

A NOVEL



**SPIES, LIES,
& ALIBIS**

NATALIE WALTERS

SPIES, LIES, & ALIBIS

A NOVEL

NATALIE WALTERS



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Spies, Lies, and Alibis

Copyright © 2026 Natalie Walters

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by Thomas Nelson. Thomas Nelson is a registered trademark of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Thomas Nelson titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please e-mail SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com.

Publisher's Note: This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. All characters are fictional, and any similarity to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

Any internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Thomas Nelson, nor does Thomas Nelson vouch for the content of these sites for the life of this book.

Without limiting the exclusive rights of any author, contributor or the publisher of this publication, any unauthorized use of this publication to train generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies is expressly prohibited. HarperCollins also exercise their rights under Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790 and expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception.

HarperCollins Publishers, Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 C9W8, Ireland (<https://www.harpercollins.com>)

ISBN 978- (epub)

ISBN 978- (HC)

ISBN 978- (TP)

ISBN 978- (IE)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[CIP TO COME]

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

CHAPTER 1

Ben

Dallas, Texas
Monday night

The day I walked into school in my Sunday suit, my hair slicked back, and my orange juice in a martini shaker I took from my house, I felt like the coolest kid in school. “Shaken, not stirred,” I told Mrs. Connor with a wink. I’m not sure if I earned detention for the wink or when I argued that a spy didn’t need to know algebra.

Not that it mattered. When Mrs. Connor asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I was all about bull riding. Or driving a derby car at the local mud track on a Friday night. Or moving to Australia to wrestle alligators like the great Steve Irwin. In sixth grade, the only thing I wanted was a taste of danger—like James Bond.

I scan the interior of the Dallas Museum of Art and feel like I’m in the middle of a Bond movie, but unlike the Ian Fleming plots, the kind of danger surrounding me isn’t fictional. And to be honest, the taste of danger isn’t as sweet as I’d imagined.

Tonight, the art museum is decorated with gold and white balloons and a live band is playing a broad range of music from across the decades. Waiters with trays of appetizers and champagne slip in between the guests.

An older couple, around the age of my grandparents, is sitting at a

secluded table in the sculpture garden. It's corny, I know, and I'd never admit it out loud, but there's something mesmerizing about watching them interact beneath the twinkly lights strung between the live oaks as if they're the only people in the world.

Somehow they've managed to ignore the three hundred other gala guests dancing, eating, and talking loudly around them. I don't know who they are, and my first instinct is to be suspicious, but for a few minutes I give them the benefit of the doubt and believe they are good people—and not Mom and Pop Gambino.

My imagination paints them as a hardworking couple: He invested in the market when he was young and grew his wealth while working his way up the corporate ladder; his wife is a schoolteacher who truly did it for the love of her students while filling their home with love, children, and memories.

I let my mind play out their story, and when I see the husband gently cradle his wife's hand, I can't help but hope my version is right. It stirs a longing for my own story.

"So, no risk, eh?"

My attention is dragged back to the man standing next to me at the outdoor bar. Charles Rinault's brown eyes are a little glassy but not enough to hide his interest in my answer. "Low risk, low reward. High risk . . ." I smile. "Well, with your success you must know the rest."

Mr. Rinault's expression lights up with pride. He's a restaurateur, and from the story he's fed me for the last twenty minutes, he started from nothing except a fat inheritance from his French great-grandmother he never knew. He took that money and opened two French nightclubs that also serve food, hence why he calls himself a restaurateur rather than what he truly is—a shady, criminal club owner.

It's so cliché. Burlesque club owner? Sometimes I wish criminals would be a little more imaginative, but their lack of creativity makes my job easier. At least most jobs. My gaze slides back to the older couple again, and tonight my job feels . . . taxing.

Eighteen months ago, my real life was put on hold when the FBI assigned me to go undercover as a financial advisor working for AJ Fi-

nance, a fictional boutique investment firm that requires interested clients to have a financial portfolio in the high millions to even be invited to a concept meeting. But I'm only interested in one man's accounts, and that man isn't Charles Rinault.

