back in that ballroom and work it. Anybody you think might ditch your party – you confront them directly. You ask them if they’ll have a drink with you at your party. Make them give you a commitment, right to your face. These kids are drunk and confused tonight, but they know enough not to insult you outright.”

“Okay. I can do that. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll get started on Nicky Bloom. We’ll find something eventually, I’m sure. You just relax, Kim. Now more than ever it’s time to show confidence. If the others sense you’re afraid...”

He was right. She had allowed Nicky Bloom to rattle her, which only made things worse. It was time to take back control. She was Kimberly

Fucking Renwick, for God's sake, and she was allowing some no-name nobody to mess with her. Not anymore.

She hung up with her daddy and walked back up the driveway, finding Art and Rosalyn standing on the stoop. Art had removed his wine-soaked jacket. Rosalyn, whose outfit was ruined, had covered up with a trench coat and was sobbing.

Pathetic.

"Kim, I'm sorry. She twisted--"

"Shut up Art before you bury yourself even further. What's the use of all that time in the gym if you're so weak a girl can spin you like a top?"

"She caught me at a weird angle. Let me--"

"Shut up I said! I don't want to hear your voice."

Rosalyn let out a whimper. It occurred to Kim that right now she was now doing the opposite of what her father had suggested.

Whatever. Rosalyn and Art were coming to her party regardless. As were Amy, Pauline, Josette, Brian, Andrea, Colin, Otis, Remy, and twenty-some others. All the richest kids in school, whose families were either indebted to Kim's dad or compelled to behave because of some dirty secret in their past. Even the worst case scenario left Kim with all the power players.

Including Ryan. That was her ace in the hole. Clearly, the new girl thought she had Ryan all wrapped up. Surprise, Nicky Bloom! At Thorndike, you can bat your eyelashes at the pretty boy all you want. That kind of stuff might have worked at whatever Podunk high school she came from, but in DC it was about the dirt. It was about the trade. You want something from me, I want something from you. And what Ryan wanted from Kim was to keep her mouth shut about a certain secret that she and only she knew.

It made Kim happy to think about how she'd already spoiled what was probably a big part of Nicky Bloom's strategy. But she couldn't get cocky. There were many others who wouldn't hesitate to back the new girl if they thought she had even the slightest chance. Those were the people she had to talk to.

"What time is it Rosalyn?"

Rosalyn perked up at the question, as if in a few words all might be forgiven.

"Four minutes after ten," she said.

Six minutes of intermission left. Enough time to get started on what her daddy suggested. Enough time to find some important people, people who might be thinking about going to Nicky's after-party, and make sure they remained loyal to Kim.

The doorman allowed Kim back into the mansion. Right away, she saw someone to approach.

Marshall Beaumont was someone Kim expected to support her even though she hadn't really expended any effort on him. He was exactly the sort who might leave her given the chance. She would start with him, then, one by one, she would get in the faces of every student who was a flight threat, and she would make them promise to her that they were coming to her party.

"Kim, oh...hi, how are you?" Marshall said.

"Wonderful, thank you," said Kim. "Will I see you at my party tonight?"

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## 19

Jill stood just a few feet away from Annika, looking on like everyone else. It was a sight that had become commonplace among the senior class – Annika Fleming telling a story to a group of onlookers, all of them entranced. The girl could work a crowd.

The story now was about Annika’s Uncle Charlie, “a Nebraska hick from the deepest, emptiest parts of the corn country,” who somehow ended up at a charity gala in Oklahoma City and hysterics ensued.

The crowd for Annika’s story included all the usual suspects from her gang, but also a good collection of new faces, people who had their own crowds to hang with but loved a good story so they stayed to listen. Isabella and Pauline, Emily and Dana, the McGuire twins – all of them were gathered just behind the bar, forming a half-circle around Annika, and laughing so hard they could barely breathe.

Annika was in rare form tonight. Her joyous charisma was completely cut loose by the wine and all the pent-up energy of her peers, who were eager to find a reason to be happy on this night, which was supposed to be one of the best of their lives. As Jill watched this virtuoso performance, she thought about what a difference a few months can make. She remembered how Annika was in early June, when Shannon’s death in a boating accident was still fresh on everybody’s mind. Shannon had been one of Annika’s closest friends, and for a time after her death, there was no place in Annika’s heart for boisterous storytelling and drunken laughter.

The funeral for Shannon Evans and her parents, who had also died in the accident, began at St. Andrew’s Cathedral and processed to the Evans family cemetery in Alexandria, where a bronze memorial statue was unveiled. The memorial was a three-sided pylon, each side bearing a plaque for one member of the family. It was a small memorial by the standards of the social sphere in which the Evans family lived, so much so that Jill couldn’t help but wonder if the survivors were being purposefully discrete. In Washington, the deceased were either celebrated or forgotten, and the way Shannon’s surviving family had put together the memorial, it looked like Shannon and her parents were going to be forgotten.

Forgotten wasn't the glamorous way to go, but it was much safer for the survivors. All too often in DC, an early death meant someone had raised the ire of an immortal. In the case of Shannon and her parents, that was almost certainly the case.

On the day they died, the Evans family took their yacht, *The Lavender Rose*, on an unscheduled outing. They made no arrangements with the pier to have the boat prepared, they didn't hire any deckhands, and they didn't commission a captain. They just showed up before sunrise and took the boat into the open water, riding past the buoys even though a storm was coming in.

The call for help came from Shannon's dad. At the time he made the call, the weather was bad, but not so bad that an experienced sailor couldn't navigate through it. When the Coast Guard arrived and the boat was nowhere to be found, their first assumption was that Shannon's dad had navigated his way to calmer waters. It wasn't until a day later that divers were employed.

They pulled up *The Lavender Rose* with a four foot hole in its bow. Shannon and her parents were pronounced dead.

All of this would have been considered strange in a normal town, but in DC, no one dared ask the questions that immediately came to mind. Questions like: Why was the Evans family in such a hurry to take out their boat? Where were they going? Why didn't they hire any help if they were going so far off the coast? Why didn't they check the weather before they left?

How did that big hole get in their boat in the open water?

Nobody asked because the mere presence of these questions gave the only answer anyone needed. The Evans family had angered someone important. Now they were dead.

And their survivors were being careful not to go overboard in celebrating their lives. The funeral was tasteful and quaint. Colleagues of Shannon's parents joined members of the Thorndike senior class in the private cemetery and said kind words about the deceased. People cried. They hugged. They moved on.

Except for Annika. To her, Shannon's death was a tragedy that was worthy of more than a two-hour mourning period. While everyone else went right back to their lives the minute the funeral was over, Annika went



into exile, her friends claiming she had locked herself in her bedroom and wouldn't come out.

Jill remembered that time well. Early summer in DC, the first round of fabulous summer getaways already starting for the Thorndike community, and the most outgoing, popular girl in school was locked in her bedroom. Annika never asked her friends to skip their trip to Cozumel, but they did anyway. It was very eye-opening to Jill. There was no good reason for Mattie, Jenny and the rest to stay home, but so powerful was Annika's influence on them that they couldn't leave while she was in pain.

Jill was watching all of this play out when Gia Rossi approached her about the plan to get Nicky Bloom into Thorndike. The Network wanted to fill Shannon's vacant spot in the senior class with an undercover agent who would not only enter Coronation, but win. It was a plan so bold as to be absurd, but Gia called it, "Our one and only chance to kill Sergio Alonzo, a mission we must attempt, even if we all die trying."

Perhaps it was the timing that made Annika's role so obvious in all this. Jill's first task that summer was to figure out how in the world a new girl who was totally unknown in Washington could somehow stir up enough support to win Coronation. The new girl needed a group of friends who were easily manipulated. A group of friends who were so devoted to their leader they would stay home from Cozumel just because she was sad.

If they got Annika to support Nicky Bloom, they got all of Annika's admirers as well.

The road to Annika went through Mattie Dupree, who was Annika's Number 1 now that Shannon was gone. Jill and Mattie, though not good chums, had a friendly relationship dating back to their time as lab partners in freshman biology. Still, the thought of making that first phone call out of the blue, that *Hi Mattie I know we haven't talked much but I want to be friends* sort of moment – it terrified Jill. She was so nervous about coming across as a fraud that she spent a week preparing herself for the phone call. She imagined hours of conversation between herself and Mattie, conversations about the sad state of Annika's psyche, the cute boys at school, the goings on around town, the girls who might wear black to Homecoming, and for each topic, Jill imagined the ideal things she could say and wrote them down.

Lunch with Mattie led to afternoons shopping with Mattie and Jenny led to a movie outing with Mattie, Jenny, Vince, and Jake which led to more

lunches, more shopping...when Annika came out of mourning just before Independence Day, Jill was a bona fide member of the group. Annika was more than welcoming of this new addition; the first time Annika joined the group for lunch that summer she gave Jill a big hug, as if there was nothing unusual about her presence. A week later, Annika herself invited Jill to join the gang on their rescheduled trip to Cozumel.

Beach volleyball, body surfing, frozen drinks with little umbrellas, open fires on the beach at night, looking at boys with Jenny, talking about boys with Mattie, parasailing, water skiing, scuba diving—a funny thing happened to Jill during those weeks. In pretending to like these people, she came to actually enjoy their company. It was something Gia had warned her about.

“Every undercover operative is in danger of losing her identity at any time,” Gia had said. “It’s something you must both accept and look out for. You will come to see yourself as one of them. If you didn’t, you’d be doing a poor job. But you must take time every day to remind yourself who you really are and why you’re really here, lest you lose yourself entirely.”

For Jill, those reminders of who she really was came late at night, when everyone retired to their separate rooms in the Veranda Hotel and Resort on the beach. Before getting in bed, Jill spent at least an hour every night hacking into the admissions database at Thorndike, laying the groundwork for Nicky Bloom to go from absolute nobody to ideal candidate for the open spot in the senior class. Those late-night hacking sessions brought Jill back to reality, and kept her brain aware that there was a larger purpose in all this, that she was more than another rich girl on the beach.

On the morning of their second-to-last day in Cozumel, Jill feigned a hangover, releasing herself from the day’s scheduled activity (cliff diving behind a beach house Jake’s family had purchased last winter). Jill watched from her tenth floor window as the limo took away all her friends, then she retrieved a plastic box from a hidden compartment in her luggage. Inside that box was a key card encoder that Gia had given her.

Jill had asked for two keycards to her room at check-in. One of those key cards had been with her throughout the trip. The other had been held safe in her luggage, not needed until now. Taking the spare key card and the encoder box, Jill left her room and took the elevator to the top floor, room 1858, Annika’s room.

She slid her spare key card into the lock on Annika's door. An LED on the lock turned red, notifying her that she was not granted access. Jill removed the card and put it in the encoder box, which read the trace magnetic signature the lock had left on the card. Two seconds passed, then the encoder spit out the card, which was now re-keyed to open Annika's door. Jill slid the card in the lock, watched the LED turn green, and opened the door.

She was surprised at the mess in Annika's room. Housekeeping hit these hotel rooms daily, yet somehow Annika had found a way to scatter clothes, makeup, and toiletries everywhere. Jill was careful not to disturb a thing on her way to the desk at the back corner of the suite. Paying close attention to the position of the chair before she moved it, Jill sat in front of Annika's open laptop and turned it on. She interrupted the boot-up before the operating system was loaded, and began controlling the computer at the command level, speaking directly to the compiler. In a few minutes, all the secrets that made this laptop run were revealed to her. Annika's user name and password, the network key that identified its operating system, the GUID, the CPU number, the IP address.

She allowed the boot-up to continue, and used Annika's user name and password to gain full access to the operating system. She pulled a thumb drive from her pocket and plugged it in, installing a modified version of the software she had written freshman year to spy on her classmates. This new version gave her total (and invisible) access to Annika's laptop and everything on it. Jill took a moment to check the install, ensuring it worked as planned and, more importantly, left no trace of its presence. Satisfied that all was well, she shut down the computer and left.

That night, after everyone returned from their scuba excursion, Annika got online. Everything she did was visible to Jill.

Annika surfed the Net, visiting the web site for a band named Grogtail, then a web site for amateur artists, then her social media pages.

She sent an email to the sculptor who was making her mask for Homecoming, asking for an update.

She sent another email, from a free web mail site, but didn't use her own name.

Jill, who had been dozing in and out of sleep, sat up straight in her chair and paid closer attention. Why was Annika sending emails under someone else's name?

The name she was using was Zhang Li Gong, and the person she was emailing was named Hong Chung.

“What in the world?” Jill whispered.

At first she suspected that her software was malfunctioning, and somehow had intercepted computer activity from China, but the contents of the email were definitely from Annika.

*Dearest Hong,*

*Cozumel Day Six. Scuba diving with everyone except for Liu, who had too much to drink last night. I'm going to have to teach that girl how to party...*

The email went on to describe a day of scuba diving between a girl and her friends, only all the friends had Chinese names.

*Chen spotted a turtle and then dove all the way to the bottom trying to catch it, the dork. Duan and Xu's on-again off-again status is back to on-again – they couldn't keep their hands off each other today. And Ming – that girl is so strange – be glad you aren't here. She'd be driving you nuts. She had no interest in actual scuba diving, just in cannonball diving off the side of the boat. She thought she was funny, but let me tell you, after an hour, it's not funny. I would have made her stop but I wasn't in the mood. I tell you, I'm not myself these days. I miss you more than I can put into words. I love you so much. I'm counting the days until we can be together again.*

*Love you,*

*Zhang*

Annika was describing her day, but giving everyone a code name. Liu, the one who had too much to drink, was Jill, who had skipped the outing with a phony hangover. Chen, the dork who chased a turtle, sounded an awful lot like Jake. The strange girl who cannonballed off the side of the boat was named Ming in the email but was almost certainly Norah, who probably wouldn't be invited on anymore of Annika's fabulous trips. And

the on-again off-again couple named Duan and Xu were Mattie and Vince, who had been a couple in and out of hiatus since freshman year.

More interesting than any of this was the sign-off. Who was Hong Chung, this mystery man who not only got a recap of Annika's day, but a "Love you" at the end? It appeared Annika had a secret boyfriend, one so secret that they had to use anonymous email accounts where all the names had been changed to Chinese. It was smart of them. *Clean Street* was always surfing the web, always reading emails. It looked for key words that identified what was going on in the context of an email conversation, and picked out proper names. Had Annika typed in Jill and Mattie and Jake and the rest, it wouldn't matter that she was using an anonymous account. *Clean Street* would find those names and know who was typing. Whatever Annika and 'Hong Chung' wanted to keep so secret that they were using anonymous web mail accounts – to *Clean Street*, it wouldn't be secret at all if Annika was using real names.

This of course begged the question: what was the big secret? Who was this guy and how come Annika was hiding him from her friends? What did she mean when she said, "I'm counting the days until we can be together again?"

Adding even more mystery was the location of this Hong Chung fellow. When Mr. Chung sent a return email an hour later, Jill was able to trace it to the source IP address.

"Brazil," Jill whispered.

Annika had secret boyfriend in Brazil? A secret boyfriend with a Chinese name, or a fake Chinese name?

Jill did an Internet search on all the names in Annika's email, and learned that Zhang Li Gong and Hong Chung were the main characters in a Chinese film from the seventies named *Crimson Sunrise*. What little there was about the film online was posted anonymously. Apparently, the Chinese government had banned the film immediately after it was released and executed the moviemakers. While the immortals in America had never declared the movie unacceptable viewing, people on the Internet treated the film as taboo, only speaking about it on anonymous message boards in discussions that were peppered with warnings not to take the movie too seriously or speak openly about it.

It was an exciting development. Secrets were weaknesses that could be exploited. The key for Jill was to figure out what this secret was all about.

She spent the rest of the summer trying. In the mornings she was one of Annika's "peeps," joining her and the rest of the crew for lunch dates, shopping excursions, visits to the museum, visits to sporting events, and whatever else Annika felt like doing. In the evenings, Jill spied on Annika through the computer.

The emails between Zhang Li Gong and Hong Chung were a daily occurrence. Annika's emails were a recap of the life Jill was living, told from Annika's point of view with all the names changed into Chinese. Hong Chung's return emails were like a travelogue, describing a family (also with Chinese names) touring the countryside, learning the ways of the locals, deep sea fishing off the coast, and waiting eagerly for Zhang Li's eventual arrival. There was nothing on the surface that suggested subversive activity, but it was curious just how secretive they were being. Not only were they using anonymous web mail accounts and encoding the names of their friends, they were also deleting the emails immediately after reading them. Jill went through Annika's sent items, saved items, deleted items – all were empty, even of emails she had read only a day before. All Jill could learn from the history of the web mail account was that it was created on November 15th the year before. There was only one email address in the contacts folder, and one email address in the memory cache.

Clearly, they were being careful. They were acting like the Network sympathizers Jill had met in so many chat rooms. But no one from the Network knew a thing about this. The Network's intelligence officers were just as puzzled by this development as Jill.

"Never once have we seen a shred of evidence that Annika Fleming has an interest in overthrowing the immortals," said Alvin Green, who, until Jill's arrival, had been the Network's best computer hacker. "Everything we've ever seen from the Flemings suggests a family who is in deep with the powers that be. I mean, her father is the governor of Oklahoma. These are people who play by the rules."

"Have they ever been to Brazil?" Jill asked.

"Perhaps that's something you should find out," said Alvin.

The next day Jill initiated a conversation at lunch about the places they'd been. After suffering through Jenny and Mattie announce how many tropical paradises they'd been to since high school began, Jill turned to Annika and asked her directly.

"What about you? Where have you been?" Jill asked.

Paris, London, Rome, most of Germany, the Alps in Switzerland and in Italy (“skiing was best on the Swiss side”), London, Vienna, Greece—but only as a cruise stop—Turkey, Morocco, Dubai, Sydney, Hong Kong, Tokyo, “and all the beaches we’ve hit on breaks,” was Annika’s answer.

“Is there any place you haven’t been but want to go?” Jill asked.

“Rio de Janeiro,” said Annika.

“Ooohhh....let’s go there,” said Mattie. “School doesn’t start for another month.”

“No way,” Annika said. “When I go to Rio it’s going to be special. It will be more than just another thing to do on summer vacation.”

*I’m sure it will be,* Jill thought.

In August, Jill started fishing for opinions from the group about Coronation, about Kim Renwick. She got nothing but fluff. Annika was unwilling to speak ill of Kim, so no one else was either. Even when Jill spoke openly about her disdain for the Renwicks, the best she could get from the others were gentle nods of agreement before they changed the subject.

And that was only when Annika wasn’t around. When Annika was present, she wouldn’t tolerate any mention of Coronation or the Renwicks at all.

“It’s such a boring topic,” Annika said. “Any time wasted on Coronation is time we could have spent having fun. We all know who we have to support in the contest. I, for one, am focusing on looking fantastic at Homecoming and getting on with my life.”

Such was Annika’s stance out in the open, but in her secret emails to Hong, she sang a different tune.

