



**ANNA
DEL MAR**

**AT
THE BRINK**

Chapter One

Lily

The silk gown propped up on my couch announced the end of a truce and the beginning of yet another battle. After a long day at work and a dreary walk through the cold drizzle soaking Boston, I wanted a bath and my bed. But I knew better. Martin and trouble always came together. Dressed in an ill-fitting tux, Martin sat on the couch between the gown and a shopping bag from Second Hand Concessions, twirling a pair of six-inch stilettos by the heels.

"Beautiful, yes?" He lifted the shoes in the air. "A present. For you."

I shut the door behind me and dropped my purse on the table. "Why are you here?"

"Why, Lily, you forget," he said, voice tilting with the French accent I'd once found charming. "This is my place too. I've come to take you out. Tonight. You need to get ready. We're going to a party."

"A party?" My heart tripped and my mouth soured. "You know I don't do parties."

"You'll do this one."

"No, Martin, I won't."

"There's no need to argue." He rose from the couch and, clutching the shoes in one hand, tucked a handful of salt-and-pepper curls behind his ear. "You are going to the party and that's final."

I kept him at bay with a narrow-eyed glare and retreated behind the kitchen counter. "What are you up to this time around?"

"You blush so prettily when you are angry." He launched a shoe up in the air and began to juggle the pair. "You might be surprised, but I've found a solution to our problem."

"Our problem?" I stared at him in disbelief. I wasn't the one who'd gotten booted out of a professorship at MIT for cavorting with students. I wasn't the one who'd lost my grant, maxed out our credit cards and mismanaged my research project. And I sure wasn't the one who'd defaulted on one bank loan after another.

"Yes, dear, *our* problem." Martin flashed a joyless smile, eyes fast on the shoes, hands moving with practiced ease. "Don't forget that you're my wife."

"I've told you many times," I said. "I don't want to be your wife anymore."

Martin fumbled his juggling act, but he managed to catch the shoes against his chest before they hit the ground.

"Merde," he cursed under his breath and glowered at me. "See what you made me do? This is not about what you want. It's about what I need. The simple fact is that you're still my wife and, tonight, I need your support, which means you need to get ready."

"I want no part of whatever this is." I stood my ground. "I'm *not* going."

"Oh, come on, let's go dancing, my dear." He tapped the stilettos' heels on the kitchen counter. "Don't make me out to be the bad guy. Be nice. Do as I ask."

I took a deep breath and dug my nails into my fists. "I want you, the gown and the shoes, gone."

Martin stopped the impertinent tap dance and asked. "For such an agreeable soul, you're in a bad mood today. I didn't want to disrupt your dull little routine, but I've got news for you." His stare hardened. "WindTech is out of money. We've run out of time. Either I find a funding source or we go bankrupt."

The news didn't come as a total surprise, but it hit me like a jab to the gut. My belly roiled. WindTech had gone under even sooner than I'd expected. Another blow to my efforts to keep us afloat. But living in bankruptcy couldn't be much worse than the way I lived now. Could it?

"I'm sorry, Martin," I said and I meant it. "I know the project is important to you. Maybe this will give you an opportunity to regroup?"

The look he gave could've vaporized me on the spot. "I'm not going down and neither is WindTech. I've arranged for an introduction to the man who can change my fortunes. It's happening tonight. At the party. You'd better pray he takes the lure."

"The lure?" I moistened my lips, even more alarmed. "This sounds like a really bad idea, Martin. I'm out. If you really feel like you have to go to this party, go without me."

"I'll make you a deal," he said, suddenly too amiably for comfort. "If you come to the party, go along with what I say, smile and act the part of the charming wife, you'll be done for a while."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll leave you alone. I swear, if I get the funding, I'll stay out in Ohio and I won't disturb your life here. Oh, and I'll pay for the nursing home. I'll pay the late charges and bring the account current. Come on, Lily." He flashed his best smile. "Do it for me. Do it for your mother."

A life free of Martin might not seem like a lot to anybody else, but it would be one humongous gift to me. I wouldn't have to put up with his verbal abuse, his mood swings and his condescension. I wouldn't have to deal with his bar bills and his reckless behavior when he came to town. Best of all, my mom would be safe from eviction.

Careful, Lily. I suppressed an inkling of hope. Martin had never kept his promises before. Why would he start now?

"Martin," I said, "I... I don't want to go."

"Zip it." The smile wilted on his face. "Do I have to remind you of the deposition that sits ready with my attorney?"

I swallowed hard. "Blackmail will only get you so far."

"Far enough to make you do what I want," he said. "Fraud is such an ugly charge."

I snapped. "You set me up!"

"And what judge is going to believe you?"

I clenched until my teeth hurt. "The day you use that deposition, you're done too."

"So, I get to go back to France while you get to face the music. Not too bad. For me." He adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses and smirked. "But we're jumping the proverbial gun, dear. I don't wish to return to Europe yet, especially not under such unpleasant circumstances. Which is why you'll help me save WindTech. If my world comes to a sudden end, so will yours."