"It's my job to leverage the risk so that your *investment* remains clean." The band has chosen a slow number, allowing the volume of the conversations around me to pick up, so I lower my voice. "I'm not here to convince you to use my service, Mr. Rinault. My client list is quite full, and honestly, I'm not even sure I can take another—"

"No, no." Mr. Rinault slaps his glass of whiskey on the bar top and then throws a sloppy smile at the couple on the other side of him. "I want to invest. Just tell me what I need to do."

A tall brunette enters my line of sight, her green eyes locked on me as her slender frame saunters in my direction. Her appearance at my side steals Mr. Rinault's focus, turning it envious when her hand grazes the sleeve of my tuxedo. "I've been looking for you." Her gaze shifts to Mr. Rinault and then back to me. "Are you going to be here all night?"

Her tone isn't flirtatious, which matches the tight smile she gives me. She wedges her way between me and Mr. Rinault to order a drink from the bartender. Her eyes flash with a message. *It's time.*

The move is intentional and gives me the chance to look over my shoulder in the direction my partner, Ruby Knight, alluded to. I scan the area searching for anything that seems . . . suspicious. Anything that stands out among the lavish show of wealth on parade by the guests who have all congregated in the name of philanthropy. *And crime.*

It's not lost on me that some of these individuals hiding behind their overly bright veneer smiles are slimy snakes with hushed-up criminal histories. Or, like Charles Rinault, they believe laundering money with *me* is worth the risk. I should feel out of place given the net worth surrounding me is in the millions, billions for some. Meanwhile, I spent last night budgeting for a summer fishing trip and debating whether a three-star motel is better than a two-star hotel.

In my notch lapel tuxedo—the same one James Bond prefers (I checked)—no one should suspect I'm not who I say I am, which means

my meeting tonight with a crime boss shouldn't draw any extra suspicion.

Especially when I disappear.

After a minute, my eyes catch on a familiar face—Lorenzo Ramirez—and every nerve in my body goes on alert.

Ramirez owns Enzo Coal & Oil, a family-run business started by his grandfather that deals in the extraction, refinement, and sale of fossil fuels. But beneath the façade of a legitimate business, Ramirez engages in illegal activity that includes money laundering and arms trafficking, which has put him under the scrutiny of federal prosecutors for Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) charges. However, it's the brutal murder of Special Agent Daniel "Danny" Morales that has me and the entire Dallas field office targeting Ramirez.

Morales was tracking an undercover DEA informant who was killed, and somehow he got caught in the crosshairs of Lorenzo Ramirez. We intercepted an encrypted message to Ramirez indicating a "problem was solved," and a bullet recovered from the scene was traced back to a cartel he's worked with, but it wasn't enough to convict.

That's where I come in.

The one thing all criminals want to protect more than their freedom? Their money. And for my role as AJ Finance's most proficient financial advisor, the FBI made sure I had a thick portfolio of clients who paid me to keep their money as starched as their white-collar shirts.

But Lorenzo Ramirez isn't dumb, and he's had enough experience being investigated by law enforcement, federal or otherwise, to keep his circle tight. And his mouth shut.

I couldn't just saunter up to him, hand him my business card, and hope he'd call me and tell me how he ordered the death of a federal agent. The only way to get access to Ramirez was to make him want to meet me more than I wanted to meet him.

It was a long shot, but he took the bait. Through his personal attorney, Jimmy Rook, I was invited to help Lorenzo Ramirez manage a financial deal that involves a private meeting this evening.

"If you'll excuse me." I push my untouched glass of champagne across the bar. "Mr. Rinault, this is my assistant, Isabella McAllen. If you give her your information, we'll see what we can do about getting you through the doors of AJ Finance."

Mr. Rinault's glassy gaze settles on Ruby. He sizes her up and smiles like one of those cartoon wolves who see their prey. "I've never had a problem getting myself through doors."