*Liu really hates the Chairman, and wants the rest of us to hate her too. She’s practically on a campaign. I had to shut her down on the whole topic today, even though I admire her spunk. Here she is, one of the richest girls in school, and she’s trying to rally all of us to support someone other than the Chairman. I wish I could help her. The problem is, there is no one else to support. As we expected, the Chairman is running away with a victory this year.*

Liu, of course, was Jill, as she had been in the emails all summer. Jill assumed ‘The Chairman’ was Kim Renwick. If that was the case, then

Annika might change her tune when Nicky Bloom showed up. Despite her insistence that she had no interest in the politics of Coronation, Annika secretly wished to support someone other than Kim, other than The Chairman.

On the last Friday night before school started, Annika called Jill, Mattie, Jenny, and Norah to her house for a “Girls Night Out” party. Annika’s parents were in New York, and she insisted that the girls spend the night together in an old fashioned slumber party, “Just like when we were kids.”

*Just like when we were kids*, if kids got drunk out of their minds. By midnight, Jenny was puking, Mattie was asleep, and Norah was ready “to find some guys and get this party started.” Annika asked her driver to take Norah to a dance club. While Annika walked Norah out the front door, Jill, under the guise of checking on Jenny, went exploring in Annika’s bedroom.

She found a copy of *Crimson Sunrise* in an unmarked black box on the bookcase. Betting that Annika was already so sloshed that she wouldn’t remember anything that happened in the next few hours, Jill took the movie downstairs and popped it in. The title screen was rolling on the TV when Annika came back inside.

“What are you doing?” Annika asked.

“I should be asking you the same thing,” said Jill. “This movie is banned, you know.”

“It’s not banned, people just think it is, and who the hell cares? You were snooping in my stuff. What the fuck?”

“Relax, Annika. Your secrets are safe with me.”

*Secrets*. Plural. Hopefully Annika wasn’t too drunk to catch the reference.

“Besides,” Jill continued, “I’ve always wanted to see this. Come watch it with me. I need you to explain the symbolism.”

Annika stood in place for a moment, as if trying to sort out in her mind what was going on. Jill had been around enough drunkards, her dad being one of them, to know about where Annika was in the process. Her eyes were thoroughly glazed. Her cheeks were bright red. She couldn’t walk straight but her speech wasn’t slurring yet. One more drink and Annika would be totally useless. Jill would have to keep her away from the booze until the movie was over.

“Okay, you’re on,” said Annika, a smile taking over her face. She jumped over the back of the couch, landing right next to Jill and giggling at



how clever she was. On the TV, the screen went from black to bright orange. A flute played a somber melody. Time lapse photography showed a sunrise over the ocean.

“This movie was an open declaration of artistic war against the ruling regime in China,” Annika said. “By the time it was released, Fu Xi and his clan had already taken over the Chinese government. The sunrise represents the triumph of humanity over the vampires.”

“Vampires,” Jill said. “I love it when people say that word.”

“I do too,” said Annika. “I think everybody does it, in secret. Pass that beer over here, Sweetie, will you?”

“Have some water instead,” Jill said, grabbing a bottle off the end table and giving it to Annika.

Annika held the bottle up to one eye and pointed it at Jill like a telescope.

“I see you,” she said in a sing-song voice, before breaking into a giggling fit.

The movie was short, just over an hour long, and its plot was simple. It was *Romeo and Juliet* with a Chinese setting: two teenage lovers named Zhang Li Gong and Hong Chung were kept apart by the warring parties of the ruling regime and ultimately died for their love. An evil villain known simply as “The Chairman” orchestrated the murder of Zhang Li. Upon learning that his lover was killed, Hong looked out at the sun rising across the ocean and stabbed himself in the gut. The movie ended with Hong falling into the sea and the camera panning up to show the sunrise.

It was a dark, brooding movie. The yellow English subtitles running across the bottom were frequently the brightest things on the screen. Even though she found it all a bit boring, Jill could see the appeal of the movie to someone like Annika, someone who harbored feelings of rebellion but repressed them. To Annika, watching this movie, and explaining all the symbolism as it went, had to be a liberating feeling, even if she was drunk.

The minor characters in the film matched the fake names in Annika’s secret emails. Duan and Xu were friends of the main characters, and couldn’t decide if they wanted to be a couple or not, just like Vince and Mattie. Ming was the comic relief character, a strange girl who brought happiness to the screen until the Chairman killed her.

And Liu, Jill’s namesake in Annika’s emails, was a princess who turned on her father and tried to help Zhang Li and Hong. Although Liu’s plan to

smuggle Zhang Li out of China failed, she was a heroic character, who died at her own father's hand after her treachery was revealed.

Jill found it quite touching that Annika viewed her this way.

"Do you think anything is ever going to change?" Jill asked.

"You mean, will the world stop being so evil? No, I don't think so," said Annika.

"You're a happy person," said Jill. "How can you be so pleasant all the time when you know the world is like this?"

Jill was openly inviting Annika to engage in sedition with that last question. Her words asked Annika how she could be so happy, but they both knew the question really was, 'How can you stand aside and do nothing when you know the truth of the world?' The question was Jill seeking an opening to find out if Annika might be Network material.

Her reaction was disappointing.

"We shouldn't have watched this," Annika said, racing to the TV and turning it off. "I should throw this movie away. I don't really believe in any of this stuff. I just like being bad sometimes, that's all. It's getting late. Maybe we should go to sleep. You don't have to stay if you don't want to."

"Annika, I enjoyed watching this movie with you," said Jill. "And I promise I'll never breathe a word about it to anyone."

"I know you won't, Sweetie. I trust you. I..."

Annika was crying now. Jill sighed. Whatever she was hoping to accomplish with this little movie date wasn't going to happen.

"Here," Jill said, grabbing the beer bottle she'd been withholding from Annika during the movie. "Have a drink. Everything's going to be okay."

Annika took a swig from the bottle, then another, then a third. As she reached for the table to set down the bottle, she fell off the couch.

"W'oh, are you okay?" Jill said.

Annika started laughing. She rolled onto her back and laughed even louder.

"Look at me!" she gasped. "R..O..F...how's it go?"

"ROTFL," Jill said.

"Yes! That's me right now!"

Annika rolled back and forth on the floor, laughing louder and louder as she went. Somewhere upstairs, a toilet flushed. Jenny must have had to get out of bed for puking round 2. Watching Annika roll on the floor, Jill wondered if she'd be next.

Jill stayed at Annika's house until Saturday evening, tending to Jenny and Annika both. Annika started puking at three in the morning, but was done by four. Jenny wasn't finished puking until after dawn. All three girls slept until mid-afternoon. When they awoke, Jenny was still a moaning mess, but Annika was happy as a lark. Jill hung around to cook lunch and help Annika clean up. There were many opportunities that afternoon for Annika to bring up *Crimson Sunrise* and what happened the night before. She never did. Either she didn't remember, or she intended to forget.

Three weeks had passed since girl's night out. Now, Annika was standing near the bar in Renata Sullivan's mansion, her eyes getting glazed underneath her bejeweled mask, her cheeks turning rosy. Annika's story about Uncle Charlie had come to a close. This was the moment Jill had been waiting for. Everything was in place. Nicky Bloom had arrived and made her presence known. Jill had given the cover story about the "secret consortium" behind Nicky's campaign. Kim Renwick had tried to ruin Nicky's night with a spilled glass of wine and failed in spectacular fashion. The ballroom was buzzing. In barely an hour, Nicky had demolished the hierarchy and order of the senior class. Annika was on her third or fourth glass of wine. If ever there was a time to close the deal, it was now.

Jill put her hand on Annika's shoulder.

"Oh hey," Annika said, as if she and Jill were old friends who hadn't seen each other for a long time.

"How's it going?" Jill asked her.

"Great," Annika said before gulping from her goblet of wine.

Something was wrong. Jill had spent enough time with Annika that she could tell.

"Is everything alright?" Jill asked.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Annika said.

"I don't know, it just seems like you've got something on your mind."

Annika gave Jill a look that was a mix of curiosity and sympathy. "Let's go someplace to talk alone," she said.

A minute later they were in the far corner of the ballroom.

"You know, I was thinking during the first hour of the dance," Annika began, "and I've decided I'm angry with you. Really angry."

"Angry with me. How come?"

"You've known about Nicky Bloom all this time and didn't tell me."

"Annika, like I said--"

“I know, I know. Your family’s in some secret club.” Annika waved her hand dismissively.

“And we weren’t supposed to tell anyone,” Jill said. “I wasn’t even supposed to tell you tonight. The only reason I said a thing is because you guys are my friends and I’d hate to see you get caught backing the wrong girl.”

“See, I think that’s horse shit,” Annika said. “I think your little club thought it would be a good idea for you to become friends with me, and this whole summer was just a charade leading up to that speech you gave us before the dancing started. I think you started hanging out with us to see if I was worthy of being in your secret club but decided to stay away from me because I wouldn’t talk enough smack about Kim.”

“Annika, that’s not how it is.”

“Really? Are you sure, Jill? Because I seem to remember you trying hard all summer to get my friends to talk shit about Kim Renwick and I had to shut you down. I thought it was strange at the time, but now it all makes sense. You were testing me, and I failed. You didn’t trust me to join your anti-Kim crusade, so instead you fed us this story tonight that you care about us and don’t want us to get left out.”

Jill took a deep breath. She was losing her. A whole summer of work and potentially the whole operation would go down the drain if she didn’t get this turned around.

“It’s not a story, Annika. I do care, and that’s why I told you guys what we were up to. Okay, I admit it. I pushed my way into your group this summer because the consortium wanted you, but that doesn’t mean my friendship was fake. That doesn’t mean the week in Cozumel, or the lunches, or the girls night out were any less special to me than--”

“Don’t even talk to me about girls night out,” Annika snapped. “Oh yes, Jill, I remember everything. I just pretended to forget because that was better for us both. You and I both need to be more careful. This isn’t some little game. Make a wrong move in this town and you might end up dead. Don’t you think for a second that Kim Renwick won’t arrange for her enemies to end up at the bottom of the ocean, just like Shannon. You and your little club can go do whatever the hell you want, but I’m making it out of this year alive. I don’t care which girl wins Coronation, but I do care about my friends, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to see another person I care about go down because of stupid DC politics. You put me and my

friends in danger when you started hanging out with us this summer, Jill, so now I will kindly ask you to leave us the hell alone.”

With that, Annika turned and walked away. Jill thought about calling after her, but what good would it do? Annika wasn't going to back Nicky no matter what Jill said. She had blown it. Her brilliant plan to bring Annika and her friends over to Nicky Bloom had backfired big-time. She hadn't made Annika into a supporter, she'd made her into an enemy, and there really couldn't be a worse outcome than that. The big weapon she'd been aiming for, Annika Fleming's sway in the senior class, was now turned against her. They'd be lucky to get anyone to come to Nicky's after-party now.

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## 20

Nicky stood up from the bar and went to the back of the mansion, thinking about the mission, thinking about her role in it all. She saw Jill standing there, staring blankly at Annika Fleming, who was walking away.

It didn't look good.

Nicky nodded in Jill's direction, guiding her with her eyes. There was a hallway in the south corner of the ballroom that led to the restrooms. Having given Jill a cue to join her there, Nicky stepped into the hall, but instead of turning towards the restrooms on the right, she turned left, then left again, finding herself in a short corridor just outside the kitchen. It was the one spot in the ballroom that was suitable for Nicky and Jill to get together and talk shop. Not only was it removed from sight of the party, but it was also a rare blind spot for the many security cameras in Renata's mansion.

Jill showed up a few seconds later.

"How's it going out there?" Nicky asked.

"Terrible. Annika is angry at me and has absolutely no interest in your after-party. She's scared to death of betraying Kim and wants me to stay away from her."

"It's Shannon, isn't it?" said Nicky. "Annika's afraid she's going to end up dead."

"Seems that way," said Jill. "What's weird is that she's got this other side of her that's totally rebellious. The secret boyfriend in Brazil, the forbidden Chinese movie..."

"The secret boyfriend is the reason she's scared," said Nicky. "There's a reason she's hiding him. There's more to Annika and this Hong guy than we know, and whatever it is, she's scared that Kim will find out."

"So scared that she wants to be as far away from us as possible," said Jill. "It sucks. I felt like I was getting so close to figuring her out."

"Don't get discouraged now. This angry rejection she gave you is the final piece of the puzzle and now we know what we have to do."

"Is that so? Then maybe you should enlighten me what it is we have to do now, because I have absolutely no idea. I've just spent the last three

months chasing Annika Fleming only to have her flip out on me.”

“Jill, you’ve spent the last three months getting to know Annika Fleming on an intimate level. You have the intel you need to make this happen. Annika is staying with Kim because of a secret she doesn’t want revealed. But we already know that secret. We hold all the cards.”

“All I know is that she’s got some secret boyfriend who shares her love for a weird foreign film.”

“That’s enough. Once Annika learns you know that much, she’ll be eager to do as you ask.”

“You’re suggesting I should blackmail her?”

The look on Jill’s face was baffling. It was as if Nicky had asked her to commit murder or something.

“Of course that’s what I’m suggesting,” said Nicky.

“But...that’s just what Kim would do.”

Nicky sighed. “I don’t know what you were expecting when you signed up for this, but this game we’re playing – it’s for keeps. The immortals eat people. At the end of this contest, if I don’t win, I’ll be put in a cage so the winner can eat me. Blackmailing your new friend might not be an appealing idea to you, but it’s our best option. Our only option, really. You have everything you need to march right up to Annika and demand that she comes to my after-party and that she brings everyone with her. It’s a strategy that works. Just ask Ryan Jenson.”

“What? Ask Ryan?”

“Yes, Jill, you’re not the only one who’s having a tough night. Ryan said he isn’t coming to my party either. Kim has something on him and he’s committed to her through the bitter end.”

“Holy shit,” Jill said. “I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t know. Nobody knew.”

“Now what?” said Jill.

“We’re going to regroup and get back out there,” said Nicky. “You’re going to keep working the crowd, and the minute you see Annika take a break from the dance floor you’re going to follow her and make her come to the party.”

“But without Ryan?” Jill began, “What good is Annika without Ryan? Without Ryan we don’t stand a chance.”

“Ryan’s not the only guy in this school who has money, and I’ve already worked out a backup plan. But I’ll need your help to pull it off.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“I need you to find Art Tremblay and talk me up while you dance with him. If we can’t have Ryan, Art is second best. He’s got plenty of money.”

“But just a few minutes ago Art Tremblay was trying to spill wine all over your dress!”

“Exactly,” said Nicky. “And he failed. Kim just took Art outside and whipped him like a dog. You should have seen the look on his face when he came crawling back to the ballroom. That guy is so beaten down I don’t think he could get much lower. A guy like that is vulnerable. He’ll be open to anyone who is willing to build him up again. And it’s going to start with you. By the time you turn him over to me, we’ll have him ready to listen.”

“Nicky, this is crazy. I have no idea what I’d even say to Art.”

Out in the ballroom, the musicians began tuning up, which was everyone’s cue that the dancing was about to start again.

Nicky put her arm around Jill and began leading her out of the hallway.

“You’re going to tell Art a story that makes him rethink the ramifications of what happened when he tried to push me into Rosalyn. The first words out of your mouth will be, ‘I saw what you did earlier.’”

“What he did?”

“That’s right, what he did. In your story, Art wasn’t a victim in the great wine spill fiasco. In your story, Art knew exactly what he was doing.”



**Part 4**  
**The Hunt**

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## 21

While a hundred genuine teenagers gathered inside Renata Sullivan's mansion, nine ageless beings in teenage bodies gathered in the woods outside. As the host of Homecoming, Renata had certain responsibilities. She had to provide a setting for the party, which she did gladly. Her mansion, surrounded by a thick swath of Virginia forest, was the perfect getaway for students and immortals alike. She had to provide entertainment, which for the students inside meant a chamber orchestra assembled from all the best players in the world.

And she had to provide food.

For the teenagers inside the mansion, Renata's slaves prepared hors'dourves in the kitchen then carried them around the ballroom on silver platters for all the guests to enjoy. For the immortals outside, no such courtesies were necessary. For the immortals, Renata's slaves didn't make food. They were food.

At any given time, Renata, like all members of the Samarin clan, had at least forty slaves on site. A few of those slaves had been there for many years, growing old in Renata's mansion while they taught all the new kids their roles in the house.

But most of the slaves arrived when they were young and never made it to old age, becoming Renata's dinner when they ripened to her liking.

Immortals preferred to feast on people who were in the prime of life and health. Humans aged eighteen to twenty-two tasted best. Their blood was vibrant in those years. Their flesh, tender.

Renata and all the other immortals of the Samarin clan ate often, feasting on ripe young humans whenever the mood struck them. Consequently, their slave populations needed frequent replenishment. That was where Melissa came in.

Melissa Mayhew was a small girl whose eyes and hair were matching shades of gold and whose tiny frame masked her enormous ambition. That ambition won her the Coronation contest in 1968. Immediately seeing her

potential to do important work for the clan, Daciana put Melissa in charge of the newest institution in her hierarchy of power. The Farm.

The Farm was ten acres of land in South Florida where new slaves were raised to feed the growing family of immortals in America. It was a strange creation, absolutely unique in the world of the ever-living, but it had become necessary. Since Coronation had been instituted at Thorndike, Daciana's clan had grown to the largest in the world. They needed to be fed, and they couldn't rely on simple hunting alone. These were respected members of high society now. They couldn't just go around eating the innocent.

In those early years of Daciana's reign, the clan feasted on the prison population, on the villains who deserved to die, on the troublemakers who needed to be removed from the streets, and the world thanked them for it. But there were only so many rapists and murderers in the world, and very few that were healthy and ripe.

Fearing that her clan would get greedy and too many innocent people would be missed, Daciana created a farm where young people could be born and raised in totally anonymity, the sort of people who could be eaten when ripe without anyone missing them at all.

Murderers, rapists, and thugs would still be removed from the world, of course, but no longer would Daciana's children be forced to eat them. A murderer who had over-ripened would become a father or mother on the Farm, a parent brainwashed to reproduce and give its babies up for slaughter. No one would miss the parents; no one would miss the babies. The Farm was a way for humanity to look the other way while the immortals got their fill of fresh blood.

Shortly after becoming immortal, Melissa Mayhew proved herself exceptionally adept at the high level mind control that was necessary to run an operation like the Farm. Together with a young auto mechanic named Dominic Volcker, whom Melissa had chosen for her first immortal bond, Melissa turned the Farm into a machine of mind control, where the detritus of society came in, had their memories erased, and became eager, servile livestock.

As headmistress of the Farm, Melissa had a standing invite to Renata's Homecoming party, and when she came, she always brought a horse trailer filled with eight young slaves. Those eight would replace an equal number that Renata had hand-picked from her collection. The eight most

sumptuous, delicious, ripe slaves Renata owned, offered up as a gift for the nine immortals invited to join her for a Homecoming gathering in the woods outside her mansion.

