

Lisa Yamamoto waits for the chrome doors to close, then releases the air trapped in her chest in a single prolonged breath. She slides her black Prada sunglasses off and eyes herself in the mirror on the rear wall. The concealer hides the stress and exhaustion, but it cannot summon joy to her eyes. There's not a hint of the over-the-top exuberance an invitation to a drop party for Finland's hottest rap artist—or any artist, for that matter—would have sparked a year or two ago. Now the predominant emotion is one of unpleasant suspense, and she regrets not having done something before leaving the house to boost her confidence—something stronger than champagne. But no doubt one of her fellow invitees will make sure her needs are attended to. Shoot the right person the right look, and she'd be strolling into the ladies' with a bump that would guarantee a nice pick-me-up.

Lisa scans her body, sheathed in a beige Hervé Léger bandage dress: fit and just the right amount of curvy. At least her look is on point. Not that things aren't fine or that she doesn't have it all under control. The sole item on tonight's agenda is getting a couple of good selfies with the man of the moment and maybe shooting a few video stories with other celebs. Considering whose release party it is, Helsinki's most famous faces are sure to be out in force.

Lisa hears her phone vibrate in the side pocket of her purse. Probably Jason again. He's already tried three times. *Get a life*. She shifts her gaze from the mirror to the digital number panel above. A red four. Five. Six.

A short melody plays, and a moment later the doors open. The

elevator is flooded with pounding bass and loud chatter, accentuated by shouts and sporadic bursts of laughter.

Lisa looks down the red carpet toward the coat check, which is mobbed by guests bearing bouquets and bottles. *Nobodies, nevers. Lucky I don't have to introduce myself to them.*

The bouncer, a guy named Sahib whom Lisa has known for years, gives her a discreet nod as she steps out of the elevator.

Lisa passes the floor-to-ceiling windows giving onto a panoramic view. Helsinki's rooftops are slick from days of rainfall. The strikingly lit Tornio Hotel rises in the distance, a miniature Empire State Building that dominates the city's low-slung silhouette. The light from the streetlamps and windows sets the dark scene glistening. The city has yet to be brightened by a first snow.

"Hey, Lisa, nice to see you," the black-blazered, white-T-shirted Sahib says as he helps her out of her dripping overcoat—artificial leather trimmed in fake fur. The couple in front of Lisa has stopped a few feet away to whisper, by all signs about her. There was a time she got off on the looks, the attention of complete strangers. Now they just make her uncomfortable. *What the hell are they staring at?*

"How's it going?" Lisa asks the bald, muscle-bound Sahib as she lowers her purse and shoe bag to the counter. She steadies herself with one hand as she deftly slips off her black, white-striped Superstars with the other and slides her toes into a pair of patent beige heels that came equipped with an extra four inches.

"Party's already bumping," Sahib replies smoothly, carries Lisa's coat and bagged sneakers over to the rack, and hands her a numbered tag creased by the sweaty fists of thousands of partyers.

Lisa feels her phone vibrate again along with the thump of the bass. Maybe it's been ringing this whole time. She pulls it from her purse, glances at the screen, and silences the device. *Shit.*

"Thanks," she says, flashing Sahib a quick smile.

"Be careful out there—a lot of bad boys on the loose tonight," Sahib

says with a wink. And although she can't stand the bouncer's patronizing flirtation, Lisa smiles and winks back.

The highway created by the red carpet cuts through the dark drapes and into the glare of the photographers' flashes. The air is permeated by that distinctive nightclub odor—stale cologne, spilled alcohol, and cigarette smoke absorbed by the floor and curtains over the years—a reek even a series of remodels hasn't managed to eradicate. A female bouncer Lisa doesn't recognize cracks the curtains, and Lisa steps into the club proper, a tall space packed with partyers showing off the latest trends. Hair dyed in flaming tints, off-the-wall makeup, plumped lips, custom-made suits and sport coats accentuating trained bodies, ironic hipster mustaches, trimmed beards. Lisa pauses to take in the photo wall, the size of a soccer goal, and the guests being brusquely manhandled toward it as if it were a medieval gallows.

"Yamamoto!" a female voice squeals. Lisa's eyes strike on an overweight reporter with glasses whose name she can't remember, despite having been interviewed by the other woman at some point.

Lisa gives the reporter a practiced smile that shows her white teeth. "Hi!"

"We'd love to do a little piece on you "

Lisa glances at the photographer standing behind the reporter; he has a tabloid press card hanging around his neck. Probably legit, and good advertising for her blog.

"Let me go over and take my picture first."

"Sure. We'll be right here."

"OK, great," Lisa says as she leans in to hug a young English-speaking man she doesn't remember ever meeting. *Hi! Good to see you. Sure, talk to you soon!*

After extricating herself from the stranger's excessively eager and overpowering aftershave-drenched embrace, Lisa drifts to the photo wall, joins the short queue snaking up to it.

She scans the room bathed in low lighting, the sea of bodies surging

there. Some faces are familiar, others aren't; the majority are somewhere in between. Faded memories, distant flashes of Helsinki nightlife. *CDKF. Chat, dance, kiss, fuck.* Typically in that order, although Lisa remembers a few nights she skipped directly from the chatting to the fucking. And maybe one or two when she arrived at the same outcome without so much as a chat.

Over at the back, Lisa spies a knot of revelers corralled off from the main herd, camera flashes, men and women taking turns rubbing shoulders for the paparazzi. And at the eye of this storm, the top-hatted, sequin-tuxedoed guest of honor himself, Kex Maces, aka Tim Taussi, the twenty-six-year-old rap artist whose pop-influenced hip-hop album made Spotify history last year: it rose to the top of the streaming lists not only in Finland, but in the other Nordic countries, and Germany too.

"You're up, Lisa," calls the woman with the telephoto lens. Purse in hand, Lisa steps up to the backdrop: an album cover illustrated with a huge spider. *Kex Maces' Spider's Web.* The flashes click briefly, annoyingly so. The photographers haven't always let Lisa off the hook so easily. Just last year, she would see camera flashes in her sleep. *Thanks!* She is free to go. *Great seeing you, Lisa! Have fun tonight!* The smiles feel almost genuine, the words almost sincere, but the underlying chill does not go unnoticed by Lisa. She has an eye for social cues that has been honed by dozens of such events. No one is really interested in who you are, only what you look like and what you represent. Some people are interested solely in whether you'll be available for an after-party blow job at five a.m., once the bottles have been emptied and the Ziploc bags vacuumed of every last gram.

The next item on the agenda is a glass of champagne; a server in a black shirt and yellow bow tie is conveniently carrying a tray of them in his gloved hand.

A promo girl in a tastelessly short skirt and a breast-baring top hands Lisa a program, winks, and says: "Don't get tangled in the web."

*Don't get tangled in the web.* So damned pretentious and overproduced. Lisa has been inside for only a few minutes, but she already has the urge to spin right back around and get the hell out of here. She's more desperate for a shot of courage than she realized. *Snow White. Marching powder.* Her gaze seeks out anyone who could offer relief. Teme, Sakke, Taleeb . . . Her usual guys are presumably present but obscured by the hundreds of faces.

And then Lisa feels her heart skip a beat. There he is again: standing, hands in his pockets, at the windows overlooking the city. His gaze, vaguely accusatory and penetrating, is exactly the same as last time. Lisa turns on her heels and heads for the bar.

But she knows the man won't let her out of his sight.