He grabbed the dress and tossed it over the counter. It skimmed across the laminate and billowed in the air for an instant before it plummeted to the floor, where it lay flat like a corpse.

The walls of my small apartment closed around me. My throat tightened, allowing only a trickle of air to get through to my lungs. The weight of his threats crushed my resolve. He meant every word he said and I knew it.

I hated the tears that welled in my eyes. I bit down on my lips. I wasn't going to cry, not in front of Martin, not in front of anybody. I wasn't going to have a panic attack either. My circumstances might suck, but I had some dignity left in me. I'd survived heartache and managed on my own for many years, until desperation struck, along with Martin. I was no dimwit. I was smart, educated and hard-working. And yet, here I was, trapped by a single, fatal mistake. I couldn't believe my life had been reduced to this.

I gulped down my tears and my pride. "Please, don't make me go."

"No more discussion." Martin stalked around the counter, snatched the dress from the floor and shoved it into my hands. "Get ready. The benefit is for a good cause. Rich people love wounded warriors. They make for wonderful photo ops. So hurry up, my dear. Who will take care of your mother if you go to jail?"

* * *

My mother used to say that my mind worked like a color wheel. Color defined my world and explained it too. My mom, for example, fell into the violet spectrum, somewhere between lilac and tyrian purple, the color of emperors. I belonged in the yellow spectrum, which I used a lot in my portraits. Martin, well, he belonged in the neon red category, a color that happened rarely in nature and then only to announce extreme danger.

On good days, primary colors filled my canvases. On not so good days—and there had been a lot of those lately—my eye craved neutrals, mostly whites and grays, since I feared black, the color killer. Despite the vibrant display of high fashion crowding the ballroom, Martin's party fell squarely into the grayscale range. Very appropriate, since right after the speeches, I ended up in the bathroom, where I now knelt on the floor staring into the depths of a stark toilet bowl.

Panic attacks were a bitch. Mine came on without warning. Sometimes I couldn't breathe. Sometimes the full blow of my anxieties hit my weak belly. I couldn't say that I preferred one over the other.

"Come on, Lily." I wiped my mouth and hovered for a few more seconds over the toilet. "You can do this."

I flushed the toilet, took a deep breath and, finding my feet, steadied myself against the stall's marble wall. Focus on the positives. If one had to be sick with panic and anxiety, the plush women's lounge at the Ritz Carlton on the Commons wasn't the worst place in the world for a powwow with my lunch.

The sounds of music and conversation drifted through the doors as someone walked out, leaving me alone with the empty stalls. In my hand, the little satin clutch I'd borrowed for the evening began to vibrate again. My gut ached with an additional pang of dread. I pulled out my battered cell. I had five texts from Martin.

Come out. The words glared on the cracked screen. Think consequences.

My stomach churned some more.

Hurry up, the next text said. He's here.

And Come out now or I'll come in there and drag you out myself.

I took another deep breath and staggered out of the stall. I stumbled on my way to the sinks. Damn high heels. Martin had insisted I wear them. I made it to one of the crystal bowls lining the granite counter. Despite the tremors shaking my hand, I rinsed my mouth, reapplied my lipstick and straightened my dress.

"Lily Boswell," I said to my reflection in the mirror. "You're perfectly capable of handling this."

My stomach completely disagreed.

I forced myself to walk through the threshold anyway. The alcove that connected the restrooms to the ballroom held a small crowd swarming around a Navy sailor wearing dark sunglasses and dress whites. A bar full of medals adorned his chest. I recognized him right away. He'd been one of the speakers earlier tonight, a war hero and a wounded veteran whose appeal to assist his injured comrades had made me wish I had more than thirty dollars to my name.

On the stage, the veteran had introduced himself as Petty Officer Chavez. He'd been poised and inspiring, an excellent spokesman. But standing at the center of this smaller crowd, he didn't look nearly as comfortable. On the contrary, he looked nervous. The anxiety etched on his face mirrored my own. Sweat beads gleamed over his lip as a few clueless donors clustered around him to examine his state-of-the-art prosthetic arm, which was furnished by the Healing Warrior Development Fund, the not-for-profit sponsoring the gala tonight.

The prosthetic arm seemed to work really well for the petty officer. The crowd? Not so much. I could almost feel his anxiety climbing, and so could his service dog. The restless yellow Labrador circled its handler, trying to put some space between him and the others. I wanted to do something to help him. Instead, I froze at the sight of all of those people. My legs refused to carry me forward and my belly squeezed. Faces crammed my visual field and shrill laughter tortured my brain. A cloud of sweet perfume had me gagging. Oh, God. I covered my mouth with my hand. Was I about to throw up again?

The dog's yelp broke through the din.

"Damn it!" A man dressed in a white tuxedo kicked at the dog and missed. "Did you see that? That mutt just nipped at me!"