The man is disgusting. I don't believe he's a threat—especially not to Ruby—but am I comfortable leaving her here? Ruby must read my mind because the edge of her lip curls into a smirk. I hold her gaze a second longer to make sure she'll be okay. I'm rewarded with a hard stare that says she knows a dozen ways to kill me.

Leaving them at the bar, I wind my way through the crowd and head toward the stairs. A quick look reveals no one is paying attention to me. I take the steps two at a time to the second-floor mezzanine area. There are fewer guests up here and their attention is focused on the dancing below. Easily enough, I slip around the velvet rope barrier keeping guests from the third and fourth floors.

At the top of the third floor, I tug at my tie while I catch my breath. This mission has kept me in more penguin suits than I care for. As anxious as I am to hang up the tuxedos and slip back into my trusty pair of jeans and boots, I'm even more anxious to watch Ramirez trade his pinstripe suits for a prison-orange jumpsuit.

"I didn't deserve that."

The words snap in my ear and I can't help my smile. I glance down the empty hallway filled with Asian art. The music echoing from below is just loud enough to cover my low response. "How'd you get away from him so fast? I'm impressed."

"Don't be."

It isn't Isabella McAllen's syrupy tone speaking through my earpiece now; it's all Ruby. And I'm concerned. Making my way down the hall, I take a few seconds to appreciate a woodblock print called *Hara: Mount Fuji in the Morning* just in case someone happens to catch me up here.

“What did you do?”

“Why do you always assume I *did* something?”

I walk quietly toward my destination at the end of the hall. There’s a door marked Employees Only, and with a quick glance over my shoulder I turn the knob and let myself through. Behind the door, I feel less exposed and continue my conversation with Ruby as I take another set of stairs back down to the second level. “*Did* you do something?”

She hums in my ear all innocent, but Ruby Knight is one of the FBI’s best agents, with a nearly flawless résumé. Nearly. There are three things that Ruby hates and have caused some issues on the job. One, having to prove herself as a female agent; two, people touching her food; and—

“He called Tucker Reid a hack. Said the Cowboys would have a more consistent running back in a turtle.”

And people who dis the Dallas Cowboys. Ruby is very sensitive about football. I close my eyes briefly, unsure if I want to know more. “Please tell me Mr. Rinault is still walking.”

“He’s walking.” I can hear the spark of unapologetic mischief in her voice. “But with a limp.” I imagine her giving an innocent shrug. “What can I say, I’m a little clumsy in these heels.”

Lies.

“You’ve got eyes on Ramirez?”

“Yep,” Ruby answers. “What time is your meeting?”

“Fifteen minutes,” I answer after checking my watch. With caution, I slowly push open a door that leads me into another gallery room. Just like on the third level, a velvet rope cordons off this section of the museum from guests. Soft lights illuminate the artwork on the walls and the Latin American sculptures on pedestals.

Tonight’s meeting is going to take place in the Mayer Library. It’s private, quiet, and off-limits to everyone but Lorenzo Ramirez and whoever he’s supposed to be meeting to discuss a deal with great financial opportunity. My role was to come with a plan to manage the profits of the deal and, as advised by Jimmy Rook, “prove my worth.”

Oh, I have a plan. I double-check my pocket, ensuring the cigarette

lighter containing the Raspberry Pi Zero is secure. The human interface device will act as a covert back door, allowing the FBI to remotely intercept network traffic and access Ramirez's laptop as soon as he logs in. If he opens any accounts or sensitive files, we'll see everything. All I need to do is get inside the office and plant it. I pull out my Lishi lock pick tool and start toward the locked door.

I'm careful not to let my confidence lure me into complacency. Ruby will alert me if Ramirez moves, but there are still museum security employees making rounds. I need to tread carefully. I can't risk exposure of any kind. Lorenzo Ramirez might not pull the trigger, but his hands are as bloody as the ones he pays to do it.