Nine immortals; eight slaves. The discrepancy was no accident. In a moment, Renata would send her slaves running into the forest, and her guests would hunt them down. With only eight slaves for nine immortals, someone would go hungry. It was a race, a game where these most gifted of predators could test their skills against one another.

Melissa, Dominic, and Renata were three of the immortals in attendance. Alexander Chapman and his bond, Ansel Gregory, were numbers four and five. Lena Trang with Thomas Byrne, and Bernadette Paiz with Mark Spinoza rounded out the total.

Present on the property, but off somewhere hiding, was Sergio Alonzo, the reclusive immortal who showed his face only a few times a year. Sergio liked to come to Homecoming to view the girls wearing black, but he never partook in Renata's slave chase rodeo.

Also invited but not present was Daciana herself, and her long-time bond, Aaron Defazio. Their absence was the topic of conversation as the evening got started.

"Did Daciana say anything to you about coming or not coming?" asked Lena Trang.

"No," said Renata. "I haven't spoken with her in over a month."

Melissa didn't like the way Renata spat the words from her mouth. *In over a month*, as if it were Daciana's responsibility to check in with Renata, as if the mention of Daciana's name was somehow an affront.

"Me either," said Bernadette.

"When is the last time anyone spoke with her?" asked Lena.

Melissa said nothing as her peers chattered away like gossipy schoolchildren, even though it was all a charade. Daciana and Aaron had broken their bond and were in separation. It was obvious. No one had heard from either of them for weeks. Still, these cowards danced around the topic, hoping someone else would be the first to say what they all were thinking, that the queen of their clan had broken a bond for the first time in nearly a century.

No one knew what it meant that Daciana and Aaron might have broken up. It was rather like they were children in a large family whose parents started fighting and then disappeared.

“As far as I’m concerned, Daciana’s absence merely means the best meat will go to someone else,” Renata said. “If we’re done speaking of her, I’d like to show off what I have for you tonight. It is the tastiest line-up I’ve prepared in many years.”

“Yes, please,” said Alexander.

Melissa was as anxious as anyone to hunt the slaves, but she wasn’t able to just blow off Daciana’s absence like Renata did. For Melissa, the great appeal of being immortal was the constancy, the way that some things changed slowly, and other things (like your body) not at all. This past year—the notable tension whenever Daciana and Aaron were around – it made Melissa immensely uncomfortable. Now they were at Homecoming, a night steeped in tradition, practically a holiday, and Daciana was missing. It was almost too much to bear.

Not that Daciana was some calming presence or something. Far from it. Daciana was intimidating and intense, demanding the best of “her girls” in behavior and appearance at all times. On a normal night, Melissa would be thankful for the opportunity to play a game while Daciana was gone.

But this wasn’t a normal night. This was Homecoming. And Daciana’s absence ran headlong into decades of nostalgia, creating an unfamiliar mix that seemed like a bad omen to Melissa. It was the end of something. The end of something good, something sinfully good. And with the end there would be consequences. There were always consequences.

Renata led them deeper into the woods, where eight of her slaves stood in a single file line.

“Edgar, come forward,” Renata commanded.

A tall boy with curly brown hair stepped out of line and towards Renata. He stopped right in front of her, standing still with his chin up.

“Edgar turned nineteen last February, but has only begun to ripen in the past month,” Renata said as she stroked his cheek. “He was born at the Farm, but his heritage is Slavic.”

This was another change. Traditionally, Melissa would be the one to speak of the lineage of the slaves. After all, it was Melissa who knew these things best. And while it was true that Edgar was born to parents who had been kidnapped in the Czech Republic, it wasn’t accurate to say his heritage was Slavic. Edgar had two older brothers who had already been consumed, and their masters described them as tasting a bit more Mediterranean,

suggesting that Edgar's parents or grandparents were not born in the same place they were found.

Melissa would have liked to tell all of this, but she didn't want to be rude. These were Renata's slaves now. Just because Melissa knew more about their lineage didn't give her the right to interrupt the hostess.

But in years past, Renata would have invited Melissa to tell them more about Edgar. In years past, Renata and Melissa were tight, the two favorite daughters in the clan. But last year Renata's bond with Chad went sour and everything changed. No, not everything. Just Renata. She changed. She became distant. She started keeping to herself.

Breaking a bond was a nasty process. Melissa was thankful for the strength of her bond with Dominic. While all bonds broke eventually, good ones could last a century or longer. Melissa was certain she and Dominic had one of those bonds. She still loved him as much as the day she made him.

She used to love Renata too. She had such fond memories of spending time with her, once.

Melissa and Renata. Within the highest caste of high society, these were the chosen daughters. These were the two girls that Daciana favored among all her children. It was beautiful. It was everything Melissa had ever wanted.

You become the prom queen, Sergio visits you in the night, you become immortal, you join the clan, you find your bond, you live forever. Melissa was twelve years old when she decided this was the path she wanted to take. But no one told her what happens next. No one told her that bonds come to an end, that love for the ever-living ends with as much passion as it started.

At the time that Daciana kicked off the Coronation contest, she and Aaron had been bonded for going on forty years. By the time Melissa won, there were twenty girls in the clan ahead of her, including Renata. Not a single one of them had broken their bond. It was only natural for everyone to assume this was how it always was and always would be, that immortals found a bond and stayed with them forever. Only the immortals themselves and the rebels who studied vampire lore had any inkling how bonding really worked.

Then Renata's bond disappeared. Neither Renata nor Daciana said a thing about it. No one knew if Renata killed him or if he fled, and Daciana

made it clear to the entire clan that what happened between Renata and Chad was Renata's business. Renata became cold and distant to her sisters in the clan. Melissa felt like she had lost her best friend, and when she turned to Daciana for some motherly love, Daciana and Aaron began to unravel as well.

It was all very unsettling to Melissa, and the fact that Renata was now changing the rules at Homecoming, that Melissa was no longer allowed to talk about the slaves, only made it worse.

"Mmm..I've had some delectable Slavic kids from the Farm over the years," said Mark Spinoza.

*No you haven't, thought Melissa. You've had Edgar's oldest brother and three of his cousins, and we don't know their heritage.*

"You'll like this one if you enjoy them a bit green," Renata said. She turned to Edgar. "My guests would like to smell you now," she said.

Without any hesitation, Edgar walked past Renata and to the crowd of immortals behind her, standing in place while they gathered round and sniffed at him like dogs. Melissa stepped forward and put her nose to his neck, not because she wanted to, but out of respect for tradition. She didn't need to smell Edgar at all. She'd been smelling him and his family for years. To her, the scents of cherry and oak that emanated from his skin were reminders of better times, when it seemed she had many centuries of unchanging wealth and privilege ahead of her.

Renata gave them all a minute to get a good whiff, then called for the next slave.

"Nellie, come here," she commanded, bringing forth an unusually broad-shouldered girl. As Nellie approached, Edgar returned to his place in line in well-rehearsed fashion.

"Nellie was free raised, landing on the Farm when she was thirteen," Renata said.

"She's a big girl," said Lena.

"I've already decided this one will be mine," said Bernadette.

The others laughed. At just over five feet tall, Bernadette was the shortest immortal at the party, but probably the one with the biggest appetite.

One by one, Renata called over her slaves, introducing them each with a little bit of history then allowing her guests to check them out. The slaves didn't mind at all that these immortals spoke openly of eating them. That

would change in a moment. To heighten the fun and improve the taste, Renata would release the slaves from her mind control. As soon as they were released, fear would begin coursing through their veins. Fear made the blood taste sweeter.

“I must warn you on this last one that if you find her intriguing, you’ll be competing with me for a bite. I’ve been imagining how this one would taste since the day she arrived six years ago. Aurora, come over here.”

The eighth and final slave approached. She was a petite thing with thick black hair and milk-white skin.

“Aurora came to me when she was only ten,” Renata said, putting her arm around the girl, leaning close to her hair and taking in her scent. “I knew right away that she was something special.”

*Came to her?* As if this girl just dropped out of the sky and landed on the mansion. Now Melissa was getting angry. Couldn’t Renata at least acknowledge the good work that was happening on the Farm? Couldn’t she mention that under Melissa and Dominic’s tutelage, the breeders there were making better and better specimens?

“Oh Renata, you’ve outdone yourself with this one,” said Mark. “So vibrant she is. I bet she’d live to a hundred if allowed.”

“You all can have her,” said Lena with a laugh. “I learned last year not to go after Renata’s favorite.”

“That’s right. You went hungry last year,” said Renata. “Well, I’m sure you’ll find something tasty to pursue among my treats, even if it isn’t lovely Aurora.”

Renata put a wide, hospitable smile on her face as she spoke, and in that moment, Melissa decided that she would have Aurora this night. She would go head to head with her former best friend, her speed against Renata’s, and she would take the prize meal of the night for herself.

“Gather round, my children,” Renata said as she escorted Aurora back to the line. All eight slaves formed a circle with Renata in the center. “I have something to tell you.”

Renata started with Aurora, looking her in the eyes, probing the activity behind them, making a hypnotic connection.

“You are released,” Renata said.

The words, spoken in Renata’s voice, with Renata’s gaze doing the rest of the talking, had an immediate effect. All the commands that had been put in that girl’s head since early childhood were released at once, and Aurora’s



eyes woke up to what was really happening around her. That first look in the eyes was one of Melissa's favorite parts. A kind of recognition showed in the girl's face. It was the realization that she had been duped.

Poor girl. Poor beautiful, delicious, sumptuous girl.

"Aurora, we're going to eat you now," Renata said. "But there's a whole forest behind you. I suggest you run."

A murmur, some trembling, and off she went.

"She's fast," said Bernadette.

"Another strike against her as far as you're concerned?" asked Renata.

"I like it when the meat on their bones slows them down," Bernadette said, following her comment with a cackling laugh.

"Let's do yours next, shall we Bernadette?" Renata said. She turned to Nellie, looked her in the eyes, and released her from enslavement. Nellie didn't wait for any encouragement to turn and run. She lumbered into the forest, moving as fast as she could. The girl wasn't built for running. Bernadette would take her down in seconds.

The next five were released in rapid-fire pronouncements, each of them sprinting away the instant their minds were freed.

"And Edgar, I've saved you for last because I expect your long legs and skinny frame will make you the swiftest runner of the bunch," Renata said. She turned to her guests. "Tell me, which of you has your eyes on this one?"

Lena and Mark both raised their hands.

"Do you see them, Edgar?" Renata asked.

"I do," he said.

"One of them is going to eat you in a few minutes."

"I understand."

"Are you frightened?"

"No."

"But you will be once I set you free."

"I understand."

"If you got to choose, would you rather be eaten by Mark or Lena?"

"Lena."

"How come, Edgar?"

"She reminds me of you, Madam."

"Oh, how sweet," said Bernadette. "Now I kind of want to eat him."

“You stay with the one you already picked,” said Lena, her fangs now showing in her smile. All of them were ready to eat, but, according to tradition, none got to go until Renata gave the word.

“You are released, Edgar.”

He bolted into the darkness. Melissa saw Mark lick his lips as he watched Edgar go.

All the immortals stood still for a moment, listening to their prey push deeper into the woods. On another night, Renata might have let the humans run for ten minutes or more, just to make it more interesting, but she was due inside the mansion shortly. The dance was on intermission right now. The immortals had to go join the party once intermission was over.

“How do you suppose things are going inside?” Dominic asked.

“Who cares?” said Renata. “This will be the most boring contest we’ve ever held. The Renwick girl has had it wrapped up since birth. Is everybody ready to race?”

The hungry monsters roared in response.

“Take your marks,” Renata said.

The immortals lined up in a row, all of them being careful not to cheat even by an inch. Doing your best in this race was a courtesy to the hostess, even if you ate the human she wanted, as Melissa intended to do. But cheating was not acceptable.

“Get set.....go!”

With that, Melissa and eight other immortals blazed into the forest after the humans now running away. Bernadette reached her target first, dropping onto Nellie like a bird on a mouse and felling the girl with a single bite to the neck. Ansel was next to break off in pursuit of his prey, then Mark and Lena. Dominic went off to the left, chasing one of the boys. Melissa wasn’t surprised. Dominic loved the taste of a young man. Alexander had gone in the same direction, just a few steps behind Dominic.

Melissa and Renata ran alone now, side by side, weaving in and out among the trees, hurdling obstacles on the forest floor, both of them chasing Aurora’s citrus scent. As they ran, Melissa felt an understanding pass between them that they both were after the same target, that they were competitors now.

That the relationship they once had was over.

Her own body bubbling with the chemistry of the hunt, Melissa no longer felt anxious or sad about all that was changing. She felt angry. She

felt an anger that was suitable for a chase such as this, an anger that would drive her past her former best friend and make the kill that much more delicious. A part of her knew that the anger was temporary, a byproduct of circumstance. But a larger part recognized that her anger was not only justified, it was overdue.

It was Renata's fault that everything was changing. Renata was the first of the Samarin clan to break her bond, and nothing had been right ever since. Now Daciana was missing. What would become of them all if Daciana never returned? Who would be clan leader then?

Tradition gave the right to the oldest among them, which of course would be Sergio, but he had no interest in such things. Next was Aaron, but if Daciana was gone, that would mean that Aaron killed her in the fallout from their breakup, and if that was the case, all bets were off. The clan would break into factions, with some wanting to follow Aaron out of tradition, and others, Renata being one of them, wanting to kill Aaron and take over the top spot themselves.

Yes, that was the real story here. Why hadn't Melissa seen it before? Renata was thinking about a coup. Renata was hopeful that Daciana and Aaron were done, and intended to make a play for the top spot in the clan. The way she responded when the others wanted to speak of Daciana, the way she was so dismissive of the whole topic, the way she had become such a different person after her own bond with Chad had ended...

Someone had to put Renata in her place. To remind her that she was no better than the rest of them. Aurora was within sight now. Melissa and Renata were neck and neck. They would be on the girl in seconds. Melissa allowed her anger to drive her feet, and she pulled ahead. Her mouth was open, her fangs extended, the taste of Aurora's delicious flesh practically on her tongue, when Renata tackled her from behind.

The two of them, both moving at speeds more suitable for a race car than a formerly human body, went tumbling to the forest floor in a violent heap that broke through branches and left a trench in the dirt. Melissa caught sight of Renata's face in the heap and roared in anger.

She was surprised at the venom of Renata's response. Renata's eyes had turned a shade of red as vibrant as her hair, and her fangs were all the way out.

In that instant, had Melissa responded in kind, these two former best friends would have fought to the death, then and there.

It wasn't worth it. Melissa retracted her fangs. Renata seized on the moment of weakness and threw Melissa into a tree, then leaped from the ground and came down on Aurora, winning the most delicious prize for herself.

"Good Lord, Renata, what was that all about?" Melissa said.

Renata took a deep inhale of the girl's blood, her back expanding as she sucked the life out of her former slave, then she tossed the girl's body aside and stood up.

"All in good fun, no?" she said, wiping the blood from her lips with the back of her hand.

"It didn't feel very fun to me," said Melissa.

Renata smiled. "That's only because you lost. But I had a great time. I'm so pleased you tried to challenge me. You made it so much more fun and interesting."

Melissa looked into Renata's eyes. Was she serious? Was that moment of murderous anger all in Melissa's head?

No. It couldn't have been. Melissa had never been in a fight with another immortal, but her instincts told her that the look in Renata's face was entirely real. Renata would have taken this as far as Melissa was willing to let it go.

With that thought, the anger of the hunt morphed right back into anxiety. So much was changing. So much from the past had to be answered for.

"I'll go back to the trailer and prep your new slaves," Melissa said, eager to get away from Renata.

"And get us some wine glasses while you're over there," Renata said.

Melissa closed her eyes and shook her head. "Sure thing," she said. As loser of the night's game, it was her job to give everyone a wine glass so they could fill it with the blood of their kill and carry their own drink into the ballroom.

A moment later Melissa was unlocking the door to the horse trailer she and Dominic had parked on the east end of the property. She led eight teenagers outside, each of them dressed in the black and white outfits that were distinctive of Renata's mansion. To make Renata the supreme master of these slaves, Melissa had to look into the eyes of each one of them and let them know they were off the Farm and Renata's commands now superseded her own. As she went down the line, searching deep into the minds of her slaves, she thought about her first encounter with each. Six of

these slaves were born on the Farm, and came under her control as soon as they could talk. One of them was the child of parents suspected of illegal activity, and was taken to the Farm after her parents were killed. And one of them was picked up as a stray off the streets.

That stray, a handsome lad named Francisco, brought back memories of another time of anxiety, just like this one. Francisco was one of two kids brought in that night. The other, a little girl, had gotten away. In all her years running the Farm, that girl was the only one who had ever escaped. What a strange night that was. For some reason, Melissa's mind control had malfunctioned with that little girl and she'd walked right out of the Farm and was never found. For weeks, Melissa had been terrified about what that little girl's escape had meant. If Daciana had found out...that would have been the end of Melissa's reign on the Farm, probably the end of Melissa altogether.

But nothing ever came of it. The little girl was somewhere at the bottom of the Florida swamp, and no one but Melissa knew that she once had a human ignore her mind control and walk out the front door.

"Francisco, your new master is named Renata Sullivan," said Melissa, looking into the eyes of the boy. "She is coming to meet you in a moment."

"My new master is Renata Sullivan," Francisco said.

Such a handsome boy this one was. Olive-skinned, perfect teeth, emerald eyes...

It was too bad that little girl got away, because she and Francisco were quite a pair. Beautiful specimens that would have ripened together. They could have been presented as a matching set to Daciana herself.

Nicky. Just thinking of the name made Melissa angry. Little Nicky. The one that got away.

**Part 5**  
**A White Orchid Corsage**

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Music during the second half of the Masquerade was more modern than the first. Guests were still expected to follow the formal etiquette of a ballroom dance, but no longer were they required to know the specific steps of a waltz, minuet, or cotillion. Following the intermission, the orchestra returned with their folders full of contemporary pieces, pieces written specifically for the Homecoming Masquerade. The most renowned composers in the world wrote new music for the dance. It was swirling and ambitious music, with sounds from multiple centuries blended together in a modern way. It was the kind of music Renata liked. Beyond romantic, the music was downright hypnotic. With everyone already buzzing from the wine, their bodies warm and loose from the first hour of dancing, the music put the ballroom in a kind of trance, creating the perfect background for the immortals to make their entrance.

And at some point during the second hour, they would. Until that moment, Jill had work to do. According to the new plan she and Nicky had concocted, Jill worked her way over to Art Tremblay and made sure she was his dance partner when the second hour began.

Getting a dance with Art was the easiest thing Jill had done tonight. Coatless, with his head down, smelling of wine, Art all of a sudden found himself an outcast, and was glad for Jill's attention. Finding dance partners for the rest of the night was going to be a challenge for him.

The music began, they picked up their feet, the ballroom was in motion, and Jill delivered the line Nicky had scripted for her.