"Marie Therese doesn't bite." The petty officer knelt on the floor and groped for the Labrador, feeling along the leg that the poor creature held curled up against its chest. "You must have stepped on her."

"That dog is dangerous." The guy snapped his fingers, getting the event manager's attention. "You! Hey, you, yes. You need to kick this dog out of here. Call animal control."

The sailor's face crumpled in horror. "Please, don't do that. My dog is safe."

The anguish in his stare powered my outrage. The people in the little crowd murmured assorted opinions, but no one intervened. I took an instant dislike to the jackass who chose to make such a racket at the expense of a hero. With his gel-slicked hair plastered to his head, the idiot looked like a plastic doll, like Barbie's Ken with a rotten attitude. A total jerk. I was furious, but before I could muster my voice, a man I hadn't seen before stepped into the alcove.

"Why don't we give Petty Officer Chavez a bit of space, people?"

The newcomer's appearance scattered quite a few of the bystanders. I watched in awe as a handful of Boston's power brokers fled from the alcove. Whoever this man was, he commanded a great deal of authority.

The resolve in his voice matched his body language. His brown eyes scoured the place for stragglers, clearing the room without need for words. Everybody left, everybody except for the jerk—who was reckless, dumb and drunk—and the petty officer and his dog. And me, of course.

Blue. The newcomer unleashed the color blue in my mind, and not just any blue, but the most spectacular blue of them all, cobalt blue, rich, deeply hued, velvety and intense. When his gaze fell on me, adrenaline flushed through my veins in buckets. I wanted to run too, and yet despite the urge, I couldn't move, because a ballroom full of strangers terrified me almost as much as the stare pinning me to the wall.

The man stood tall and imposing, wearing an exquisitely tailored tux that emphasized his body's broad shoulders and sleek lines. With his brown hair

cut razor short and his expressive brows set into a permanent scowl, he was handsome, but in a stern, forbidding, frightening way.

He moved fluidly, with purpose, intensity, confidence and elegance. He owned every stride he took, every gesture he made. He owned the place too, the room, the walls closing in on me, the air barely trickling into my lungs, the world all around me.

His stare stalked me from across the room before it settled back on the drunk. "I suggest you return to the ballroom." His voice rustled with danger. "You don't want to miss the auction."

"I don't give a damn about the auction." The drunk glared. "That dog bit me and I want it gone!"

"Perhaps you should've given the dog and its handler more space." The man crouched by the dog and examined its paw. "Marie Therese seems to be okay." He helped the petty officer to his feet. "Are you all right, man?"

"Fine." The sailor wiped the sweat off his brow. "But my dog. If that guy complains..."

"Nobody will take Marie Therese away from you," the man said, and I believed him. "Nobody." His stare returned to the jerk. "You owe Petty Officer Chavez and his dog an apology."

"I don't apologize to dogs." The drunk blurred his words. "Dogs shouldn't be allowed in places like this."

"By law, a service dog is allowed to go anywhere its handler goes," the man spat out in his exacting tone.

"But that dog is too aggressive."

"Marie Therese isn't aggressive." The sailor's fingers tightened around the dog's leash. "She'd never attack anyone."

"How would you know?" the drunk said. "You're blind, you retard."

The newcomer's face hardened into a blank mask, but the heat in his glare echoed the feral fury fisting my hands and burning through me.

"The dog didn't attack anybody." It was my voice and it sounded strong and bold. "This man stepped on the dog's paw. I saw it. The dog nipped, but only because it was in pain."

"See?" The petty officer side-hugged his Labrador and turned his face in my direction. "Thanks, miss, whoever you are."

"She's lying," the drunk said.

"I am not!"

The newcomer glanced at me then returned his glare to the drunk. "What's your name?"

"I'm Edward Lancaster." He smirked. "My father is John Lancaster."

"John, yes." The man crossed his arms and braced his feet apart. "He's the chairman of Lancaster & Associates."

"And a platinum donor to the Healing Warrior Development Fund," Edward Lancaster added with mindboggling arrogance.

"Your father is very generous," the other man noted. "Wasn't he a decorated Air Force officer during the first Iraq war?"

Junior hesitated. "Yes?"

"Ah, then, do me a favor." He flashed a vicious smile. "Go tell your daddy that tonight you trampled on the service dog of a veteran who earned his Purple Heart in goddamn Afghanistan. Tell him that, after you hurt his dog, you whined like a spoiled brat and demanded that the dog be removed. If your father hasn't choked on his bile or strangled you with his own two hands by then, tell him that you're an idiot with a goddamn bug up your ass and that you were kicked out of the gala because you insulted a friend of Josh Lane."

The young man gaped. "You're Josh Lane? *The* Josh Lane?"

"Affirmative," he said. "And you're done here."