CHAPTER 2

Cybil

Dallas, Texas
Monday night

The Dallas Museum of Art buzzes with excitement over the surprise headliner, country star Bart Jennings, but my attention keeps sweeping to the hunk of muscle who could be Vin Diesel's stunt double. I'm hoping he's more furious than fast—I'm confident I can outrun furious. But the way his right arm hangs, I know there's a gun beneath his tuxedo coat, and the scars on his knuckles tell me he's not the type to rely solely on the weapon at his side to take down an adversary.

It's weird the things I notice now since working for Earl Edmond. Like how someone stands and walks a little differently when they have a gun tucked against their body. Or how someone can donate millions of dollars to a charity with one hand and pay off arms dealers with the other. Or that secret conversations don't always happen in shady nightclubs or in dark Italian restaurants over a plate of spaghetti like they do in the movies.

Sometimes they happen in law offices, on a park bench, at a child's birthday party, and surprisingly—more frequently than I ever imagined—at charity galas.

Like tonight.

Bart Jennings kicks off a rousing song that electrifies the crowd, and

it's my cue to sneak away. I check my left where my boss, Earl Edmond, and his son Sebastian are talking with the hosts of tonight's fundraiser to support the South Dallas Community Center. I glance around at the A-list of affluent guests interspersed with professional athletes, actors, and musicians, all gathered in the name of helping those less fortunate. The cynical part of me wonders if any of these people would be as philanthropic if they couldn't just write a check.

Not tonight's problem.

No. Tonight's problem is a six-foot-something bald man who is armed and standing between me and the second-floor bathroom. There's no way he's museum security, which means he's not here to protect the art.

I toy with the ring on my thumb, locking onto my target. With a silent *Sorry about your night*, I time my move perfectly—elbowing into the path of a server balancing a tray of freshly poured champagne. The poor guy doesn't stand a chance. The tray tilts, the glasses fly, and a symphony of shattering crystal cuts through the noise. The music drowns most of the chaos, but the mess still pulls the attention of the nearest staff—and, more importantly, Faux-Diesel.

Not wasting a second, I slip around him while his back is turned and hustle up the stairs to the third level. At the top, a flash of movement makes me pause and press into a corner. A handful of museum security guards are on patrol tonight—two of them prowling the roped-off levels. No weapons, but they don't have to be armed to ruin my night. I check my watch, marking the time. When I peek around the corner again, both guards have vanished toward level four.

I slip into the women's restroom at the end of the hall, checking the stalls before ducking into the third one. The black floor-length gown I borrowed pools around my feet as I wriggle out of it. It's not as flashy as the low-cut, glittery numbers floating around the gallery, but that's the point. I'm not here to stand out. Blending in? I've had a lifetime of practice. It used to bother me. I used to feel like I was fading. Now? Now it's survival.

Now it helps me work as a *covert asset*—to collect intel on corrupt

individuals and businesses that prey on the innocent. *Another thing I'm painfully experienced in.* I twist the ring, grounding myself in the promise I made a long time ago to never be powerless again.

The bathroom walls vibrate with a twangy anthem about a man, his pickup truck, and a lifetime of questionable decisions. I'm counting on the charity gala's headliner to distract my boss long enough that he won't realize I'm gone. My elbow clips the side of the cramped stall, sending a sharp jolt through my arm, but I grit my teeth and focus—carefully draping the gown over the edge. Underneath, I'm squeezed into shapewear—supposedly more practical for movement than a ball gown. *Breathing, apparently, is optional.*

I rip a few squares of toilet paper and layer them across the seat. Stepping out of my heels, I climb up, balancing on the questionable surface like a very determined circus act. On my toes, I press up on the ceiling panel and start feeling around. After a few seconds of swiping at—and collecting—a truly gross amount of dust, I find no sign of the backpack.

I wobble on the toilet seat, and the confidence I had two minutes ago—when I seamlessly snuck away from Mr. Edmond and the gala—is melting into panic. Did I pick the wrong stall? The wrong bathroom? Sweat slides down my back as I mentally replay Athena's instructions.

Third-level restroom. Conservation Gallery. Third stall.