"I saw what you did earlier," she said.

They were spinning around the floor, their feet moving with a simple grace to match the four-beat bars of the music.

"Everyone saw," Art said. "I'd rather not talk about it."

"I think it's pretty cool what you did, that's all."

"Pretty cool? What are you talking about?"

"The way you stuck it to Kim like that," said Jill. "I've been waiting for years for someone to stand up to her. I was talking to Nicky and some of the other girls during intermission. They were totally impressed. I am too."

“Wait a minute,” said Art. “You were talking to Nicky? What did she say?”

“She told us everything. She knew she wasn’t supposed to tell – I guess you asked her to keep everything a secret – but please don’t be mad at her. What you did was so amazing. Seriously, half the ballroom is thrilled at what you did, even if they’re afraid to admit it. The fact that Kim has a real competitor now, thanks to you. It’s so awesome.”

Art didn’t say anything. He was waiting for Jill to tell him more.

“You know, I think you’ve played this exactly right,” Jill continued. “Kim may be in the driver’s seat right now, but we’re just a few hours into the night, and already Nicky has peeled off a good chunk of her support.”

“You think so?” Art said.

“Everyone I’m talking to wants to go to Nicky’s party tonight, not Kim’s. We’re all a bit nervous though. Once we go, we’re committed. We needed something to push us along. Your courage is what did it.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say it was that courageous,” said Art. There was still a lot of confusion in his voice. Now was the time to help him understand what Jill was trying to tell him.

“Are you kidding me?” Jill said. “Kim asks you to make Nicky crash into Rosalyn, and you do it yourself instead? It was perfect. You made Kim think she had it all worked out, you lulled her into a state of inaction, and she did nothing about Nicky all the way to intermission. Then when you protected Nicky and threw yourself at Rosalyn instead, Kim was screwed. Kim bet everything on you, and when you turned against her, it was too late for her to try anything else. And having you take the wine spill instead, making that big scene, and then Nicky got to look at Kim and say ‘You missed.’ My God, that was one of the best moments of my life. It was perfect. You changed the whole nature of the contest in a single move. Every one of us has wanted to turn against Kim from the beginning, but we all were scared. In one courageous act, you showed us the way. You might have won Coronation for Nicky Bloom tonight. Who knows? The way Nicky was talking about you, you might have won yourself a bond with a future immortal.”

Art was looking around now. His eyes found Nicky dancing with Xavier Lincoln, and stayed on her, no doubt imagining himself with her, imagining an immortal falling in love with him and arranging for him to live forever.

“How much did Nicky say to you about what happened?” he asked.



“She told me everything,” Jill said. “Or, I guess I thought it was everything. You’d know better. She said that as you were dancing you whispered to her that Rosalyn was waiting with a goblet of wine and you were supposed to push Nicky into it. Then you told her you were going to crash into Rosalyn yourself. You told her that a lot of people in the ballroom knew Kim was going to try something, and you had a plan that would make sure everyone knew that Nicky got the best of Kim. She said it was your idea for Nicky to look at Kim after it was over and tell her she missed. That part’s my favorite. You are so ballsy.”

They danced in silence for a bit while Art processed this gigantic lie.

“Nicky told us you were coming to her party,” Jill added. “I’m going too. So is Annika. And you know how many people Annika will bring along.” She was improvising now. The plan was to feed Art a story about the wine glass incident being his idea, about the ballroom buzzing over his heroics. Jill figured, if she was telling a lie of this magnitude, she might as well lie about everything. She might as well pretend that her own part of the mission hadn’t failed, that Annika was bringing a crew to Nicky’s after-party.

“I’m beginning to wonder if Nicky’s party is going to have a bigger turnout than Kim’s,” she continued. “And with you going, she’ll have one of the big money players. I can’t believe this is happening. Kim Renwick is going to lose. You are so fucking amazing, Art Tremblay. I could kiss you.”

Now Art was looking at Kim, who was dancing with Terry Reese.

“It was so smart of you to ditch her,” Jill said. “She was using you. She uses everyone. And now...oh my word, the things she’s saying now. You couldn’t get away from her fast enough.”

“What is Kim saying?”

“Just her typical morbid fantasies. She thinks she’s immortal already and gets to kill anyone who bothers her. She’s totally delusional. The poor girl has been raised to think Coronation is her birthright or something, and all of a sudden everything’s going wrong for her. Nicky’s the new favorite to win. Wow. It feels so good to say that. Nicky Bloom, not Kim Renwick, will be the immortal from our class. And we owe it all to you. You are so totally my hero.”

Jill was aware she might be going overboard, but was caught in the moment. Art was buying everything she was selling, and it felt good to have something going right, since everything had gone so wrong with Annika.

Even with Art on board, the night could not be called a success if Annika didn't come around. Art had lots of money, but they needed more than one person with money to have a good party.

Blackmail. The word sent a shiver down her spine, so closely was it tied to the Renwicks and their treachery. To bring Annika along, Jill was going to have to blackmail her.

She decided not to think about it right now. One thing at a time. She was still dancing with Art. Her story was going over well, but hers was only part one of a two-part plan to bring Art on board.

She could feed this lie to Art all she wanted, he still knew the truth. He was there. He had tried to push Nicky into Rosalyn and had failed. If Nicky was telling people otherwise, Art had to know why.

That was part two of the plan: Nicky dances with Art and tells him why.

The music came to an end and the dancing stopped. Art's moment of truth was coming up right now. Jill made sure to arrange herself so Art turned in the proper direction to find his next partner.

"Hello again, Art," Nicky said, with a seductive smile that made Jill jealous. Why were some girls just born with the ability to do that?

"Nicky. We were just talking about you," Art said.

Nicky took his hands in hers. "Nothing bad, I hope," she said.

"No," said Art. "Nothing bad at all."

Jill turned to her next partner, Eddie Miller, and left Art in Nicky's hands.

## 23

Rockwell Transport had assigned a man named Julien to be the driver of Nicky's limo. Julien was well-mannered, impeccably dressed, well-trained for his job, and a little bit short. It was that last part, his height, that made Julien of interest to Nicky as she pondered ways she might quickly turn Art Tremblay from foe into friend, and before intermission had ended, Nicky ran out into the parking lot and had a brief conversation with Julien. She outlined a plan to him, a plan where Julien, of all people, had a role to play in Nicky's mission tonight.

Now, as Nicky stepped in front of Art, putting her hand in his and beginning the dance, she thought about Julien, and hoped he was in position. Nicky had told him to line up at 10:15. It was 10:20 already, and Nicky's dance with Art was just beginning. Hopefully Julien would be patient, as Nicky's plan for him didn't start until her dance with Art was over.

Nicky pulled close to Art, creating points of contact between them at the chest and hips. It was a much friendlier posture than she took with him on their last dance. Art's white shirt was meant to have a tuxedo jacket on top of it. Without that jacket, only a few millimeters of cloth separated Art's skin from Nicky's. Her hand on the small of his back, Nicky allowed her fingertips to dance ever so slightly. When she spoke, she did it in a quiet voice, close to his ear, so her breath tickled his cheek.

"I'm guessing Jill was sharing my little story," she said.

"She was."

"It benefits both of us. You understand that, don't you?"

"I don't know. It's a lot to process. Are you really telling everyone that it was my idea to crash into Rosalyn?"

"I've only told a few people. A few well-placed people. I'm letting them do the rest. By the end of the night, everyone will think one of Kim's most trusted allies has left her for me."

"You might have signed my death warrant."

"Only if Kim wins. I don't intend to let that happen. With your help, I can jump way out in front on this one. The minute people think Kim might

lose, they'll leave her in droves. She doesn't have any real friends, Art."

The music was heavier on this dance, with a rhythm that landed hard on the downbeats. It was mesmerizing, even a little erotic.

"Do you think you might be a bit overconfident?" Art said. "The contest is about more than the school. Kim's family is so connected in this town."

"So is yours," Nicky said. She put some force into the words. It was time for Art to grow a pair and realize that he didn't have to be Kim's whipping boy. As she spoke, she moved her hand up his back, allowed it to rest on the nape of his neck.

"My dad is friends with Galen Renwick," he said. "This is going to get tricky for me."

"Your father's friendship with the Renwicks ended the moment I pushed you into Rosalyn. Kim was so disgusted with you. That girl's temper is short and she holds a grudge like you wouldn't believe."

"I know all about it," Art said. "You totally screwed me."

"No. You were trying to screw me. I was just looking out for myself. Now I'm looking out for you too. You know the part of the story Jill and Annika liked the best?"

"The part where you told Kim she missed."

"Yes, and I told them it was your idea. Art, if we were telling people the truth about what happened, then you would be the guy who got pushed around by a girl. You would be the guy who spends hours and hours in the gym but still wasn't strong enough to push me into Rosalyn. But we're not telling that story. Now the story is that you are the guy who had the courage to pull one over on Kim Renwick. And, like it or not, there's no stopping it now. The story is out. Why even try to deny it? The minute people hear that it was your idea, they think you're a badass."

"All of that is for nothing if Kim wins."

"She's not going to win. You and I can make sure of that. Quit thinking about her and look at what's right in front of you, Art. Kim wants to use you. I want to partner with you. I was sad when you tried to push me into Rosalyn. I was hoping you and I could work together."

She pulled even closer, pressing her cheek onto his.

"I want you to come to my party tonight," she said, allowing a hint of weakness in her voice, a hint of begging.

"I don't even know you," Art said.

“But I want to know you. I was excited about getting to know you before our little incident tonight. I saw you at school – it’s clear that you take care of your body. I like that. I like that a lot.”

“It’s not that easy. Kim is going to be so pissed. People don’t do well when Kim is pissed at them.”

“Those days can be over tonight. You and I can end the Renwick reign of terror over this school, over this whole town. Art, you should see the look on people’s faces when I tell them you betrayed her. They’ve been under her thumb forever, and your bold move tonight has given them hope. Kim is only as powerful as we allow her to be. People are ready to leave her, but they’re scared, just like you. Someone has to stand up to that bitch. I think you’re the one to do it. You’re popular, you’re rich, your family is one of the most respected in town, and you’re smoking hot. Art, you’re the one they’ve been waiting for.”

Nicky could tell that the ‘smoking hot’ line had worked. Art’s whole body seemed to expand upon hearing it, like he was a flower and Nicky’s words were the morning sun. Art had worked and worked in the weight room so he could hear compliments like this, and Nicky imagined he rarely got them, if ever.

Because the truth was, Art was not smoking hot. Sure, he had a great body, and his face was handsome enough, but underneath it all was a frightened little boy. Art’s father had so thoroughly screwed him up, Nicky doubted he could ever recover.

Whatever. Not her business. She was working him right now for one reason and one reason only. His money. Art Tremblay was rich enough to be a big player, and Kim had taken him for granted. Kim had grown too accustomed to pushing Art around. She never thought in a million years Art would have the courage to leave her.

“This all sounds great, but what happens when Kim’s dad comes to my house for one of his infamous little talks?” Art asked.

“Your family has nothing to hide, and if there is any family that could stand up to the Renwicks, it’s yours. Kim’s dad thrives on messing with people’s personal info, but do you honestly think he could mess with your father? Your father is a security expert for the immortals. He hasn’t left anything to chance.”

“Yeah, I guess so. But my dad--”

“Your father will understand. He doesn’t want you to support Kim, he wants you to support *the winner*.”

“He doesn’t even know who you are.”

“I’ll come to your house tomorrow and introduce myself.”

On that line, Art shut up. Having a girl wearing black come to his house, by herself – for once, Merv Tremblay would be impressed with his son. Nicky had him now. She just needed to reel him in.

As the music came to an end, Nicky sped up their dancing, moving with intent towards the door.

“What are you doing?” Art asked.

“Relax,” Nicky said. “I’m not going to push you into anybody this time. I have a friend waiting just outside. I’ve asked him to help us with something.”

When the music finished, Art and Nicky were right by the front door. As Art gave Nicky his concluding bow, Nicky opened the door, and found her driver, Julien, waiting patiently outside. He had removed his black coat and now held it out for Nicky to take.

“Thanks,” Nicky said, taking the coat from Julien and immediately closing the door behind her.

Nicky put a flirtatious smirk on her face and went back to Art.

“Hold out your arms,” she said.

Aware that she had drawn the attention of the ballroom, Nicky slid Julien’s jacket over Art’s shoulders. It was such a little thing, but she could tell it meant so much to him. Fully dressed again, Art could rejoin the party with confidence. He was no longer the lone white shirt in a room full of black jackets, and perhaps he was beginning to understand that his life didn’t have to be over just because he had angered Kim Renwick. Perhaps he was coming to see that he didn’t have to be Kim’s little toady, that this was a moment in his life where he could choose to be something better.

But even with all this opportunity in front of his face, Art was the sort of guy so driven by fear he might let it all slip away and go crawling back to Kim, begging for forgiveness. Nicky had to make sure he got it, and if he didn’t get it, that everyone else in the ballroom got it for him. Before they parted ways, with the whole class still looking at them after Nicky’s little jacket delivery stunt, she leaned in close and gave Art a kiss on the cheek.

“Now everyone knows you’re with me,” she whispered to him. “My party’s at the Hamilton. See you there.”

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## 24

On the north side of the ballroom stood the front entrance. None of the immortals would come in that way. Too visible.

On the east was a hallway that led to a study and a library. Sometimes Sergio entered the ballroom through this hall, but none of the other immortals did.

The south side of the ballroom was connected to the kitchen which led to the servant quarters. It would be uncivilized to enter through that side. The immortals were in formal wear and coming out to a party that honored them in all their glory. Entering through a servant area would sully their splendor.

No, the eight immortals who had recently finished their hunt outside now entered the ballroom through an archway on the west wall, the same that led to the art gallery. Per their custom, Renata led them inside in single file, her bright red hair now in sharp contrast to the dark blue evening gown she had chosen. Melissa, feeling underdressed in her red strapless dress, followed close behind.

Renata was wearing an outrageous necklace. A diamond lattice in the shape of a spider web that hung from the nape of her neck and across the bare space of her chest. In the center was a black onyx with eight tarnished silver legs. The whole thing created the effect of a black widow in its web, living on Renata's chest. It was a stunning, over-the-top display piece of the kind Renata would never have worn in the old days. Renata used to go with understated looks at Homecoming, looks that Melissa not only appreciated, but tried to emulate.

But when her bond with Chad came to an end, Renata's sense of style died with it. Now she enjoyed wearing ridiculous showpieces like the spider necklace. Now she teased her hair so it exploded in a flaming pyre of red that clashed loudly with her blue dress. Now she wore a gold and silver mask, with a long, sharp nose and a flurry of gemstones around the eyes.

The thing about Renata's outfit was that most of the students wouldn't even see it. The immortals entered the ballroom with such stealth that they went unnoticed. They were a trickle of water flowing into a lake. Even



when they dressed in eye-popping getups like Renata's, the students rarely saw them. They were conditioned not to. An immortal could slide in and out of view whenever she chose, using her charms to ensure the people all around didn't see her unless she wanted them to, and at Homecoming, the immortals didn't want to be seen. They wanted to observe the students, to cut in on their dances and toy with them, to laugh at how easy they were to manipulate, but not to dress up and be admired by them.

No, Renata wasn't thinking of the Thorndike students when she donned her bright, bold colors. She was thinking about the other immortals, her sisters and brothers in the clan who, for many years, saw Daciana wear similar outfits to Homecoming. And while Daciana never commanded the others to be more conservative in their garb, there was an understanding that Daciana had to be the most stunning, the most colorful, the most beautiful. She was the queen, after all.

And tonight, Renata was playing the queen in Daciana's absence. She was dressing as loudly as she could, and daring someone to challenge her on it.

Melissa wanted to call her out but knew she couldn't. That incident in the woods was all the conflict Melissa could handle in one night. If push came to shove, Renata was willing to take it all the way to the bitter end. Melissa wasn't. She didn't want to fight, and she certainly wasn't ready to die. She just wanted things to go back to the way they were.

Knowing that wasn't going to happen, Melissa sought comfort in those things that remained unchanged. Things like the ballroom. Wood paneling and sculpture, golden trim, gemstone-adorned backsplashes along the walls, and the classic parquet floor that Melissa herself had once danced on as a human, so many years ago.

Homecoming always made her nostalgic. There had been so much promise when she stepped onto the floor as a high school senior. She was a girl wearing black. She was competing for the big prize. She would live a life of eternal glory or die trying. She would right all the wrongs in her life, she would become one of the rich and powerful, and no one would ever mess with her again. It was such an amazing year, such an incredible time.

Now, many decades later, the truth of it had set in. Whatever meaning Melissa had hoped to find in immortality wasn't there to be found. The fears and insecurities of her human self went away, but they were quickly replaced with the fears and insecurities of an immortal. Her fear of growing

old was replaced with a fear of becoming irrelevant. The world was constantly changing, but she was not. Every new generation of kids was so different than the last, and it didn't matter if she changed her hair and her clothes, if she learned the new idioms, if she adapted to new technologies – she was still Melissa Mayhew, born in 1950, crowned Prom Queen in 1968, made master of the Farm and all its slaves shortly thereafter. Her parents were dead. Her classmates were old. Her body was unchanging, as was her soul. She was stuck in the past.

Still, she took comfort in ritual and tradition, and at Homecoming she had her routine to follow. That routine always began with the biggest guy in the room. This year, it was some oaf named Brian Kingsbury.

Melissa slid her way in between Brian and the girl he was dancing with, cutting in and dismissing the girl. Brian had to look down nearly a foot at Melissa. His head might as well have been in heaven for the look on his face. *Yes, you dunderhead, I'm an immortal and I'm going to dance with you.*

In the summer of '66, Melissa went on a date with a boy named Marco Clemente. He didn't go to Thorndike, but rather, to Van Buren High School on the north side of town. He wasn't at all in Melissa's social class, but she didn't care. She met him at the shopping mall, he took an interest in her, he was gorgeous beyond belief, and they went out to the drive-in together.

Melissa was so naïve. The term "date rape" wasn't invented in 1966. Back then, what Marco did to Melissa was a common occurrence, and girls weren't supposed to make a fuss about it. If you went to the drive-in with a beautiful boy from a north-side high school, what did you expect?

Seven weeks after her date with Marco, Melissa had to fly to Mexico City to see a doctor and undo what Marco had done to her. Her parents arranged it all so it could be discrete. Melissa flew out on a Saturday morning and was back home by Sunday night. She never told her friends about Marco, and her parents agreed not to send a gang of thugs to teach him a lesson (though her father was prepared to do so).

Melissa waited it out. She entered Coronation. She won. She became immortal and, at Senior Prom, she feasted on a girl named Jacqueline Harris. The next night, she went to the north side of town and allowed her nose to guide her to Marco. She found him at the drive-in, working on another girl in the back seat of his car. Melissa broke the window with her fist and pulled Marco out with one hand.

“Hello, Marco,” she said. “I’ve come to kill you. I suggest you run.”