My stomach convulsed with another wave of nausea. For a moment, I couldn't move. Numb, I watched as security escorted the drunk out of the alcove, and the man conferred briefly with the sailor before a staff member led the veteran and his dog out of the ballroom. Then the man's stare narrowed on me, eyes rich with crystal brown hues, gaze curious.

He drew in all the light in the room, consuming it, reshaping it, absorbing it, until he was the only image in my frame and blue was the only color on my canvas. I couldn't look away from him. I stood there, rooted in place like a potted plant, unable to move. That is, until he started toward me.

I bolted. I ran, back to the restroom, through the lounge, to the stall in the very back of the row. I locked the door and pressed my back against the wall. I had trouble breathing, thinking. Why did I run away when I'd wanted to stay? And why had I wanted to stay in the first place?

I settled my hand over my heart. Oh. My. God. It couldn't be a freaking coincidence. My anxiety returned in full, because the target of Martin's plan, the source of my only hope, and the stranger outside the door shared the same name.

Josh Lane.

Chapter Two

Josh

Charity balls were not my definition of fun, but after raising a few million dollars for the Healing Warrior Development Fund, I was in a mildly forgiving mood. If I had to suffer fools, cheap wine, and appalling cuisine, I might as well do it for the right people.

Cinched into a stunning red gown, my co-chair for the evening beamed from beneath the copper sheen of a high-end spray tan. Money excited Lisa Artiaga almost as much as adulation, and tonight's fundraiser was the pinnacle of her social climbing career. I played my part, greeting donors in the lavish ballroom, even though my attention strayed and my patience waned.

Lisa must have noticed, because she pulled me aside and leaned over my shoulder, deliberately brushing her breast against my arm. "How about a little break?" She tilted her champagne flute in the direction of the kitchens.

I took a sip of my water on the rocks. "Not tonight."

"Now, Josh, you used to like me a lot." She pouted, sticking out her rouged lower lip. "Why don't you want to play with me anymore?"

I gestured with my tumbler toward Judge Edward Artiaga III, standing only a few feet away, engaged in animated conversation with a group of Boston's most rapacious ambulance-chasers.

"Because I'm married?" An expression of genuine surprise overtook Lisa's perfectly made up face. "So what?"

"I guess I'm just a stickler for details."

My eyes scanned the crowd, searching for danger as usual, but also for something else—the woman who had come to Chavez's defense. A looker with a heart, in this crowd. Imagine that. Bravery and brains. No wonder she'd gotten my radar up.

I'd waited outside the women's lounge a little too long. When was the last time I'd loitered outside the bathroom waiting for a girl to come out? High school? No. Middle school? Nope. Kindergarten?

Jesus Christ, Lane. You're losing it.

Maybe I'd just caught a break. Bravery and brains entailed risks and liabilities that didn't figure into my carefully orchestrated life. As to the woman, I was just curious, that's all.

I suppressed a yawn. Tired. So tired. I was used to going without sleep, but sleep deprivation plus extreme, unadulterated boredom made tonight a particularly trying occasion. I could almost feel my brain cells committing hara-kiri.

Hell, I'd go back to Afghanistan to avoid this show. But nights like these were part of the plan, important to the job description and vital to the causes I supported. I looked at my watch. I'd scheduled myself here for sixty minutes, my very own endurance test. Fifteen minutes to go.

"Oh, Josh, don't be mad at me." Lisa batted her impressive eyelashes. "I didn't want something as trivial as my marriage to get in the way of us. I should've told you before."

"You should have," I said. "Better to hear it from you than from my security detail."

"I can assure you, my husband doesn't mind," she said. "He's a power hog with the sexual drive of a celery stick. If he doesn't care, why should you?"

It was classic thinking around these parts and I wasn't about to waste my breath with an explanation. Marriages of convenience didn't rate high on my admittedly flexible moral compass, but I demanded honesty and despised deception. What people said didn't matter so much. What people did? Now that mattered. Lisa had lied to me and that was that.

I tuned out her chatter and scanned the room. The stale smiles. The idle conversations. The same old players. I was in a funk and I knew it. Too much reality showmanship crowded the place, too much fakeness. Few of the people in the room knew what it was like to fight in Afghanistan or Iraq, or about the shock of coming back. None of them knew what it was like to pledge your life to your country and then have to deliver on that promise.

Except the speakers for tonight, of course: a gunny who had left his legs in tatters in a back alley in Fallujah, and Elton Chavez, who'd been a decorated hospital corpsman first class on the day he lost his arm and eyesight.

The gunny had left right after his speech, but Chavez had gotten stuck on his way out. What a clusterfuck. His service dog was his life link, his only means of independence. To think there was a dipshit out there willing to mess that up.

I left Lisa as she turned her attention to a group of new arrivals, but I spotted Thomas Stratton tracking me from across the room like a cheetah on the prowl. My director of business development might be scrawny, but he was relentless when he smelled opportunity. He made his way toward me, squeezing his slight frame through the crowd, shaking hands and mumbling quick greetings along the way.

