

Chapter 0003

Anastasia

The car's engine was a low hum, a purr that skated along my skin and left me tingling as I cruised down the highway.

Or maybe it was the adrenaline.

I hadn't started my career as a dancer by lifting cars and robbing my customers. It was something I sort of fell into.

A hobby, if you will.

Two years ago, my father and Jayden cranked up their pursuit of me. They hired private detectives that tailed my every move, tracing my location across the country. They'd almost caught me too.

There was never enough money, I realized. I needed more, much more than a few measly jobs could get me. Money to run. Money to hide. Money to buy a way around my father's rules.

That's how my side hustle as a professional pickpocket began.

I spent some time in Las Vegas, which was where I'd met my mentor, a human girl named Harpy.

My ability to stop time is what propelled me from amateur pickpocket to expert thief. Over the years, my control gradually increased. Three seconds became ten, then thirty, then an entire minute.

It was something I did to the rich human men that left their wives and children at home, claiming they were 'staying late at work' when really they were paying top dollar to have some half-naked woman dance for them.

Even if Mr. Dark-and-Handsome did let bill, he sealed his fate when he failed to pay me for the private dance.

I dropped my voice, mimicking his deep, dark tenor. "Consider yourself dismissed, Ms. Buttey." Snorting, I rolled my eyes. "What a jerk!"

Losing his car was penance for his bad attitude.

Rook, who I called "Crook" only when he was trying to rip me off, lived in the attic of his Dad's old mechanic shop.

"Whew," He whistled as I pulled into an empty bay. "That's a nice ride. Porche 911 GT3 RS. Goes for a solid 300k and that's without any additional bits and bobbles."

Rook didn't look twice at my sparkly costume. We both knew his one and only love came with leather seats and custom rims.

"You know I don't know what any of that means. I like driving fast cars, I don't care what goes into them."

Rook quickly tied his hair back. "Who'd you swipe this one from?"

"Does it matter?"

"Nah. You used that signal jammer I gave you, right?"

"Obviously. I don't need Richie Rich coming to take my car back. GPS tracker has officially been placed out of service. You're free to do your thing."

While he scoured the inside of the car and peered beneath the hood, I leaned against the body of ashy pick-up truck and analyzed my chipped manicure.

I'd have to get that this weekend.

"Oh, God. Stacy, what did you do?!" Rook yelled; his voice so shrill that I nearly ignored the fake name I'd given him all those years ago when we

I looked uplighting a frown. Rook scrambled his way out of the car, clutching a couple of papers in his face was drained of blood.

"What's your damage?"

"My damage?! Do you have any idea what you've done? Whose car this is!"

"Business man Bob?"

"You think this is funny? This car doesn't just belong to anyone, Stacy. It belongs to an Alpha. The Alpha!"

I thought back to the man I'd danced for. A jerk he might've been, but an Alpha?

No—No, it was okay. I'd been through worse. I'd just have to lay low and keep my head down. Skipping out of work would only draw attention, so I'd act as though nothing changed. Yeah, I could definitely handle this.

I blinked, "You're going to have to be more specific. There's a lot of Alpha's in this country."

Rook thrust the papers in my face. "Read them! Go on, read them. That's our death warrant right there."

Sighing, I took the crinkled registration from his hand and scoured the tiny print, searching for—

Oh.

Written in a neat, professional script at the bottom of the page was a name.

Alpha Caius Blackwell

"We're dead." Rook chuckled; the sound akin to a mouse's squeak. "Five years I've been in business and now I'm done for. What am I going to tell my parents? What am I going to tell my brother? I have a family for—"

"Calm down for a second." I snarled, my heart thundering in my chest. "You're getting carried away. Goddess, it's like you want to be caught. The Alpha doesn't know it's me who swiped his keys. There's no proof of it either. Take the car apart and sell what you can. You use aliases during your deals, right? You'll take what money we can manage and destroy the rest. Then, we'll both take a little break from car lifting until things calm down. Sound like a plan?"

"You can't expect me to still try and sell this thing, Stacy. The risks—"

"The risks are worth the reward, yeah? Besides, what am I supposed to do with it? Do you seriously think the Alpha Caius Blackwell, ruler of the Falling Star Pack, is going to let me return his stolen car without retaliation?"

Rook steeled his hair, yanking it from its ponytail. "Let's say I do this for you. I want half of the profits."

Ugh, that was going to sting. "Done."

"One last thing," he said, glancing nervously at the car. "If you get caught, I want your word you won't snitch on me."

I'd come from luxury; from the kind of money most people would kill to have, but I knew what it was like to steal to survive.

"You have my word, Rook."