She played with Marco like a cat with its mouse, chasing him into the night, ensuring that his last hours on this earth were full of terror and regret. For three hours she made him run, and when he was able to run no more, when he collapsed onto his knees in front of her, she made him beg for mercy.

“Please,” he begged. “I’m so sorry, Melissa. Please forgive me.”

“That’s all I needed to hear, Marco,” she said, then she bit into his neck.

It was all the vengeance a girl could want, and it felt good, for a time. But like everything else in an immortal’s existence, the novelty eventually wore off. In an admittedly pathetic attempt to recapture that delicious but fleeting feeling of vengeance, Melissa had developed her own Homecoming tradition in which her first dance was always with the biggest guy in the ballroom. She found the big guy, cut into his dance, and proceeded to mess with him.

As the most skilled hypnotist in the Samarin clan, maybe in the world, she felt like it was her prerogative to get into the heads of these boys and bring them down to size. She told herself it was in honor of all girls everywhere who got treated like objects, but she knew better. She knew that the real reason she held up her tradition was boredom. She had righted the great wrong of her youth on her first night as an immortal and now she had an eternity with nothing better to do, so at Homecoming, she looked for new and creative ways to punish the big, burly guys whom nature had taught to be bullies.

The first time, in 1969, she nabbed a towering boy named Walter Grayson and convinced him that his new purpose in life was to make the world a better place for little people. Walter Grayson went on to form a lobbying group on behalf of midgets and dwarves, and dedicated the rest of his life to the cause.

In 1970, the boy she danced with was a brute named Mickey Carlisle, who stood to inherit one of the largest fortunes in Washington. For Mickey, she put a little time bomb in his head, telling him that on New Year’s Day in 1990, he was to give all his money to charity and move to Africa to build a school. Sure enough, on January 1, 1990, the entire Carlisle fortune was given away and Mickey Carlisle disappeared, never to be heard from again.

Technically, what she was doing was against the rules – Daciana only wanted the clan using mind control on their slaves and in situations

approved by her – but Melissa was so skilled a hypnotist that no one ever knew. Sometimes, as with Mickey Carlisle, she set her commands to take effect so far in the future that no one could possibly connect the strange behavior with a few minutes of dancing twenty years in the past. Other times she made her subjects conform to the commands in secret, so that no one would ever know there was strange behavior at all. Such was the case with Gordon Henley, a tall kid with spikey hair she had danced with in 1987. Melissa told Gordon he had a strong desire to sip at household chemicals when no one was looking. Gordon Henley slowly poisoned himself over a ten-year period. Neither the doctors nor his family understood why he grew sicker and sicker, and, when he died, only Melissa knew his true cause of death.

On this night, as she danced with Brian Kingsbury, a secret neurosis like the one she had given Gordon seemed more appropriate than some time-released oddity. She had an amusing idea in mind, one that had made her smile all summer long.

“Do you like to look at me, Brian?” she asked.

Brian nodded eagerly, and as he did so, he went in and out of eye contact.

“Don’t use your head to speak to me, use your voice,” said Melissa. “Tell me again, do you like to look at me?”

“I really, really do,” said Brian.

“Good, then look right in my eyes, okay? Look in them so deeply you forget that we’re both wearing masks, that we’re both dancing at Homecoming, that we’re both anything at all. Forget everything in your world except my eyes. Can you do that for me, Brian?”

“Yes ma’am.”

This was a good connection. Brian was a particularly easy subject. If she wanted to, she could tell his brain to make his heart stop beating and he would drop dead then and there. Fortunately for Brian, Melissa was in the mood for something a little more playful, especially after that strange encounter with Renata out in the woods.

“Brian, as of this moment, you are a passionate, militant nudist,” said Melissa.

“What’s that mean?” asked Brian.

“It means you love to be naked. You feel like it is the body’s natural state, and you’re never truly comfortable unless you are naked. Clothes

make you unhappy, Brian, so the fewer the better. But you know that the rest of the world doesn't understand your desire to be naked. You know that they aren't as enlightened as you are, so you keep your clothes on when you are in the presence of others who don't understand the beauty of the naked body. Do you follow me, Brian?"

"Yes. I want to take my clothes off right now."

"But you won't, will you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I am in the ballroom and people can see me. They don't understand my desire to be naked. They don't understand the beauty of the naked body."

"That's right. But when you are alone, or when you are with other nudists, you can be naked as much as you want. Do you know where you can find other nudists, Brian?"

"I don't know where. I wish I knew. Can you tell me? I want so bad to be naked."

"You will have to research, Brian. You will have to learn where you can go to be with your people. And as soon as you graduate from Thorndike, you will go be with them, even if it means you have to give up everything else. Your inheritance, your career, your life in DC – you will give all of that up to be a nudist."

"A passionate, militant nudist," Brian added.

"That's right. And remember Brian, nudism is your secret until you are with other nudists. No one else gets to know about it."

"I will not tell anyone about my passion for the naked body."

"We're almost done dancing, Brian. I'm going to count backwards from five. When I get to one, you will remember none of this conversation. You will never know that your desire to be a nudist came from me. To you, it will seem like a piece of you that has always been there, but that didn't come to fruition until now."

"I am, and always have been, a nudist."

"Good, Brian. 5...4...3...2...1."

"I really do like to look at you, Melissa," Brian said.

"I know you do."

Melissa stretched upward with her neck and gave Brian a soft kiss on the lips, just enough to drive him crazy, then she turned away and

disappeared into the crowd. For the rest of the night she would cut in with whomever she pleased, allow them to fawn on her, then, at the moment her dance partner was insane with lust, she would leave him and move on to someone else.

She started with the Featherstone boy, who was cute enough, she supposed. When he got thoroughly hot and bothered, she moved on to the mayor's kid, who nearly passed out by the time she was done with him. From one to another she moved, waiting to find the pleasure she always got from dancing with the seniors at Homecoming.

It wasn't coming. She was thoroughly bored with all of it this year. Too many things were wrong. Too much was out of order for her to enjoy this night at all. Daciana was missing. Renata was on a terror. Everything was changing. Melissa had an aching hunger in her belly, having missed out on the chance to feast with the others after Renata beat her in the hunt. All of this came together in a strange way for Melissa. It gave her a feeling that immortals rarely experienced. She felt a sense of urgency.

She felt like everything might change at any moment, like the long party that began when she became immortal was finally coming to an end. She felt as if all the terrible things she had done in her life were going to come back to exact their vengeance on her, just as she had done on Marco Clemente.

That sense of urgency, of the past chasing her down, got all mixed up with her hunger and she found herself with a strong desire to hunt and kill. She felt like the human part of her was going on hiatus, and the vampire would get full reign of her body and mind. She felt like the ballroom was a swirling mass of trouble, and at its center, fueling it all, was some monster that had been chasing her for years, always there, always ready to strike, but never making itself known until now.

She could smell the monster. It was a familiar smell even if she didn't fully recognize it. It was buried in the folds of her mind, associated with something awful. And although it was a smell she knew, it was also different. It had changed. Whenever it had last entered her nose, it was a younger, riper smell.

It was a human. A human whose scent brought about fear and regret and anger all at once, with a new, sweet scent on top of it that appealed to her hunger in a profound way, as if she could make the monster and the hunger go away all at once if she just bit into the girl and—

*What was that last part? The girl? Yes. Dear God, yes that was it. It was the girl. The smell of the girl. She was here.*

Melissa inhaled deeply through her nose and allowed it to guide her. She turned to her left. She sidestepped across the floor, letting the smell pull on her like a rope. As she approached the girl and the full implications of it all became reality, Melissa realized it was better if the girl didn't know, at least not yet. Melissa ducked into a shadow where she could see the girl, but the girl couldn't see her.

The girl. The one who got away. Nicky. She was here. She was here wearing black.

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## 25

“The immortals have arrived,” Nicky said.

“What? The immortals? I don’t see them,” said her current dance partner, Marshall Beaumont.

Nicky wondered how it was even possible that he didn’t see them. They were everywhere, roaming about and cutting in wherever they chose. Marshall had been looking all around the ballroom during their dance, no doubt eager to spot the immortals when they arrived. It seemed like they were awfully hard to miss.

Unless Nicky was able to see things the other students couldn’t.

The immortals were supposed to be stealthy, yet, to Nicky’s eyes, they were just meandering about where anyone could see them, not stealthy at all. It just happened to be that no one was turning to look. It had to be some sort of mind control, some kind of groupthink the immortals were forcing upon the ballroom. They didn’t want to be seen, so no one was seeing them. No one, except Nicky, on whom their mind control didn’t work.

“How do you know they’re here?” Marshall asked.

“I don’t,” said Nicky. “I thought I saw one, but...I don’t know. I’m probably wrong. I’m just excited that they’re coming, I think.”

In reality she saw seven of them. Renata, with her sunfire-colored hair; Alexander Chapman with his bond from Germany. Mark Spinoza, Bernadette Paiz, Thomas Byrne, Lena Trang – these creatures had been central in her life for the past six years – she had been following them around, staking out their mansions, looking for two people they had enslaved.

Renata, Alexander, Mark, Bernadette, Thomas, Lena...and Dominic. The seventh vampire she saw was Dominic Volcker, bond to Melissa Mayhew.

Gia and the strategists from the Network were certain Nicky’s identity was safe whether or not Melissa was here. In the years since Nicky’s escape, Melissa had reprogrammed more than a thousand kids. It would be awfully hard to recognize a girl she spent a few minutes with six years ago, particularly when that girl is wearing a mask.



Of course, this was just conjecture. Nobody knew for sure what would happen. If Melissa was here, and she did recognize Nicky, the mission was over and everyone involved was as good as dead.

“You know what’s weird?” Marshall said. “I don’t really care if I dance with one of them or not. I know it’s supposed to be a big deal, but, come on, it’s just a dance.”

“You’re so full of it,” Nicky said. “If an immortal came over here right now and cut in, you’d be on Cloud Nine.”

“That’s what you think, but immortals aren’t really my type,” said Marshall.

“What? You don’t go for older women?” said Nicky.

Marshall just smiled at that one and let it pass.

The truth was, Marshall did go for older women, but he thought his proclivities were his own little secret. Marshall and the junior history teacher at Thorndike, a married woman named Suzanna Benchley, were having an affair that would be an epic scandal at school and around town if anybody found out.

The Network stumbled onto the affair when Nicky asked Jill to do some spying on Marshall. At the time, Nicky had no idea Marshall was sleeping with a teacher. She was just curious about him because he seemed like an independent spirit, and he was Nicky’s pick to win the Brawl in the Fall fundraiser.

Jill uncovered a stream of text messages and phone calls that suggested Marshall and the history teacher had been seeing each other for nearly a year. It was a goldmine of dirty secrets, and the sort of information that could get Marshall expelled. Nicky fully intended to use it to win Marshall to her side.

If she had to. It was better to get him on board through friendly persuasion first, if possible.

“Are you going to enter Brawl in the Fall?” Nicky asked.

“I’m thinking about it,” Marshall said.

“I think you should enter,” said Nicky. “I’d bet on you if you did.”

“No you wouldn’t,” said Marshall. “You’re flirting with me because you want my support.”

“That’s true,” said Nicky. “And I wouldn’t waste my time if I didn’t think you were a good prospect. On your own, you don’t have enough money to make much difference to me. But if you win the brawl, then

everyone will want a piece of you. When that happens, I hope you remember that I believed in you first.”

“You’re a strange and surprising girl, Nicky Bloom,” said Marshall. “Where in the world did you come from?”

“I’m from Chicago,” said Nicky.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Of course it wasn’t,” Nicky said with a smile. “You want to know how a new girl that nobody knows ends up wearing black to the Homecoming Masquerade.”

Marshall nodded.

“Can you keep a secret?” Nicky asked.

“When I want to,” said Marshall.

“Hopefully you’ll want to keep this one,” Nicky said, and then she dove into the story about the secret consortium of Nicky Bloom backers. From there, she went straight into her sales pitch.

“You and I are outsiders, Marshall,” she said. “We know we have to play the game, but we’re both doing it by our own rules. We’d make a good team, you and me.”

“I’ve never been much of a team player,” Marshall said.

“It’s Coronation. You have to choose somebody. Come to my after-party tonight. It’s at the Hamilton. Jada Razor will be there.”

“So I’ve heard,” said Marshall.

The music was winding down. The next partner change was just a few steps away.

“I really want to see you there,” Nicky said. “Kim doesn’t understand your role in this contest, but I do. Right now she’s not paying you a lick of attention. She assumes you’ll be another one of the lemmings who comes to her party.”

“Maybe she’s right.”

“Cut the crap, Marshall. You’re training your ass off to win Brawl in the Fall. You want that prize money and all the power that comes with it. You’re doing it in secret because you want Kim to come begging at your door after you win.”

“How do you know about my training?”

The music stopped. It was time to switch.

“I know a lot of things about a lot of people,” Nicky said. “And I’d be glad to tell you more tonight, at the Hamilton.”

With that, she turned away, leaving Marshall to wonder how much more Nicky knew about him. Hopefully his curiosity would bring him to the Hamilton tonight. If he came, she'd have to decide how much more to tell him. She couldn't let all the secrets out at once. Marshall was the kind of guy who—

She couldn't finish the thought. Her next partner was in front of her, and it wasn't someone she had expected at all.

“Ryan,” she said. “Are you going to dance with me?”

Ryan grabbed her hand and threw his arm around her back.

“Be quiet and listen,” he said. “I need to talk to you, and there isn't much time. Sergio's on the floor and will be looking to dance with you any minute now.”

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## 26

“I want you to leave with me. Right now,” Ryan said. “I want for the two of us to walk out the front door, get in my car, and drive. I have a hundred and forty thousand dollars in my bank account. If we leave now, no one will think to look for us for a few hours, and by then we’ll be in Philadelphia.”

The look in his eyes as he said it – the sincerity in his voice – here she was, a Network spy, dancing with a boy she was supposed to seduce...

And he was seducing her. He was looking at her with eyes that saw right through the charade. He didn’t know she was a spy, but he didn’t need to. He saw the real person inside, the girl Nicky had learned to put away. Ryan knew nothing of Nicky’s history, of her agenda, of her mission, but he saw who she was and he liked it. He connected with it, and now that connection was pulling hard at Nicky.

That connection made her want to stop living in the past, to face the reality that the family from her childhood was gone and it was time to move on. Time to be someone besides the lost girl driven by her past. Time to finally put her old life behind her and start a new one.

“I know this guy,” Ryan continued. “If we go to Philadelphia he can help us get away. He gives people new identities so they can escape. He says he helps people do it all the time.”

“Ryan, I--”

“No, listen to me Nicky. This is our only chance. I swear to you this guy is legit. I started looking into this during freshman year. The guy’s name is Patrick. I met him online. I researched the heck out of him. Last summer I went to Philadelphia and met him, anonymously. I gave him a fake name, and wore a hat and sunglasses. I told him I wasn’t ready to go yet, but I was thinking about it. He told me to come back whenever I was ready and he’d get me out. It’s what he does. He helps people who have gotten in trouble with the immortals, people who need to disappear without a trace. He says there is an escape route that leads out of the country.”

Ryan was talking about the Network, without even knowing he was talking about it. The man he had met was Patrick Hall, a goofy, skinny guy

with salt and pepper hair who loved to make bad jokes. When Nicky and Gia were staking out the immortals in Pennsylvania, they stayed in Patrick's apartment.

The escape route Patrick had mentioned to Ryan was known as The Wormhole, and was a string of safe houses throughout the world where the residents were Network sympathizers with the training and connections required to forge identity papers that could get people out of the country. If they went to see Patrick, he would draw up new driver's licenses and passports for them and put them on the next flight out of the country. While they were in the air, Patrick would make arrangements for another Network sympathizer to meet them at the airport and give them yet another new identity. On and on they could go, bouncing from safe house to safe house along The Wormhole until they had effectively disappeared.

"So what do you say? Let's go now, Nicky. The immortals are on the floor. Sergio's going to cut in and dance with you any minute now, and when he does, it's all over. After you dance with Sergio, you'll be as committed to the contest as the people who made you enter."

*Oh, Ryan, she wanted to say. If only you knew. If only I could tell you that Sergio won't have the same effect on me that he's had on everyone else, that the reason I'm here wearing black is because the immortals can't control me.*

Why couldn't she tell him? If she wanted to, she could walk out the door with him right now, just like he was saying, and then she could tell him everything. The second they hit the highway she could tell him the truth about what she was doing here, about how the story she'd told him was a lie, that there wasn't some evil interest group making her enter the contest to defeat Kim, but that she'd entered of her own volition, that she was here to kill Sergio.

That she was here to save the world. That her mission was already well underway, and many people had risked their lives to bring it this far. Jill, in particular, would be left holding the bag if Nicky disappeared in the night. Jill, who had risked her life to hack her way into the admissions database, who had been undercover all summer, who had betrayed her parents the moment she told the story about a secret consortium of which they were a part...

And Ryan. Had he given any thought to what he would leave behind if he ran away?

“I can’t,” Nicky said.

The music was blaring now. Nicky felt the sound vibrate in her chest, but she heard none of it. In that moment, for her, the world was silent.

In that moment, Nicky wished she could be the girl Ryan saw. She wished she could go away with him and hide inside some secret life like so many other people the Network had sent away.

“We can’t leave, Ryan. We’re too visible. Our families..”

“Our families put us in this position,” he said.

Now Ryan was the one being dishonest. Whatever animosity Ryan felt toward his parents, Nicky knew he didn’t want to leave them behind for dead, and dead is exactly what they’d be if Ryan and Nicky up and left. Nicky was a girl wearing black. There were rules governing her movements now. If Nicky disappeared, everyone connected to her would be suspect. The immortals would question and punish them all. The Network would be exposed. Ryan’s parents would be killed.

“My family has done some terrible things, but I can’t leave them to die,” Nicky said. “And you can’t either.”

Ryan said nothing in response. Nicky had pulled him out of that moment of bliss when all their problems could be solved by running away. He hadn’t thought it through. He had just said it. He wanted to just do it. Nicky loved him for that. But they both had to live in the real world. They both had to recognize the consequences of their actions.

They circled the ballroom without speaking. They circled again, and Nicky put her head on Ryan’s chest. The current song was maybe half-way done, but Nicky had a sense that their dance would soon be over, so she she kissed him on the cheek and whispered, “I’m sorry,” in his ear.

“I’m sorry too,” Ryan said.

A few seconds later, a dark, shadowy presence pushed his way in between them, and Nicky was dancing with Sergio Alonzo.

He brought darkness with him. His presence felt cold but his touch was full of life-giving warmth. He took her hand and drew her close. She smelled him before she really saw him. Sure, her eyes registered his porcelain skin, his bright blue eyes behind the black mask, his perfect nose, his perfect lips, his perfect teeth...

But what really caught her in those first seconds was the intoxicating scent. It was like cloves and vanilla, a fresh, healthy smell, the clean air on a mountaintop, the sort of scent you didn't sniff but rather inhaled.