"I've been trying to find you all night," he said, looking up at me through his angular eyeglass frames. "Great party."

"What's up?"

"Remember that wind power project I pitched you last week?"

"WindTech?" My watch showed eleven minutes to go. "It was a dud."

"Don't be so fast to dismiss the new technology."

"Our investors at Phoenix Prime want profit," I said. "WindTech offers none."

"Our future energy holdings need depth," Thomas said. "How about a quick introduction to WindTech's CEO, Martin Poe? He's here tonight, and before you say no, may I remind you that he's a friend of the mayor's son?"

Thomas had been with Phoenix Prime for many years, first as my father's right hand man, now as mine. His attitude and work ethic were good, but sometimes I had to temper his enthusiasm. As Phoenix Prime's CEO, I'd fielded countless crises and survived shifty markets. With a little luck and a hell of a lot of work, I'd turned my father's company into the premier energy development fund in the country. Every nut who thought they had new technology wanted to talk to us, and that included Poe, a guy with a long history of claims and little to show for it.

"Fine," I said. "I'll talk to him. He's got three minutes, not a second more."

Thomas signaled and a couple emerged from the crowd across the room. A bearded man with sharp features and longish salt-and-pepper curls approached. With a nervous hand, he adjusted the horn-rimmed glasses perched on the blade of his nose. His rumpled tux strained around the middle, contributing to his disheveled appearance. The woman on his arm, however, was striking. I recognized her right away.

My gaze settled on her luminous eyes. Rimmed with long lashes and set wide apart on her face, they were an extraordinary color, midnight blue leaning to sunset indigo, matching her gown's jeweled tones. Her eyes widened when they met mine, bright, curious and alert, but also cautious.

"It's you," I said.

She shrugged and offered a little wave. “Hi?”

“Where the hell did you go?”

“Oh, um, well...” She flashed a crooked, nervous smile. “I had to go, you know?”

“I waited for a long time.”

“Oh.” She blushed. “You waited?”

“You didn’t come out.”

“Sorry.” She hesitated. “But thank you.”

“For what?” I said.

“For doing the right thing,” she said. “That gentleman needed help and you gave it.”

I considered the woman before me with renewed curiosity. She was perhaps the only person in this place other than me who understood how Chavez felt. I didn’t miss the look that the man standing next to her gave her—a harsh, reproving glare that raised my hackles.

“You two know each other?” Thomas said.

“No,” she said.

“Yes,” I said at the same time.

Thomas looked from her to me. “Which one it is?”

“We haven’t met formally,” I clarified.

“In that case, allow me to make some introductions,” Thomas said. “This is Martin Poe.”

“Mr. Lane.” Martin Poe had a firm shake but a clammy grip.

“I’ll leave you two to talk.” Thomas excused himself from the conversation.

I eyed the woman on Martin’s arm. “And your name?”

“I’m Lily Boswell-Poe.”

Her hand was cold in my grip and yet the contact jolted me like a blast.

CLEAR! The corpsman’s voice echoed in my head. The defibrillator struck—wham—delivering two thousand volts straight to my heart. Suddenly there was light, and pain, pain so bad I wanted to die again. The helicopter’s engines roared and blood spilled everywhere, dripping from the litter, pooling on the deck, smearing the face and hands of the young corpsman working on me.

Easy, soldier. I fought to pull out of the flashback. Get a grip.

The flashback that sent me into a tailspin felt as real as the woman standing before me. Clinging to her hand, I escaped the stench of blood and burning gasoline by forcing myself to follow a trace of her delicate scent.

“Mr. Lane?”

The sound of her voice appeased my mind’s racket. I pushed back the grisly memories and focused on her. Reason scattered the old ghosts. I had not died again.

But if the defibrillator hadn’t just delivered an electrical shock to my heart, why then did I feel revived?

Martin Poe cleared his throat. “Excuse me, Mr. Lane?” His voice betrayed a slight accent—French, I remembered from the report. “If I might say—”

“Wait.”

The woman before me looked as dazed as I felt. Her brows dipped in an exquisite frown. “Are you all right, Mr. Lane?”

“Fine.” Had she felt the jolt too? “You?”

“I... I’m not sure.”

I forced myself to think rationally. I was in public, for Christ’s sake. I had to move on.

“Lily.” Her name rolled from the tip of my tongue like a lullaby. “Nice to meet you. What do you do?”

“Me?” She stammered. “Well, I...”

“She works a couple of jobs,” Martin Poe butted in. “Nothing of consequence.”

I flashed him a cutting glare and returned my attention to Lily. “Is that so?”

Her shoulders straightened. “I’m an artist.” Her chin came up. “I paint.”

“Boswell?” I recalled again Thomas’s report. They’d been having a tough financial time. I remembered something else, something that hadn’t been in the report. “It’s portraits. Am I correct? You showed a painting at the benefit for the Contemporary Museum of Art last spring. *Captured Orchid*, wasn’t it?”