He cursed under his breath, "Alright, get the hell out of here and let me deal with this. I'll be in contact with you once I've got the cash."

Shifting in the woods beside Rook's mechanic shop, I bounded through the trees feeling the wind whip through my golden fur.

'Rook's too squeamish for this line of work,' Ziva, my wolf, hummed. 'We may have to take him out.'

In three years not once have we had to "eliminate" someone, yet Ziva never failed to offer the option.

'Has anyone ever told you what a bloodthirsty beast you are?'

Her tail twitched pleasantly. 'You've always been so good at compliments, Anastasia.'

I made it back to Seattle and entered my tiny one-bedroom apartment sometime around seven in the morning. Exhausted from running on pure adrenaline, I quickly mourned the bubble bath I'd missed out on and collapsed onto the bed.

My nightmares typically featured Jayden and my father. This time around I found myself cornered by a certain golden-eyed Alpha, blocked in by his muscular, domineering frame.

Unlike my father, no matter how many times I tried to run, Alpha Caius always found me.

Fighting the urge to pack up and head to Mystic's Gentleman's Club around ten o'clock, determined to feign normalcy.

Alpha Caius must've touched dozens of women that night. It could've been any one of them, even another patron, who had swiped his keys. There was no way he'd know it was me.

My anxiety faded as the hours ticked by. I danced the stress away, raking in tips that would help me coast through the week.

Determined to take a relaxing bath, I left the club around two in the morning. Since Mystic's was only a few minutes away from my apartment, I walked to and from work.

"Home sweet home."

Kicking the door shut behind me, I clicked the seven individual locks I'd installed into place. Shrugging off my jacket and sneakers by the entryway, I walked the two feet over to the kitchen.

The entire place was obscenely small, but it was under the radar and the landlord let me pay in cash with no strings attached.

While the water for my tea boiled, I opened my singular window to allow the cool breeze inside. I had just ventured into the bathroom to turn on the tub when I heard a thud.

My gut soured instantly.

'Something isn't right.' Ziva growled.

I crept into the living room. On the floor a few feet away from my open window, sat a canister.

I had just enough time to gasp when it hissed, spewing smoke and steam into the room, coating the walls and furniture. Adrenaline pulsed throughout my body, sharpening my senses, and giving me a moment to think.

This had to be my father and Jayden at work, which meant after all this time they finally found me.

I needed to leave, and fast.

Grabbing hold of my magic, time proceeded to come to a halt. Curled wisps of smoke hovered in the air like milk-white ribbons. One inhale and I knew I'd be on the run.

My gut clenched, warning me I needed to hurry before I exhausted myself completely.

I dashed into my bedroom grabbed all the cash I had hidden under the mattress.

Sprinting to the front door, I slipped on my sneakers and made quick work of the locks. I raced out into the hall, nearly tripping down the stairs when I spotted the masked men.

They wore dark suits with literal bullet-proof vests, and helmets with dark visors that blocked out their eyes.

Goddess, they had been seconds away from breaking down my door! If I had taken any longer, I would've been done for.

I raced past them, breathless and hating myself for living in the sixth floor.

If there was one consolation, it was the scent-blocker the club provided me with. So long as it remained in place, they wouldn't be able to track me.

I could feel my magic slipping through my fingers. Time skipped like a stone across a glassy lake. Each passing second it got closer to sinking beneath the surface.

I'd just emerged into the alleyway behind the building when my timer resumed. My muscles ached as though I'd run a marathon, and my head throbbed. If I had held it any longer, I would have passed out.

The sound of heavy footsteps came from the front side of the building.

I slinked deeper into the alley, keeping beneath the shadow cover provided by the nearby trees. As much as I hated living in the city, I had learned it like the back of my hand.

Cutting left behind a row of dilapidated apartments, I ran until I was a solid block away from my place. Across the street were some small townhouses. A couple of people were sitting out front in fold out chairs, passing a bottle between them.

I darted across the street, aiming for the narrow alleyway dividing the crumbling homes. The scent of trash swallowed me up the further I ran. Veering right to an adjoining alleyway, I stumbled to a halt when two men stepped from the shadows.

I recognized them instantly.

Broad shoulders, dark hair, eyes that swam like liquid gold. It was the men from Mystic's, the two that had accompanied Alpha Caius Blackwell.

Oddly enough, I was relieved it wasn't my father's men that had caught up to me.

Standing this close, I could make out a few details I hadn't noticed before. One of the two had a lip piercing, and a splotch of dark ink crawling up his throat. The other's hair was a tad longer, and he had a scar slashed through his upper lip.

Their gazes were trained on me with predatory focus. The one with the scar lifted his lips in a dark smile, a smile promising violence.

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