Nicky was filling her lungs with the smell of him when a small voice from the deepest recesses of her brain sounded the alarm: *humans don't smell like this.*

That voice was enough to shake her mind loose from its trance and allow her to look at her partner's face. Shoulder-length black hair, tight, rigid muscles behind his face and neck, a haunting look in his eyes.

Her new partner was Sergio Alonzo. She was dancing with a vampire, and he was doing something to her.

With that realization came a rush of panic. This wasn't supposed to happen. She was immune. She had resisted Melissa Mayhew, the best hypnotist in the Samarin clan. Surely she could resist Sergio Alonzo.

Couldn't she?

She felt like she was falling – losing herself to his presence, to his strength, the feel of his body on hers...

They were dancing, soaring around the floor, enveloped in the music. He moved with perfect confidence and control and Nicky had no choice but to follow. She could feel her body slipping into ever deeper submission to his. Her mind was in a daze, conscious thoughts brief and discrete. She saw the dance floor as if from above, from out of her own body, looking down at herself and her partner, moving in such perfect unison that they were no longer two people, but a single being, their bodies intertwined, their movements one with the music. She imagined her own body held closer to his, held tightly in his arms, and he made it happen.

And the music. The gentle bouncing motion, waves in an ocean – *he’s pulling me back to the water from which my life had come, back to the most basic, animal part of myself. He’s pulling me into a place where I throw aside manners, conventions, memories, rules, a place where I give reign to the creature that lay dormant inside me.*

The rhythm was everything now. *One-two-three one-two-three one-two-three breathe-in-me.*

Those last words were like a whisper on the wind. What did they say?  
*Breathe in me.*

It was a message. A signal from a part of Nicky she was about to lose.

*One two three, breathe in me. Breathe in me one two three one two three.*

She saw a picture in her mind, a bright silver ball with beams of sunlight bursting from all sides, and the image made her scared. It was the first of a deluge waiting to come out.

*Breathe in me.*

Something was wrong. Something inside her head, something put safely away, wanted to come out. It was hidden behind that bright silver ball. It spoke to her now, in her father’s voice.

*We’re going on an adventure, Nicky. We leave tonight.*

“No,” she whispered.

“No?” said Sergio. “You deny me?”

“You go too far,” Nicky said. The words were exhausting to her, as if every syllable was a brick she had to push from her throat.

Sergio smiled. Such a beautiful smile. He was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

“I go wherever I want,” he said.

*Breathe in me breathe in me one two three one two three.*

*One two three turn two three breathe in me turn two three.*

She repeated the words to herself in time to the music. She was back in the ballroom, matching the words to the movement of her feet, trying to remain in the moment.

*Breathe in me.*

She was dancing. Dancing with her sworn enemy, coming back from the brink.

She looked at him with fresh eyes. He was beautiful, nothing more. Just beautiful.



*Breathe in me.*

He smelled good, but it was just a smell.

*One-two-three, one-two-three, breathe in me, breathe in me.*

His body felt good next to hers, but she could control her desires.

*I can resist the taut muscles on his back, the perfect lines and curves of his body.*

“You’re fighting me,” Sergio whispered. “Why?”

Her head still in a daze, she had no idea what to say to this question. So she told him the truth.

“I don’t want to be your slave.”

Like a dog on a leash, Sergio pulled her to a stop. The music still played, but Sergio and Nicky stood still. He looked right in her eyes.

“What did you say?”

“I said I don’t want to be your slave. I want to be your equal. That’s why I wore black tonight.”

She could tell by the way he was looking at her that this was a pivotal moment. She had not reacted as he expected her to. Now he was suspicious. If she didn’t play this exactly right, the entire mission was over.

*Breathe in me breathe in me – come on....breathe in me...*

Her pulse, her pupils, her breathing – Gia had warned her of this and she hadn’t prepared herself properly. Sergio had tried to get in her head and she had pushed him out. He knew.

They began to dance again. Sergio was looking at her, appraising her.

“You are a very interesting girl,” he said.

“I am who I am. Perhaps you don’t normally encounter that with the girls wearing black.”

“I most certainly don’t.”

“Some of it’s your fault, you know.” She felt herself sliding into character. Nicky Bloom, the girl with the nerve to tell a vampire she wants to be his equal. Someone sassy. Someone fearless.

“Please...enlighten me,” he said.

“You just came in here with your delicious smell, your perfect body, your brooding face behind the mask, and then you swept me up. For a moment there, I would have been anyone you wanted me to be.”

“But now you won’t?” Sergio asked. There was genuine curiosity in his voice.

“I suppose that’s up to you,” Nicky said. “I have a feeling if you wanted to, you could turn on the charm to a degree I couldn’t resist no matter how hard I tried.”

“Perhaps we’ll find out some day,” said Sergio. “For now, we will dance. I will lead.”

And oh did he lead. For a few glorious minutes, they were a torrent of movement, and the sheer audacity of what they were doing ripped at Nicky’s heart. All that she thought she knew about herself and the character she was playing were called into question. Years of burning, vengeful hatred for these creatures, of desire for justice, of memory – all of it became clouded in those moments, and the best she could do was hold on.

“Do you know why I come to the Masquerade?” Sergio asked.

Yes. She did know why he came. He came to dance with her, and the other girls wearing black. *He makes them come to their own funeral.*

Nicky shook her head.

“I am supposed to get inside your head and command you to remain loyal to the contest to the bitter end. And when I am done, I am supposed to leave you with a mark.”

“A mark? What kind of mark?”

“You’re being coy,” said Sergio. “But I like that. You know what kind of mark. Would you like to have it?”

“I don’t know,” said Nicky. “Is your work with me complete?”

“It isn’t,” said Sergio. “You pushed me out. If I am to place the command in your mind, you’ll have to allow me back in. Do you intend to do that?”

“I don’t,” said Nicky.

“Then it will be our little secret that I left you alone,” said Sergio. “Just make sure you don’t lose the contest.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t lose.”

Sergio smiled, and Nicky felt herself swoon back into the trance. Had the music continued, she might have lost herself completely.

But the music stopped. The sound of silence was like an alarm waking Nicky from a deep sleep.

She looked up and Sergio was gone. A white orchid corsage was pinned to her chest.

## 28

Nicky staggered off the dance floor and collapsed onto a stool at the bar.

“I see you got your corsage,” said the girl next to her. It was Annika Fleming. A sad version of Annika Fleming. All the jollity that was her normal persona had been spent, and all that remained was a girl who was drunk.

“How was it?” Annika asked.

“How was what?” asked Nicky.

“Dancing with Sergio.”

“Did you see us out there?” Nicky asked, wondering how anyone could have seen her at all, thinking about how she felt like she was somewhere else entirely during that last dance.

“No. Hardly anybody sees Sergio, even when he’s dancing with someone. He’s like that. But you have your corsage, and you look like a girl who’s just danced with an immortal.”

Was she that obvious? Nicky was disgusted with herself. Not only had she allowed Sergio inside her mind, but she came away from the encounter looking like any other girl who had danced with a vampire.

“I’m just a little tired,” Nicky said.

“Honey, you look like you could use a cigarette,” said Annika.

A second of silence passed between them, then they laughed. Annika laughed a little too hard. Nicky waited for her to finish before saying, “Jill tells me you’re not coming to my party.”

Annika’s shoulders slumped. “No, I’m not,” she said.

“You’re scared of Kim,” said Nicky.

“You don’t know anything about it,” said Annika.

“I know enough,” said Nicky. “You hate Kim Renwick. Not only do you hate her, but you hate everything she stands for. You hate that there are some people whose whole purpose is to keep other people down, and that it’s those people who have all the power in Washington. You hate the thought of going to Kim’s after-party, but you’re going anyway, and you hate yourself for it.”

“Holy shit, New Girl. That was harsh.”

“Calling it like I see it,” said Nicky. And she was. For reasons that weren’t entirely clear to her, she was being completely candid. It probably wasn’t the wisest strategy. Nicky had seen Jill out of the corner of her eye. She was ten yards behind them, watching. In a minute, Nicky would turn Annika over to Jill so the blackmailing could begin. As it stood, drunk, defiant Annika was going to be a difficult subject for Jill already. If Nicky angered her, she’d make Jill’s job even harder.

“Maybe I should call it like I see it too,” said Annika. “Maybe I should tell you that you’ve signed your own death warrant tonight, and it’s a shame too, because I’m sure you would have had a nice future. You’re smart, you’re pretty, tonight you’ve shown that you have self-confidence in spades, but still you’re going to die. You’ve entered a contest you can’t win. And don’t start telling me Jill’s bullshit about a secret consortium. I don’t know who you’ve got backing you, but they’re not enough. All the Renwicks have to do is snap their fingers and the richest people in the world all show up and want to give them money. You’re right, Nicky. I do hate the way all of this works, I hate the game and I hate myself for playing it, but I do what I have to do. Come graduation, I’ll still be alive. And then I’m out of here.”

“Out of here?” Nicky said. “Where are you going?”

“None of your business,” said Annika. “But I guarantee you this. While the rest of these fools spend their entire lives kissing Kim’s ass, I’ll be living my own life, on my own terms.”

*Living in Brazil*, Nicky wanted to add, *with Hong Chung*.

But that wasn’t her line, it was Jill’s, and now was as good a time as any for her to deliver it.

“Sounds great,” said Nicky. “Good luck with that. I really mean it. I hope that you’re able to get away from all this madness. See you around.”

As Nicky stood to leave, she put her hand on Annika’s shoulder and gave a friendly squeeze, a gesture that wasn’t quite a hug, but was enough to tell her she wanted to part as friends.

*She’s all yours, Jill*, Nicky thought, *and she’s ready for some tough love. Don’t fuck it up.*

Jill watched as Nicky and Annika sat at the bar, talking. She couldn't hear their conversation, but she could see that Annika was going through a full range of emotions. She recognized the way Annika was leaning in as she spoke, moving with slow, exaggerated movements. It was the same way she moved on the night they watched *Crimson Sunrise* at her house. It was the way she acted when she was drunk.

Nicky said something that agitated Annika. The way Annika responded, like a cornered dog, made Jill nervous. She didn't know if she could go through with this.

Spying on her classmates, breaking into the school computer, pushing out a whisper campaign about Nicky Bloom and a secret consortium behind her – Jill had signed up for all of it, and, truth be told, had enjoyed doing it. But blackmail...blackmail was a completely different universe of activity. Blackmail was forcing someone to act against her own will. It was head-on conflict, and the thought of it terrified Jill.

What if it didn't work? Jill imagined herself talking to Annika, and, in her mind, her own voice was weak.

*I know about you and your secret boyfriend. If you don't want anyone else to know, you'll do as I say.*

What if Annika sensed Jill's weakness and fought back? It wasn't like Annika was without options here. Jill needed her, badly, and Annika knew it. Without Annika and the crowd she brought, Nicky's after-party was a bust. Was Jill in a position to dictate anything to her? All Jill had on Annika was some dirty laundry, obtained illegally. Jill had broken into Annika's hotel room and put illegal software on her computer. If Annika refused to cooperate and Jill had to release the dirt, Annika could easily arrange to take Jill down with her.

It was all a giant bluff, and Annika was sure to see that. It was a big confidence game, like everything else in Washington, the sort of game at which Annika thrived and Jill stunk.

Nicky and Annika seemed to be past the worst of their confrontation now. They were speaking quietly to each other. Nicky was looking straight

ahead. Annika was looking right at Nicky. In her drunken state, Annika probably didn't know she was staring, her eyes affixed on Nicky's face even as no words passed between them.

And now Nicky was getting up to leave. It was go-time for Jill. She needed to put aside all these doubts and just do it. She didn't have any other options.

But Jill observed two things happen as Nicky took her exit.

The first was a touch, Nicky's hand on Annika's shoulder. It was a friendly gesture, mature and full of self-assurance, more like a teacher to a student than one student to another, and Annika responded in a big way. Annika leaned into Nicky's touch, like a cat arching its back to meet its master's hand. As Nicky let her hand slide away, Annika's body followed along, extending the touch as long as possible.

The second was a stare from Annika, practically a gape. As Nicky walked away, Annika's eyes followed her out, scanning from top to bottom to top again. She looked like a hungry lion gazing upon its prey.

Or just another dude who was checking Nicky out.

The part of Jill's brain that had taken in the entirety of her mother's *Clean Street* code and seen the error, the same part that could sift through thousands of lines of dialogue all around and hear the pertinent bit of gossip, the one sentence that had any meaning – it now saw all the disparate ends of her relationship with Annika, from the Annika she barely knew before this summer to the Annika who took her to Cozumel to the Annika who watched *Crimson Sunrise* to the Annika who had a secret lover in Brazil.

Not a secret boyfriend. A secret lover. A secret lover to whom Annika sent encoded messages where the other students at Thorndike were all characters from *Crimson Sunrise*.

Jill turned around and walked away from the bar. She went to the far wall and walked along the outer edge of the ballroom, going all the way to the front of the mansion where she asked the slaves to kindly open the door so she could step outside.

She ran to the far end of the driveway and banged on the back door of her limo. Her driver, a tall and plump fellow named Dante, popped the locks so she could get inside.

"Hello, Miss," he said. "How was the dance?"

“It’s still going on,” Jill said. “I just had to come out here to think. I’ll need some privacy please.”

“Certainly,” said Dante. He pressed a button on his dashboard and a plastic screen rose up behind his head, giving Jill her own soundproof space.

Jill reached under her seat and pulled out her tablet computer, which she used to log onto her system at home. She pulled up the old surveillance files from freshman year, the text messages and phone calls she had intercepted from her classmates in a moment of boredom. All the data from that spying job was stored in a database that could be filtered by name and phone number. She of course had studied Annika’s data stream to the point of memorizing it.

Tonight she was interested in one text message Annika had received on November 14th, a Thursday.

*I really enjoyed talking to you last night. My parents are going out of town this weekend. Come over tomorrow and watch a movie with me.*

Annika’s response to that message, a benign acceptance of the offer, had never struck Jill as unusual or noteworthy. The text had come from Shannon Evans, who had been a member of Annika’s group since the beginning. So what if they had watched a movie together one weekend in freshmen year? The exchange was no different than a hundred others Annika had with every one of her friends.

It was what happened after that exchange that suddenly seemed significant to Jill, and that she now wanted to verify. Scrolling through the rest of the file, looking at every incoming and outgoing message from Annika’s phone until Jill had shut down the surveillance software, there was no other communication with Shannon. None at all. Annika texted people in her group every day, but not Shannon. And it wasn’t like they’d had some falling out or something. Far from it. From the beginning of freshman year right up until her untimely death, Shannon was a member of Annika’s clique in good standing. Jill had freshman algebra with both of them that year. Miss Metzler, fourth period – Jill remembered how Shannon and Annika always came in to class together, how they always sat in the same two desks in the back corner, how they giggled and carried on every day until Metzler screamed at them to shut it.

Jill flung that data out of the way and got into some different software, using her tablet to log into Annika's laptop with the spyware she had installed in Cozumel. She got into Zhang Li's secret email account and looked at the properties, pulling up the account creation date.

November 17th, freshman year, just three days after Annika's final text message exchange with Shannon.

They had quit communicating by text because it wasn't secure. Now they were using anonymous web mail accounts, named after the main characters in the movie they had watched at Shannon's house that weekend, a movie about two teenagers whose secret love pits them against the rest of the world.

She pulled out her phone and made a secure call to Alvin Green from the Network.

"Jill, I'm surprised to hear from you. Is the dance over already?"

"Don't worry about the dance right now," Jill said. "I need you to do some research, and I need it right away. I could use an answer in the next minute or two."

"What can I do for you, Jill?"

"I need you to hack into the motor vehicle division in Rio de Janeiro and use facial recognition software to find someone."

"Wow. That's a tall order for the next minute or two. That could take weeks."

"Just find a point of entry and I'll walk you through it."

"Even finding a point of entry--"

"They have a web site," Jill snapped. "Just get me the IP and DNS info and we'll go from there."

"Alright, alright, give me a second..."

Alvin needed more than a second, but Jill kept her cool. No use yelling at him now. She didn't have remote access to the Network's facial recognition software or the databank of photos, so she was stuck with Alvin if she wanted to finish this.

"Okay, got it," Alvin said.

"Look for all the threads leading out to adjacent servers," Jill said. "Tell me what you see. All we need is one connection and I can get you in."

Jill took Alvin on a quick tour of her best break-in techniques, using the Marsh Hawk Protocol to ride *Clean Street's* access privileges right into the



master database for the Detran in Rio de Janeiro, where all driver's license photos were stored.

“Connect the facial recognition software and scan the database going back to the beginning of the summer,” Jill said.

“Whose face am I looking for?” said Alvin.

“Shannon Evans.”

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## 30

Alvin's database search took longer than Jill needed it to – she'd have to talk to him about his setup. Jill suspected half his processing power was going unused when he hacked into slower systems.

Regardless, she had what she needed now, and as she stepped back into the ballroom, it was clear that her absence had gone unnoticed. The immortals were on the floor, the students were drunk, the music was rolling along, and everyone was having a good time. She walked to the bar, waited out the dance in progress, then got back on the floor just in time for the opening notes of the school song, which would be the last dance of the night. Jill partnered with Sam Featherstone and danced out the number.

"Jill Wentworth, so nice to see you," said Sam.

Jill thought about diving into her spiel but decided to let it go. She wasn't in the mood to talk about Nicky and her after-party right now. She just needed to get through this dance and then find her way to Annika.

Her mind was swimming with thoughts of what she might say, of how she might tell Annika that she knew everything. She was so focused on that pending confrontation that she forgot there were rules governing the way the dance came to an end, and as the school song rolled forward, Jill realized she hadn't paid enough attention to her position on the ballroom floor. There was a proper, orderly way to exit the ballroom. Everyone went arm in arm with their final dance partner of the night, snaking around the ballroom and out the front door. The line moved counterclockwise. Jill and Sam had just passed the door when the song reached its closing stanza. They would be at the end of the line.

Sam bowed low and kissed Jill on the hand, as was traditional for the dance's finale. With all the boys bowing low, Jill got an unobstructed view of the ballroom, and saw that Annika was on the other side of the door. Fifty servants dressed in white jackets and black pants appeared from the doorways on all sides of the ballroom and began cleaning up. Sam held out his arm for Jill and they began their long procession around and out. It took only a minute, but to Jill it felt like an eternity.

"See you at Kim's?" Sam said as they stepped outside.

Jill ignored him and began running down the driveway to catch up to Annika.

“Annika, wait! I need to talk to you.”

Annika was at her limo. Her driver was holding the door open for her. She looked back at Jill, then got into the car. The driver closed the door behind her.

Unable to move fast enough in her heels, Jill pulled them off and broke into a full-on sprint to Annika’s limo, getting to the door right as the engine started.

“I don’t have anything to say to you, Jill,” Annika called out from inside.