Surprise brightened her eyes. “You saw it?”

“A grand old lady,” I said. “Her hand rested on a glass dome enclosing an orchid. I liked the way the light beamed through the window and the orchid reflected in the dome.”

Her smile was like a round of applause. “You did see it.”

“You seem surprised,” I said.

“Well, um, I didn’t expect...” She got all tongue-tied. “I... I didn’t expect... someone like you to notice me—I mean, my art, you know, art in general.”

Ah. The old stereotype. At least she was honest about it.

“They did teach us a thing or two at the Naval Academy,” I said. “That is, in addition to shooting guns and blowing things up.”

The blush ignited her face again, but her eyes sparkled with amusement. “You misunderstand me,” she said. “I didn’t mean to imply that you—”

“Darling?” Martin Poe cut her off. “Mr. Lane is just making polite conversation.”

“Oh, sorry.” Her eyes went to the floor.

I didn’t like the way Poe killed the light in her gaze.

“Lily, dear.” Poe fidgeted under my glare. “Why don’t you go fetch us some drinks? What will it be, Mr. Lane?”

“I’m not fond of drink or pleasantries.” I scowled. “I’m not patient either. I read your proposal. I found nothing new or interesting in it.”

“Scotch, honey, make it a double.” Martin Poe gave his wife a little pat on the rump. “And hurry up, dear.”

It was a bad sign that the man needed his scotch to talk to me. I watched the woman go, noting her jaw’s stubborn set. She didn’t want to do what her husband said and yet she managed the short trek to the nearest bar, balancing carefully on a pair of six-inch, red-soled shoes that the imposter in me recognized as Louboutins.

“Isn’t she something?” Martin Poe said.

I gave Poe another look before returning my stare to the woman. To Lily. She was something all right, defending Chavez when no one else would. The high heels didn’t break her svelte body’s fine stride. Neither did they hinder her hips’ subtle grace. On the contrary, the heels added perspective to her movements and dimension to my imagination. I couldn’t help but notice there was a lot of quality to that body and plenty of give to those hips.

Something else intrigued me about her, the way she stole little looks at me as she waited in line at the bar, a gentle but curious probing. I was pretty sure she'd felt that jolt too.

"Lily is a joy," Martin Poe said. "She's bright, kind, and she has a sweet disposition."

Wearing her dark, glossy hair in a chignon, she looked classy and refined, even if she wasn't one of the stunning beauties crowding the place or made up to look like one. She was different—modest, shy, uncomfortable with attention and self-promotion, determined but somehow vulnerable. She stuck out, like a Sprite in a case of Cokes, or better yet, like a chick in a cage full of raptors.

Her husband was nothing like her. Martin Poe talked too fast and used his hands as he rambled. A nettle in my shoe would've been less irritating. I could tell in the first ten seconds he knew nothing about running a business. As to his technological expertise, the jury was out, but the outcome wasn't promising.

According to Thomas's briefing, Martin Poe had come to the States to teach at MIT, from where he'd been recently fired. He'd ditched his classes and invested everything he had in an experimental wind harnessing facility located in central Ohio. He faced three fundamental problems at the moment. One, his research grant had run out and would not be renewed. Two, the bulk of his hefty debt was due. Three, his prototypes had failed to produce results.

"The prototypes will work," he assured me, fiddling with his tux. "I just need to make a few adjustments before the project comes online."

"How long?" I said.

"Three months." He buckled under my glare. "Perhaps three-to-six months is a more realistic timetable, but I guarantee that the prototypes will work."

"That's a hell of a money stream you're asking for."

"The technology will more than pay for itself."

"If that were the case, you'd have all the energy sharks following you around." I made a show of looking behind him and shrugged. "I don't see anyone standing in line."

"WindTech is undervalued at the moment."

"Mr. Poe?"

"Please," he said. "Call me Martin."

"Okay, fine, Martin, let's cut to the chase. I get that you need a lot of support to save your company. But what is it that you're willing to give up in order to get it?"

"Control, management, stocks, majority stakes."

"That's all a given."

"My independence," he said. "My work, life and dreams."

"Spare me the dramatics."

"You don't understand," Martin Poe said. "I'm willing to give up anything I've got to ensure that WindTech will succeed. Anything you want." He looked elsewhere. "For as long as you support my venture, you can have it."

I trailed Martin Poe's gaze to where Lily stood at the bar. His eyes landed squarely on his wife, or more specifically, on the very spot where the gown's glossy satin stretched over her shapely ass. Son of a bitch.

Poe inclined his head and nodded. "Anything," he repeated.

Jesus Christ. He'd just paraded his wife before me like a breeder showing off his prized thoroughbred. Who the hell did he think I was? A pervert who had to buy women to bed them? A playboy with a taste for other men's wives? A fool?

Sure, I had my preferences in bed and maybe they were unorthodox to some, but they didn't involve paying for sex, victimizing women or dealing with lowlife scum like Poe. Lights flashed and alarms blared. My internal traffic control gate slammed shut. For a man in my position, Poe's offer entailed a con, a scam or a combination of the same. Blackmail. Extortion. Bribery. If Poe thought he could screw with me, he was in for a nasty surprise.

My eyes fell on Lily, placing her order with the bartender. Did she know? Did she realize what her husband was doing? And if she was a party to his plan, how far was she willing to go? Would she be willing to go all the way to my bed?

Don't even think about it, Lane.

I stared at the woman coming toward me, drink in hand. She flashed her shy, crooked smile. I had to hand it to Martin. At least he'd chosen his bait well. What if she didn't know? My gut went cold. What would happen to her if I declined Poe's offer? What if she was a pawn in her husband's game, someone who stood to lose no matter the outcome?

"What does she think of your plan?"

The man's Adam's apple bobbed up and down his throat, betraying his poker face. "Lily will do what I tell her to do," he said. "She's an obedient little thing."

Obedient?

I reminded myself of the basics. Stick to the mission. Keep the focus intact and the perimeter clear. Don't compromise your cover. These principles had kept me alive in Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond.

The woman rejoined us and, avoiding my gaze, handed the drink over to Martin. He downed half the glass in one gulp. But I wasn't really tracking Martin. All my senses were intent on Lily. *Stick to your guns, Lane.*

I was about to send Poe to hell when his tumbler went flying, spilling Scotch mostly all over himself, although a few ice cubes bounced off my shoes.

"I'm sorry." Poe tried to wipe off his jacket with a soggy napkin. "Oh, this won't work. Excuse me for a moment. Lily, take care of Mr. Lane, will you? I'll be right back."

She glanced at me, flushing with equal measures of embarrassment and incredulity as Poe scrambled for the restroom. I was done talking with her husband and she was smart enough to know it.

I pulled out my cell and called my driver. "Bring the car around, Amman."

Clearly flustered, Lily drew a delicate handkerchief from her clutch and, kneeling at my feet, wiped the water off my shoes. The swell of her breasts strained against her gown's bodice. Her anxious looks—intermittent flashes of violet—beamed up at me like a beacon leading me astray.

Inadvertently, the crown of her head brushed against my groin. My cock hardened instantly. Damn, I hadn't reacted like that to anyone in a long time. I had a vision of her, crouching as she was, only she wasn't wearing a dress. She wasn't wearing anything, except the red-soled Louboutins.

Shake it off, Lane.

I pitched the images out of my mind, but something had clicked in me, something had engaged. The lust in my body seeped into my soul. I was recharged, operational and in high gear.

The woman fussing over my shoes was nothing less than an IED in my life. If I were smart, I'd skirt around her, ignore my body's signals, play it cool and move on. But Christ, she was a rare creature. She had such a pull on me, even if she didn't know it.

Maybe she was as innocent as she appeared. Maybe she needed help. Maybe she, who was so quick to defend a wounded warrior, needed protection

herself.

Why not go for it, run with it, embrace the keen attraction, defy convention and wade into the thicket of my obsessions? I could engage her, ignite her, contain her. I could dissect her, dismantle her ticking parts and discover her mechanisms in a bid to understand how she worked. I could detonate her if only to defuse the effect she had on me.

My mind ticked off a long list of rational warnings: Inappropriate behavior, unnecessary complications, high elements of risk, poor odds, dismal returns, dire consequences. With a wink and a word, I could've seduced any other woman in the room. But what about her?

No way. My instincts had to be right. She wasn't that kind of person. It'd never fly.

I slammed the door on the impulse and offered my hand. "This is not necessary." I helped her up. "My shoes don't deserve your attention."

She tottered as she tried to stand on the high heels, but I caught her, bracing her body against mine. *Wham*. There it was again, that jolt, only this time it didn't produce a flashback but rather a flash forward to a future where she lay naked on my bed. Christ. The image felt like a done deal.

Her body was soft and pliable between my hands, delicate but fit, vital and responsive. I caught a whiff of her scent and reeled. It was as if she'd been baked of my favorite essences, as if her pores were wafting raw need and sexual heat.

I retrieved my thoughts from the gutter and let her go. She turned to face me with a flustered frown. She didn't understand what was happening any more than I did. I spotted the questions forming in her eyes and acted quickly to preempt her.

"Do you think your husband's project will succeed?"

"I...well... I sure hope so."

"And if it doesn't?"

"We'll be ruined."

I liked people who stuck to the truth even when they had much to lose from admitting it. My gut told me Lily was truthful, but the trained operator in me set out to make sure my readings were accurate. Truth or dare. True or false. I excelled at those games. My life and the lives of my men had often depended on my instincts and skills. I started with the obvious.

"Is Martin running a scam?"

Her spine straightened. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," I said. "Answer the question."

"But—"

"Answer the damn question."