Jill reached for the door handle, but Annika snapped the locks shut before she could open the door.

Jill banged on the glass. “Annika, please. I need to talk to you now!”

“Go away. I’ve made my decision!” Annika yelled back.

“I know everything, Annika. About you, about Shannon, Zhang Li and Hong Chung. I know everything, now let me inside so we can talk.”

Annika gave Jill a look of shock and disgust. Jill imagined that if there wasn’t a pane of glass in between them Annika might have reached out and punched her.

“Get me out of here, now!” Annika yelled at her driver.

“Wait!” Jill yelled. “It was easy to find you out! You don’t know what...” All around them, limos were pulling out. It was noisy and chaotic. Still, Jill was aware she was making a scene and people might be paying attention. She leaned in close to the glass and cupped her hands on either side of her cheeks. “They know Shannon’s alive. They’re waiting to see what she does, and they’ll kill you both when you get there. I can help you.”

The car started rolling away. Jill had to step back to keep her foot from being run over. She wanted to bang on the window and scream as Annika left, but she held back.

She turned to go to her own limo, thinking she’d call Annika as they drove, but as she took her first step, Annika’s limo came to a halt and the back door opened.

“Get in!” Annika yelled. “Tell me what you know.”

## 31

“Shannon Evans is alive,” Jill said. “She and her parents got in trouble with the Samarins and faked their own deaths to get away. They are hiding out in Rio--”

“Stop,” Annika said, holding up her hand. They were in the back of her limo. The sound-proof screen separating them from the driver was pulled closed. They were leaving the mansion and turning East on Country Road 6, headed for the highway.

“You asked me to tell you what I know.”

“I meant, tell me why you think the immortals know about Shannon. Tell me why you said they are going to kill us both when we get there.”

“I hacked into a government database and used facial recognition software to search for Shannon. It took only a minute to find her. Whoever forged her identity did a piss-poor job of it. The immortals would have found her in a few hours, max.”

“So you’re just assuming they know where she is. You don’t actually have any proof.”

“The proof is that I did it. The proof is, I was able to find her in just a few minutes and I’m a seventeen-year-old girl using personal computing equipment. The immortals have a thousand times as much computing power as me and they have full-time staff who spend their days looking for fugitives like the Evans family. Shannon’s face showed up right away. She’s got a fake ID under the name Isabella--”

“Quiet!” Annika yelled. “I’m not supposed to know the name she’s using, in case the immortals question me about it.”

“They don’t need to question you, Annika. They know exactly where she is. The only reason they haven’t pounced is they want to see what she and her parents do when they think they are safe. They’re watching Shannon’s every move, especially what she does online. They know all about your secret email relationship. They’ve read everything you sent.”

Annika crouched against the wall and looked out the window, as if her enemies were looking in on them right now.

“We tried to be careful,” she said.

“It’s not your fault,” said Jill. “Shannon’s parents didn’t know what they were doing. Whoever they contacted to get them phony identities was an amateur.”

“Can you help her get someplace safe?”

“I can, but the minute she disappears, the immortals will come after you. We’re going to need the Evans family to stay put until we can get you out too. When the time comes, we’ll hide all of you at once. For now, what’s important is that you and Shannon don’t say or do anything stupid. They’re reading your emails. We’ve got to make sure you’re saying what we want them to hear.”

“Who’s we?” Annika asked.

*We?* Instantly, Jill realized she was being careless with her language, saying ‘we’ in reference to the Network, talking with Annika as if she were already in the fold. Eventually, Annika would know more. She would have to if they were going to get her out. But not until Jill knew she could trust her.

“I told you,” said Jill. “There’s a whole group of us working together on this. I have contacts who will do whatever is necessary to ensure Nicky wins Coronation this year, and right now, what is necessary is getting you and your friends to Nicky’s after-party.”

“So that’s the deal, isn’t it?” said Annika. “You don’t help me until I help you.”

“That’s the deal, Annika,” said Jill.

“It’s so late. We’re already on the road. Everyone’s going to Kim’s. I don’t even know what I’d say to them at this point.”

“I’ve taken the liberty of writing something up for you,” said Jill. “Pull up your phone. I skipped out of the mansion near the end of the dance and went to my limo. I sent you a text. Read it.”

Annika opened a compartment in the arm rest and retrieved her phone. She pulled up the text from Jill. It took her a few seconds to read it.

“You think this will work?” she asked.

“Yes, I do,” said Jill. “It’s coming from you. They’ll all listen. Forward it to everyone, and get ready to take their calls.”

## 32

Nicky's last dance partner of the night was Andrew Muller, who escorted her all the way to her limo before wishing her luck and going on his way. Julien opened the door for Nicky, saying nothing as she got in the back seat.

Later, as Nicky thought back on the events of the next few minutes, she realized that these seconds from the time when Julien closed the door and was walking around the front of the limo were when she messed up. It made no sense for Julien to walk around the front of the limo. The design of the limo made it much faster for him to walk around the back.

It was the sort of observation a seasoned agent like Gia would have acted on right away. But Nicky didn't think anything of it. She didn't wonder why Julien was taking the long way, didn't think that someone else might be coming up from behind the limo and Julien was staying out of her way.

When the back door opened again, Nicky thought it was Julien, coming back to tell her something. Her mind was still in a fog after the dance with Sergio, and her reaction time was terrible. Had her enemy intended to kill her, Nicky would have been dead.

"Hello, Nicky," came a familiar voice. Nicky looked up just in time to see Melissa Mayhew push her way into the car, scooting Nicky along the bench seat with one arm, as if she were a toy who weighed only a few pounds.

Julien got into the driver's seat and locked all the doors with a frightening click. The automatic window blinds began closing on their own. Julien started the car and pulled out of the driveway.

"Your driver and I had a talk before you came out," said Melissa. "He and I are in agreement now about how this evening will proceed. Would you care to know our plans?"

Melissa was the same girl Nicky had seen six years ago. All that had changed was the hair. When they had last met, Melissa's hair hung just low enough to cover her ears. Now it was cropped into a tight pixie cut with long bangs that angled down her forehead. Much closer to her than she was

the last time, Nicky couldn't help but admire how perfectly attractive Melissa was. Her face, her eyes, her skin – everything was a reminder that this was a being who possessed the flawless beauty of eternal youth.

“What’s the matter, Nicky? When I saw you last time, you knew just what to say and when to say it. Have you forgotten that trick?”

“What do you want?” Nicky said.

Melissa smiled, and Nicky caught just a glimpse of her fangs showing, which was unusual, and probably didn't bode well. Vampires only allowed their fangs to grow when they were angry.

Or about to eat.

“I simply want to talk to you,” Melissa said. “I mean, really, how long has it been? Six years? That’s too long. I can tell you truthfully, I’ve thought about you many times since then. I was so pleased to see you at the dance tonight. I never thought this day would come.”

Melissa raised her hand to Nicky’s face, gently placing it on her cheek. With great care, she lifted Nicky’s mask from her face.

“Oh yes, it is you, and what a woman you’ve become,” Melissa said. “I mean...look at you! The last time we were together you were a scrawny little jackal in need of a bath. Now you’re one of the girls wearing black. How did this happen?”

Nicky pondered her options. Her best bet at this point was to play along, to convince Melissa that it was in her best interest to let Nicky go.

“Life’s been good to me,” Nicky said.

Tossing Nicky’s mask to the other side of the car, Melissa laughed. “I’d say so. I was so certain you were dead. My greatest fear was that someone was going to find your body in the swamp and I’d have to answer for it. But you never turned up, and now I know why. You got away. I can’t believe it, but you did. Of course, no little girl could make it out of the swamp by herself. Someone was helping you. Who was it?”

Nicky didn't answer the question. Her mind was replaying just a few words and ignoring the rest. *Greatest fear...someone was going to find your body...I'd have to answer for it.* Melissa had never told anyone. Daciana, Renata, and the other immortals – none of them knew that one time a little girl got up after reprogramming and walked right out of the Farm.

“I don't like being ignored, Nicky,” said Melissa. “Shall we do this the hard way then?”

“I’m sorry,” Nicky said. “I...don’t know where to begin.”

“How about the time you sat there in my office and answered all the reprogramming questions, even though you weren’t being reprogrammed at all. Do you remember that day?”

“Yes,” said Nicky.

“Did you know it wasn’t working? When I asked you those questions, were you aware of what was supposed to be happening?”

“I don’t know,” Nicky said

“Look at me when I speak to you! Look me right in the eyes or so help me, I will rip out your throat!”

Nicky wondered what was going to come of this. Her encounter with Sergio had left her doubting everything she thought she knew about herself. On the one hand, Sergio hadn’t gotten in. On the other hand, he clearly had some sort of effect on her.

But as Melissa’s pupils grew large and inviting, just like Nicky remembered from the Farm, she knew that Melissa wasn’t getting in. Nicky felt nothing at all. To her, Melissa was just a girl with unusually big eyes right now, staring at Nicky as if trying to see through to the back of her head.

“I’m going to ask you again, Nicky, and I want you to tell me the truth. Did you know that reprogramming wasn’t working when I was doing it to you?”

A part of Nicky wished that Melissa could hypnotize her. It would almost be a comfort if she did. If Melissa could get inside Nicky’s brain, that would relieve Nicky of the responsibility of figuring a way out of this mess.

“Yes, I knew,” Nicky said.

“How did you know?”

“I understood that you were trying to control me, but I felt nothing.”

“Do you feel anything now?”

“Yes.”

Melissa turned her head to one side, gently. Nicky wondered if she was supposed to turn with her.

“I know you’re lying,” Melissa said. She spoke the words in a voice that was overly sweet, a voice that made Nicky think about her own death.

“Sit up, please,” Melissa said. “Turn your whole body toward me.”



Nicky did as Melissa asked and now they sat together on the bench seat of the limo, their bodies facing each other, their knees barely touching. Melissa took Nicky's hands in her own. It was a motherly gesture, holding onto both of Nicky's hands, a show of affection that in another context might have been one girl bringing another close so she could tell her something important.

But inside that motherly gesture was an absurd, inhuman strength. Nicky felt it radiating through Melissa's hands as they touched, the sense that, at any moment, Melissa could crush Nicky's hands into powder if she wanted to.

Outside, the limo had pulled onto the highway, and was driving away from DC. Whatever happened next, Nicky apparently wasn't going to her own after-party. How stupid she had been, the whole Network had been, not to expect this. They knew it was possible that Melissa Mayhew would be here tonight. But they had convinced themselves that Melissa wasn't going to recognize Nicky now, that it had been too long and Melissa saw too many kids in the interim.

It was delusional on all their parts. Nicky and Jill together had given the Network a once in a lifetime opportunity to break into Thorndike, and they all had deluded themselves into thinking it would be okay. They were so desperate for this night to go well they willfully disregarded the danger that Melissa Mayhew posed.

Now they were paying for it. Now Melissa was ruining everything.

"We're going to try again, Nicky," Melissa said quietly. "I'm going to look into your mind. If you shut me out, I will break one of your fingers, then I'll try again. Every time I try and fail, I break a finger. If I fail ten times, I'll assume you are a lost cause, and I will rip out your throat. Are you ready?"

No, she wasn't ready, but she could have been. It was a depressing truth about her situation. Gia had tried to prepare her for just this moment, and she'd never completed the training. She'd given up on Abbot Schneider and his meditations, choosing instead to spend her time on things that she now knew were far less important. Had she mastered Abbot Schneider's skills, she might have been able to fool Melissa, to earn her trust and make her think she was reprogramming Nicky for real this time.

"Give me a moment, please," said Nicky. She began reciting the mantra in her mind, trying desperately to make it work. *Breathe in me breathe in*

me...

“You may have ten seconds,” said Melissa.

*Fine. Ten seconds. Breathe in me breathe in me – come on now, calm the mind, make the connection, open up to this girl.* Nicky looked in Melissa’s eyes. Her pupils were enormous now. There was something there, something going on behind them, Nicky could tell, but it wasn’t having any effect.

“Nine....eight....seven...six...”

Melissa’s counting wasn’t helping. Nicky couldn’t focus on her mantra while Melissa was talking.

“Five...four..”

Nicky focused on the countdown instead, as if this were a traditional hypnosis session, as if Gia were asking Nicky to relax so they could have a look into her past.

“Three...two..”

It wasn’t working.

“...one.”

Melissa grabbed the little finger on Nicky’s left hand and twisted it backward at the knuckle, cracking it like a wishbone.

The pain was excruciating and instant. Nicky cried out in anguish and leaned forward—her body’s natural response was to curl up.

With a finger on Nicky’s chin, Melissa pulled her up straight and held Nicky’s face to hers so they were once again staring in each other’s eyes.

“We’ll move to your ring finger next,” Melissa said. “Shall I begin the countdown anew?”

“No,” Nicky gasped. “The countdown doesn’t help. I’m trying to let you in, I swear.”

“I believe you, Nicky. Since our last meeting, I’ve given considerable thought to what happened. I even engaged in a research project to try and understand how a simple human might resist my reprogramming. More than fifty slaves were used for the research, including your father. ”

“My father?” Nicky whispered.

“Evidence that your talent isn’t genetic,” said Melissa. “Your father took to reprogramming as easily as anyone else.”

“Where is he?”

Melissa laughed. “My dear, when I get done with you tonight, you’ll either be under my control or you’ll be dead. There’s no reason to worry

about your father.”

“So tell me then,” said Nicky, “since it doesn’t matter if I know.”

“Your father is dead.” Melissa said the words in a casual voice, as if she were talking about the weather.

Tears filled Nicky’s eyes.

“How?”

“In a way it’s your fault,” Melissa said. “The fact that you just walked out of the Farm made me wonder if all these years I ever knew what I was doing. So I took some time to find out. I used your father and many others to really understand how mind control works, to try and learn how a little girl could look me in the eyes and just walk away. They were participants in a grand and useful experiment. I took them in and out of hypnosis. I placed powerful commands deep in their subconscious to lock off their minds, then asked my bond to try and get in and see what was there. I experimented with emotional and sensory extremes. Of course, I couldn’t send my participants out in the world. I had messed with their minds so much they might be unpredictable as slaves. All participants, including your father, were disposed of when we were done.”

“Disposed of,” Nicky whispered.

“I spared your friend, you know,” said Melissa. “That boy who was sleeping in the RV with you and your father. He became our control in the testing. We gave him standard reprogramming and compared his behavior to that of the test subjects throughout the experiment. He was quite useful and still made for a very fine slave. I just released him from the Farm tonight, in fact. Renata was in need of some new slaves, and that boy is almost ripe. He will be quite delicious in just a few months.”

“You gave Frankie to Renata?”

“Amusing, isn’t it? We had our own little reunion at the Homecoming Masquerade. You, me, and your friend, together again in the ballroom, six years after your improbable escape. And now, to top off our reunion, we’re going to learn the truth about you, Nicky. I’m excited, aren’t you?”

Nicky said nothing. So much to process in so little time. Her father was dead, mistreated in the most horrible way imaginable and then discarded, but Frankie was alive. All that time she’d been looking for him across the country, and he’d never left the Farm. He’d been locked inside that drab gray building for six years, and now he was in Renata’s mansion.

She had to make it out of the limo alive. No matter what, she had to make it out alive. She felt her mind coming into focus with the purpose of it. If she got out of this alive, she could finally rescue Frankie.

“In the experiment, I learned that there is a way to bore so deep into the subconscious the subject can be locked off from further reprogramming. That’s what has happened to you, Nicky. You are already a slave. The reason I can’t get into your mind is that some other immortal has programmed you to shut me out.”

Nicky put a puzzled look on her face, a look that wasn’t entirely a ruse, as Melissa was really going to a strange place with this one. Melissa thought she was already enslaved?

“Think about where you are,” Melissa said. “In six short years, a little jackal from the streets becomes a student in the Thorndike senior class? It just doesn’t happen that way. Whatever path you think you’ve taken to get where you are, it has all been a lie. Only a powerful force behind the scenes, an immortal from one of our rival clans, someone like Falcon Dillinger or Fu Xi, could have orchestrated a rise like this. How did you even get into Thorndike? Did you just fill out an application and get a phone call? Did you even have to interview? Someone got you in, Nicky. Someone wants you to do something while you’re here, and you don’t even know what it is. Someone is getting you close to me or Renata or Sergio, or maybe even Daciana. Perhaps you are gathering intelligence, or are programmed to carry out a terrorist attack on the school. Maybe you’re here to sabotage the Coronation contest. Maybe you’re going to do all these things and more, and you don’t even know it. Whatever your purpose is, there are too many coincidences in your life to assume that anything else is even possible. Tell me, Nicky, do you remember what happened on the night you escaped from the Farm?”

Did she remember running through the swamp, getting bitten by a snake, collapsing under a tree and nearly dying? Yes, she remembered all of these things, but she sensed this wasn’t the right answer.

“No, I...” Nicky whispered.

Melissa smiled. Her fangs were fully exposed now, as if she were ready to pounce on Nicky at any moment.

“When I tried to see into your mind, your own reprogramming kicked in,” Melissa said. “That’s how it works. I’ve replicated your case in the experiment. I’ve discovered the secret, and I’m going to flush out whoever

is behind you. You see, I've learned how to crack open a mind that has been programmed to stay closed. My subjects opened up when I spoke to them in the language that our inner animals understand. Pain, anger, fear....so I'm going to ask you again, Nicky. Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"Ten....nine..."

"Oh no," Nicky said. "Not again. I'll cooperate. I just need time."

"What you need is fear. When I finish the countdown, I'm going to break another finger. I want you to think about that. I want you to fear it."

"Please," Nicky said. "Please don't."

"Seven...six..."

Nicky took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. She had to make it out of here alive. She had to convince Melissa that she was safe to let go. Frankie was alive.

*Breathe in me breathe in me.*

"Five...four..."

*Breathe in me...*it wasn't working. There were only three seconds left and it wasn't working.

"Three..."

*Breathe in me breathe in me* – she took a slow, deep breath through her nose, exhaled through her mouth. The scent of the orchid corsage on her chest filled her nostrils. *Breathe in me breathe in me.*

"That's it, Nicky. Feel the fear. I'm beginning to see something. Focus on the pain that will come when I break your finger. Two seconds..."

Beginning to see something? Was it fear? Was Melissa scaring her into opening her mind?

No, that wasn't it. It wasn't fear. It was Sergio. She had smelled the orchid corsage when she inhaled through her nose and it reminded her of him, of the trance he had put her in when they danced.

"That's it, Nicky. Open your mind to me."

She thought about the way Sergio looked, the way his back felt in her hands, the way he smelled. She thought about almost losing herself to his presence.

"One second left," Melissa whispered.

Nicky took a deep breath through her nose. The scent of orchid filled her nostrils and she was all the way back. Her heart slowed down. Her breathing became steady and deep. Her pupils dilated. Her mind had taken

her away from here, away from Melissa, away from the limo. She was there again with Sergio. She was inside her own memory of the dance.