"I... I don't know. I suppose, knowing Martin, maybe...it's possible." Her answer struck me as real. "But MIT was interested. There's got to be some substance to his project."

Wishful thinking or shrewd assessment? It was hard to tell.

"Why did you come here tonight?" I asked.

"I don't have to answer your questions."

"I know," I said, "but you will."

Her chin came up. "Are you always this blunt?"

"Yes," I said. "Why did you agree to come?"

The indigo eyes scoured my face then looked away. "My husband insisted that I come."

"Did you want to?"

"Not really."

"Why not?" I pressed her hard.

Like most people, she buckled under my glare. "I... I don't really like this sort of thing and, well, I couldn't figure out what was the use of me coming anyway."

"How long have you been married?"

"A little more than two years," she said, tentatively. "Why do you ask?"

"And in those two years, you've seen your car repossessed, your credit wrecked and your student loans gone into arrears."

Her plump lips formed the word. "How...?"

"We've done our homework," I said. "It's called due diligence."

"*Due diligence?*"

"Why him?" I demanded.

Her small nose wrinkled. "Pardon me?"

"Why did you marry him?"

Anger sparked in her eyes. "I don't think that's any of your business."

"I disagree," I said. "Your husband is asking for a lot of money. In exchange, he's offering some dubious concessions. Were you pregnant when you got married?"

"No!"

"Then why did someone like you marry someone like him?"

"I had reasons," she said fiercely, "and I don't understand why they're of any consequence to you."

God, she was brave. How I craved her intensity. How I wanted to consume all her strength. She was so unlike the women I usually took to my bed. She was honest, raw and earnest. She didn't belong with Poe. She didn't deserve to suffer the indignities that the man had in store for her. If I walked away now, what would happen to Lily Boswell?

"Do you always do what your husband says?"

Her knuckles whitened around her purse. "No."

"And yet you're here."

"I told you, I had to come."

He had something on her. I could feel it in my bones. She wasn't dumb. She wasn't lamb material either. She was trapped. I went for the jugular.

"Why haven't you divorced Martin Poe?"

Her head whipped up. "You think I'm stupid, don't you?" She glared like a tigress about to tear out my throat. "Well, I'm not, so back off, Mr. Lane. I came here to help with Martin's proposal, not to amuse you. With all due respect, you have no right to treat me like this."

"Have you tried asking for help?"

"Help?" She scoffed. "Is there really such a thing? It's never something for nothing. It's tit for tat, isn't it? Or perhaps every man for himself?"

There was no bitterness to her tone, only honesty and perhaps sadness. I knew people like her, people who wouldn't accept help from anyone, people who had a chip on their shoulders, little faith in the human race, and something to prove to themselves. People like me.

"I better go," she said faintly. "Thanks for your time."

"Wait." My hand closed around her wrist.

Her eyes widened and I knew for sure that the contact had rattled her too.

I made a pragmatic decision in the field, combining a set of high-minded objectives, my gut feelings, my dark cravings, and the barrage of inexplicable emotions buzzing in my brain. Emotions felt like white noise to my mind so I set them aside, but designing an operational mission plan to tackle a defined set of objectives? Now that I could do. My strategy had to meet my basic parameters, which meant that, ultimately, the outcome had to be Lily's choice.

This wasn't going to be easy for her. Or for me. I had to be careful, stay true to my long-term mission and protect my investors from Poe's schemes. Strategically, there was a chance I could pull this off. Realistically, Lily was the odd variable.

"Mr. Lane?" Her eyes shifted between my face and her wrist where, beneath my fingers, her pulse thumped like an MP5 in a firefight.

I forced myself to lift one finger after the other until I let go of her wrist. She'd stepped into the center of my scope's crosshairs. The sniper in me inhaled the disciplined, stabilizing breath usually paired with a finger to the trigger.

"Allow me to explain," I said in my trained operator's voice. "I thought if someone like you—someone smart, talented and brave—had a good reason to bet on Poe, then maybe I would too. But if you don't want to talk about it, that's fine, Lily. We can leave it up to chance. Or fate. Whichever you like best."

"I... I don't understand."

"I think you're an honest person," I said. "I'm going to leave this up to you. If you want, you can tell your husband to come see me at the office on Monday at eleven."

"I can?" She stared at me with those extraordinary eyes.

"That's what he wanted, right?" That's why he'd brought her along. "You don't have to tell him if you don't want to. You can say I wasn't interested and we'll be done. On the other hand, if you decide to tell him and he decides to come, I'll see him only if you come with him. Be prepared. Tell him to come only if he's willing to put everything he's got on the table. Will you remember all that?"

"Yes."

"Good," I said. "You're a remarkable person, Lily, a brave one. There aren't too many of you left in the world."

"Um, Mr. Lane?" she said, twisting the little purse between her hands. "Perhaps I've given you the wrong impression. You don't know any of that about me."

I took my shot. "I'll see you on Monday, Lily. Maybe, and only if you want."