“Very good,” said Melissa. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“No,” Nicky said. She said it because she knew it was what she was supposed to say. Melissa’s voice had told her so. Nicky was hardly even there, so lost was she in the memory of her dance, but she knew enough to answer no to Melissa’s question.

“Now, search your memories. Tell me who programmed you.”

“Falkon Dillinger,” she said, lying with a name Melissa had already given her.

“Yes,” Melissa hissed. “I knew it was him. He can’t seem to leave us alone. First the Evans family, now this.”

The Evans family? Nicky struggled to maintain her composure. Was Melissa telling her why the Evans family was killed?

“What is Falkon having you do?” Melissa asked.

Nicky had learned from her time on the streets that the best lies were the simple ones.

“My job is to observe and report,” she said.

“Yes, intelligence. Go on. Why did you enter the Coronation contest?”

“As a girl wearing black, I can get closer to the immortals and report more of what is happening to Falkon.”

“But why does he want to know? What does he plan to do?”

“I am not to concern myself with that,” said Nicky. “My job is to observe and report.”

“Interesting,” said Melissa. “Nicky, I want you to listen to me. Starting now, Falkon Dillinger is no longer your master. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Your mission is no longer to give intelligence to Falkon Dillinger. It is to fool him. You will now only report to him what I tell you to say. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Nicky, a part of her thinking this was all so familiar, so much like the night on the Farm.

“I am your master now. But you will remain unaware that you have been programmed. You will continue as a student at Thorndike, completely ignorant of the fact that you now work for me. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“You will remember nothing of this conversation. Starting from the moment your driver opened the door for you until now, you have been riding quietly to your party, by yourself. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“What happened between us six years ago is now erased from your memory,” said Melissa. “You have never met me. You never came to the Farm. You never escaped my reprogramming. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“You are going to lose the Coronation contest, Nicky. You will take whatever steps are necessary to ensure you finish dead last. Your mission will be over when you are in the cage next spring. The moment before you die, you will remember everything I have told you to forget, and you’ll realize you’ve just been a pawn to my will all this time. Do you understand?”

This command complicated things. At some point in the near future, Melissa would see that Nicky had no intention of losing the contest and would know this reprogramming session was just as fraudulent as the last one.

If the mission was to continue, the Network would have to kill Melissa Mayhew.

“Yes,” Nicky said.

“We’re almost done here, Nicky, but you now have a broken finger. We need an explanation for that.”

Melissa pressed a button on the wall, giving her intercom access direct to Julien.

“Driver, please take the next available opportunity to get us into an accident. We’re looking for a fender bender, nothing too dangerous. We still wish for Nicky to go to her party tonight. We just want her to be a bit late.”

She turned back to Nicky.

“Or maybe a lot late. It’s tough to get your supporters excited when you miss your own after-party. You better buckle your seatbelt.”

Melissa buzzed Julien again.

“Driver, after the accident, I want you to stay until medical help arrives, to insist on a full and truthful report, and to have the paramedics give a thorough evaluation to everyone present. Even if Nicky wants to go to her party, you are to make her wait. Her safety comes first.”

On some level, Nicky felt herself starting to grow nervous. What Melissa proposed was a terrible plan that might result in innocent people getting hurt. But now wasn't the time to indulge such thoughts.

*Breathe in me...*

Nicky sat back in her chair, her body cool and composed, and she buckled her seatbelt.

Julien waited until they took their exit from the freeway, and then plowed into the line of cars stopped at the first traffic light, rear-ending whatever driver was unlucky enough to be at the back of the line. The crash was swift and jarring, beginning with the collision of bumpers followed by sounds of squealing tires and folding metal.

There was a second of silence, then another crashing sound, this one right next to Nicky. She turned to find that Melissa was gone, having thrown open her door with such force it had broken from its hinges.

"Dammit," Nicky whispered. She reached up to press the intercom button and speak to Julien and cried out in pain with the movement. Her neck, her shoulders, the little finger on her left hand – all were in various states of agony. Looking down at her finger, she saw that it was angled sideways at the knuckle and starting to swell. With her right hand, she undid her seat belt, then she started going through the array of cabinets and drawers along the wall and underneath the seats. After finding two drawers stocked with various free samples of expensive makeup and another six stocked with liquor, she found a first aid kit in a compartment under the armrest where Melissa had been sitting. Using her good hand and her teeth, she cut off a long stretch of medical tape and hung it from the ceiling. Then, taking a deep breath and closing her eyes, she grabbed her little finger and pulled it straight, hearing the bones grind inside as she did so. The pain was worse than when Melissa had broken it, but it was over, and there was no one in the car threatening to break the rest of her hand.

Pulling the length of tape from the ceiling, she wrapped her finger tightly, and ripped off the excess with her teeth. Then she crawled out the door Melissa had left open.

They had smashed into a white sedan and pushed it into the next car, sandwiching the poor driver on either side. It was a middle-aged man, who was now kicking at his door to get it open. Nicky ran to help him pull. Together they got the door open and the man stumbled out. He appeared to be unharmed.



“What the hell--” the man began, but seeing that Nicky was in formal wear, in black formal wear, changed his tone. “Are you okay, Miss?”

“I’m fine,” Nicky said.

“We’ll let the medics be the judge of that,” came a voice behind her. It was Julien, who was walking toward her with a limp.

“I’m so sorry,” Nicky said to the man. “My driver was being reckless. He--”

“No, no,” said the man, holding up his hands. “It’s all good, I’m sure. Did you just come from the...?”

“Yes, I was at Thorndike’s Homecoming ball,” said Nicky, “and I’m afraid--”

“Let’s wait for the police to arrive, Nicky,” said Julien. “We can give them a full report. Rockwell Transport will make sure that everyone who was involved is fully compensated.”

“I’m just glad you’re alright,” the man said to Nicky.

“What happened back here? I have children in my car!” came a voice from farther down. It was a woman. Her minivan had been parked at the light. The limo had pushed the white sedan into her back bumper.

“Everything’s fine,” said the man. “This limo was on the way from the Thorndike Homecoming.”

It was a warning to the woman to cool her jets, that this was a girl wearing black who, for all they knew, might be an immortal in nine months. The warning worked. The woman instantly went from angry to helpful.

“Oh, my,” she said. “I’m so glad you weren’t hurt. What happened?”

“Just a little accident ma’am,” said Julien. “I’ll be giving a full report to the police. You have nothing to worry about. My company will ensure you are compensated for any damages.”

Nicky felt sad for all these people. They were the ones whose lives were interrupted, but they were kowtowing to her, the girl wearing black, as they had been trained to do. It was all so ugly and rotten.

And Nicky would have to just go with it.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” she said to the woman from the front of the line. “I’ve got to get to a party, and my limo...well..”

“Are you asking me for a ride?” the woman said.

“You can’t leave, Nicky. The police are on their way. We need to complete the accident report.”

“I need to get to my after-party,” said Nicky. “The police will understand. If you have a problem with that, send them to the Hamilton.”

“The Hamilton then?” said the woman. “Yes, I’ll take you. My car...it’s such a mess. I’m so sorry. It’s the children.”

“No one is leaving!” Julien snapped.

“Ignore him,” Nicky said to the woman. “He’s forgotten who he works for. I’ll be having a chat with his boss tomorrow. Nothing is more important than getting me to my after-party right away.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” said the woman.

Julien ran in front of her and put his hands on Nicky’s shoulders. “Nicky, I can’t let you leave.”

Nicky sighed. Her finger was throbbing with pain. Her neck was jacked up from the accident. She was in a formal dress and high heels. She really didn’t want to fight her way past Julien right now.

Fortunately, she didn’t have to.

“Get your hands off her,” shouted the man from the white sedan.

“Stay out of this, it isn’t your business,” said Julien.

“You’re making it his business,” said Nicky. “I need to go to my party, now let me go.”

“I said, get back in the car,” Julien commanded.

“And I said, let her go,” said the man, accompanying his words with a shove to Julien’s shoulder. As Julien stumbled sideways, Nicky grabbed the woman by the arm and said, “Let’s get out of here.” Together, they rushed to the woman’s minivan, while Julien and the man he ran into broke into a fistfight behind them.

## 33

*Dear Friends:*

*I'm going to Nicky Bloom's after party at the Hamilton. I want you to come with me. Here's why.*

So began the text message that Jill had ghostwritten for Annika.

*Kim Renwick has controlled all of us in one way or another for as long as we've known her. Now, if we all support her and she wins Coronation, she gets to continue controlling us for the rest of our lives.*

"This only works if you're all the way in," Jill had said to Annika. "If you try to half-ass this thing, nobody will come and we all lose. You have to decide right now whose side you're on. I'm only helping you and Shannon if you're with us, and to be with us, you have to be all the way with us. We draw the line in the sand here, tonight, knowing that doing so will make Kim our enemy."

"Oh, what the fuck," Annika said, and then she sent the text on to everyone in her group.

*Kim is only as powerful as we let her be. We have all been so scared of her that we've let her run all over us, and we've convinced ourselves that it's the right thing to do because it was our only option. But now there is another choice. Nicky Bloom can win this thing. I'm sure of it. If everyone getting this text message comes to Nicky's party rather than Kim's, people will see that they don't have to support Kim and the whole house of cards that is Kim's Coronation campaign will fall apart. Be brave, my friends. See you at the Hamilton.*

Watching Annika hit the send button on that text message was one of the most exciting moments of Jill's life. So much had gone wrong at the dance, so many unexpected obstacles, but here she was, her mission

accomplished. Annika was coming to Nicky's party and demanding that her friends come with her.

Now, as Annika and Jill waited in the empty night club on the top floor of the Hamilton Hotel, Jill wasn't so sure.

"Has anyone written back to you at all?" Jill asked.

Annika shook her head. "I'm getting a drink," she said.

The Hamilton Hotel on K Street was a posh gathering place for lobbyists, politicians, lawyers, and everyone else who made DC work. The lobby and bar on the ground floor was a notorious watering hole for the most powerful people in the world, who liked to gather in the evenings to flex their political muscles. The ten floors of luxury hotel suites were always filled with emperors, presidents, ambassadors, and diplomats, and the top floor was home to the most exclusive nightclub in town.

Perhaps a little too exclusive, Jill thought. Was anyone coming to this party at all? Even Nicky wasn't here. Where was she?

For a six-minute span, Jill thought all was lost, that she had blown it and the entire mission was over. They were six horrible minutes, when it was just Jill and Annika hanging out in a nightclub that was meant to hold hundreds of people, just Jill and Annika about to get a private concert from the biggest pop star in America. Jill and Annika against the world, having risked everything to support Nicky rather than Kim, and, for six minutes at least, seeming to have chosen incorrectly.

But then the elevator chimed and the doors opened. The first one out was Art Tremblay. The second was Marshall Beaumont. As Jill was greeting them both, the elevator on the other wall chimed and opened up to reveal Annika's entire crew waiting inside.

Mattie, Jake, Vince, Norah, and Jenny came out first, giggling about something as they stepped from the elevator. Eric and Shauna came up next. Then Isabel and Gabe. The elevator dinged again and Lonnie and Karina came inside. Add in Jill and Annika and the total guest count at Nicky's after-party was fourteen, almost certainly a much smaller number than Kim would have, but enough to make this into a two-person contest. Fourteen guests including one of the big money players in the class, and a party that was about to get rocking.

If only the guest of honor would show up.

As she was greeting Lonnie with a hug, Jill's phone buzzed with an incoming text.

*Got in a car wreck but now on my way. No one hurt. Get the party started.*

A car wreck? Go figure. All the planning in the world had led them to this moment and Nicky had gotten in an accident. Jill shook her head at the absurdity of it, then headed to the stage on the far wall of the club, where Jada Razor's band had set up and awaited their cue. As she climbed the stairs, Jill nodded at the drummer, mouthing, 'It's time,' then went center stage and took the microphone.

"Hey everyone, I just got a text from Nicky. She ran into some traffic trouble on the way, but wants us to get started. So, without further ado, I present to you...Jada Razor!"

The drummer hit four downbeats, the guitar player started a heavy riff, and the show was on. Jill jumped to the floor in time to see Jada Razor and her dance team come out and perform their current number one hit, *Babydoll*.

They danced, all fourteen of them. They sang along. They enjoyed each other's company and the intimate show they were getting from the larger than life superstar. There was a unity to the group that was palpable. These people had come because Annika asked them to, but in doing so, they had tied their futures to each other and their mutual success. For these fourteen people, Nicky Bloom had to win. If she didn't, they were screwed.

Jada Razor jumped off the stage to dance with them. The roadies and techs from Jada's concert crew joined the dance party. Everyone had a blast.

Jada had completed four songs by the time Jill's phone buzzed again with another text from Nicky.

*I'm in the lobby. I want to talk to you before I come up.*

Jill shook her head. Nicky Bloom was an enigma. She had the skill to walk into the pressure cooker of the Thorndike Homecoming and win over the room, but she couldn't make it to her own after-party on time.

Jill stepped away from the dance floor and exited the night club, taking the elevator all the way down. She found Nicky in the lounge, sitting in a booth by herself. Her hair was disheveled and her eyes had a distant look to them, like she was somewhere else entirely.

"Nicky?"

Nicky smiled when she saw Jill. It was a smile that seemed to wash over her whole face in a look of absolute relief.

“What happened to you?” Jill asked. “Did your finger – how bad was this accident?”

“Sit down,” Nicky said.

The story was only minutes in the telling, but as Jill listened, she felt like hours were passing them by, so momentous was this news. It wasn't just that Melissa Mayhew was involved now, and would have to be killed if the mission were to continue (though that certainly did change the nature of things), it was that, in this story was a little nugget of info about the mysterious Nicky Bloom. She had been on the Farm, and she had escaped. Melissa Mayhew had tried to brainwash her and failed. Tried not once, but twice now, and Nicky had fooled her both times into believing the brainwashing had worked.

“It's so strange that her charms do nothing to you,” said Jill. “She, more than any other immortal, would be the one that's hard to resist.”

Nicky shook her head. “I don't know why I'm this way,” she said.

She looked like she was going to say more on the topic, but then changed her mind. “Anyway, I suppose I should get up to that party.”

“It's going really well,” said Jill.

“Who came?” Nicky asked.

Jill ran down the entire guest list for Nicky, starting with Annika and finishing with Art. She felt tremendous satisfaction at every name she spoke.

“This was a heck of a night, wasn't it?” Nicky said.

“I've never done anything like this in my life,” said Jill.

“You realize this is only the beginning,” said Nicky.

“Oh yeah. At this time tomorrow, my parents are gonna flip. Kim Renwick is probably going to be at my house soon. That's gonna be fun.”

“You'll do great,” said Nicky. “Jill, you were pretty phenomenal tonight. Whatever else happens, I hope you know that. I know it was hard for you to get Annika out here, but you did what you had to do and you should be proud of yourself.”

“Actually, about Annika, I didn't exactly blackmail her,” said Jill. “I found another means of persuasion that was even more effective.”

“Really? What did you do?”

It was a big question, one that Jill was only now beginning to comprehend. What did she do? She broke into Annika's clique early in the summer, won Annika's trust, got invited to Cozumel and Annika's girls-

only party, hacked into Annika's computer, learned the truth about Shannon Evans, and used that knowledge to save Nicky's after-party. She had gone undercover as a Network operative and completed her mission.

Or at least, completed part of it. There was plenty more to do, starting tomorrow.

"I'll tell you about it later," Jill said. "Right now, we need to get you cleaned up. We've got a block of rooms on the eighth floor just for the party. Get a key from the front desk."

Nicky smiled. "How bad do I look?"

"You still look amazing," Jill said. "Just not as put together as you were at Homecoming. And your finger – what are we going to do about that?"

"The whole point of the car accident was to give me an alibi," Nicky said. "So we'll use it. I got in a wreck on the way here and I came out unharmed, except for my little finger."

"Are you really unharmed?"

"I think I'll be alright," said Nicky. "But I can tell by your reaction that I need a bit of work before I'm presentable again. I'll go get myself in order. See you up there?"

"Yeah, yeah of course," said Jill. "See you up there."

## 34

*You, me, and your friend, together again in the ballroom, six years after your improbable escape.*

Melissa's words rang in Nicky's mind and left her wondering what might have been.

She wondered what might have happened had she not gotten up and left the Farm, but instead went further inside to find her family.

She wondered what might have happened had she and Gia spent more time at the lookout post, not just looking for intelligence about Melissa's side businesses, but actually looking for Frankie and her father.

She wondered how close she and Frankie had come tonight. Had Nicky poked her head into Renata's kitchen, or out the back door, would she have seen him?

Nicky waited for Jill to get in the elevator, then she got up from the booth in the lobby of the Hamilton and went outside. She walked along the perimeter of the hotel until she was in an alleyway in the back. She checked all around and when she was confident no one was present, she stepped into the shadows behind a dumpster and called Gia.

"Nicky, what's going on? Aren't you supposed to be at your party?"

"Frankie's alive," Nicky said, savoring the words as she spoke them aloud. She had left Frankie out of the story she told Jill, knowing that Jill wouldn't understand the significance. But to say the words to Gia, to the only person who had shared in Nicky's search, it was a moment of pure bliss, even if the next words were as ugly and harsh as the world they lived in. "He's a slave in Renata's mansion."

Silence on the other end.

"And we've got a problem with Melissa Mayhew," Nicky added.

"Nicky, are you telling me you saw Frankie inside?"

She told Gia the story, the complete, unabridged story, recounting her conversation with Melissa word for word.

"Dear God," Gia said. "You sure know how to make it interesting."



“I think we’ll need to plan an assassination attempt on Melissa,” said Nicky.

“I should say so. But don’t you worry about that right now. You’ve got a party to get to.”

“And I’d like to be involved when we discuss how we’re going to get Frankie out.”

“I know you do. One thing at a time, though, okay? You’re already late.”

“And I don’t know what to make of Sergio. I swear – I never was able to do the Abbot’s meditation before, but after Sergio danced with me....something changed.”

“Nicky, this is all very interesting and we’ll do a full debriefing later, but right now you are still on assignment. There are people waiting for you on the top floor. You need to get up there. It’s time to hang up the phone.”

“I know,” Nicky said. “I’m just...I can’t believe Frankie is alive.”

“I can’t believe it either,” said Gia. “I’m happy for you, and I’m going to help you get him out. Now get your ass up there and get back to work.”

Nicky smiled. Back to work. Her “job” was to go to a private party with the biggest pop star in the world, a party where she was the guest of honor. Things could be worse.

She said goodbye to Gia and went back to the lobby, where she found the front desk very willing to help her. They escorted her to the luxury suite on the eighth floor and had a stylist come direct to her room to help her get her hair and makeup back in order. It was just before two in the morning when she got back on the elevator and pressed the button for the top floor. She could hear the music thumping on the other side of the door as the elevator came to a stop. Taking a deep breath, she waited for the doors to open, then she stepped out of the elevator and into the party.

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Look for Girls Wearing Black Book Two in winter 2012!

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