Check, check, check. So where's the stupid—ah! My fingers catch on a nylon strap and I tug the bag down. Hopping to the cold tile floor, I unzip the backpack and yank out a pair of black leggings and a matching top. I'd tried to convince Athena that it would look *way* less suspicious if I was caught wandering the halls in a gown instead of dressed like a cat burglar. Shockingly, she disagreed.

And really, who was I to argue? Athena—definitely not her real name—was my handler. The woman paying me to spy on my boss. His employees. His business. And business associates who might be engaging in illegal practices. The same woman I'm pretty sure would pull a Houdini if I ever got caught.

"Just don't get caught," I mutter under my breath, tugging the shirt

over my head. Or as my mother used to say, “*Don’t write a check you can’t cash.*” As a kid, I thought she meant it literally. I’d watch her scribble checks for rent, groceries, or utilities—only to come home to our stuff packed in boxes on a porch, or to have our heat cut off in the middle of winter, or to be escorted out of the grocery store empty-handed.

It wasn’t until middle school that I understood what she *really* meant. By then, we’d moved more than a dozen times. I’d finally made a real friend who invited me into a world of home-cooked meals, parents who asked about homework, and the security of having a permanent address. I begged Mom not to move us. Even promised to get babysitting and pet-sitting jobs to help with the bills. My mom wrote me a check she couldn’t cash—and six months later, we were gone. In college, I understood what ADHD had stolen from her—how her symptoms weren’t just quirky or forgetful, but the kind that lived at the far end of the spectrum. How it wasn’t neglect or malice. It was chaos she couldn’t outrun. But by then, all I craved was the safety and security of a permanent address.

I still do—just preferably not at the state penitentiary, if I get caught.

There’s a lull in the music rattling the museum’s walls, and I catch my breath. My pulse pounds a staccato against my ribs. I check my watch. Time’s slipping. I carefully fold my gown into the bag along with my heels, swapping them for a pair of black flats, and then pull a tube of Chanel lipstick from my silver sequined clutch. It slides easily into the pocket of the small gear pouch strapped to my wrist.

With the backpack stashed back in the ceiling, I give myself a quick glance in the mirror. For a second, the woman staring back at me doesn’t even look familiar. I shove down the anxious pinch twisting in my gut and force a small, reassuring smile. The nerves always show up in the minutes before the job, but they don’t stick around for long.

I’m ready. I’ve already walked the museum twice this week, logged the security patterns, and marked the blind spots. Now, it’s time to do my job.

“Find out why Earl Edmond is meeting with Lorenzo Ramirez.”

That, along with the instructions about the bag, were the only direc-

tives in Athena's text. I don't know everything about the company she works for, but I know enough to trust I'm working for the good guys. My job isn't to understand what they plan to do with the information—just to get it and get out.

I step out of the bathroom and into the darkened hallway. Faux-Diesel should be back to guarding the stairwell, keeping curious guests away from this floor. If my timing's right, the museum's security guards should be busy one level up. That gives me just enough of a window to break into the office, plant the lipstick recorder, slip back into my dress, and make it back to the gala before the meeting starts. Just another night of light felonies and no arrests. *I hope.*

Beneath my feet, the floor thrums with the bass of the drums, and I time my steps to match. Under the dim glow of the gallery lights, it feels like every painting is watching me. Judging me. I hurry to the door of the Mayer Library and test the handle. Locked. "That would be too easy," I mutter under my breath.

I slip the tension wrench and hook pick from my wrist pouch and drop to my knees. There are nights like tonight when the irony of my life feels almost laughable. A mountain of college debt for an education in how to *protect* the law—and here I am breaking it. They don't teach you this kind of thing in any LSAT practice test. How to spy on your boss. Or one of his associates who . . .

"He's killed for less."

Two days ago, I overheard Mr. Edmond snapping at Sebastian behind his office door. Gruff words. Raw fear. I hadn't caught much else—but the look in Mr. Edmond's eyes when Sebastian stormed out told me everything I needed to know. This man they were meeting tonight was dangerous.

My hand slips. The hook pick scrapes against the metal, the sharp noise slicing through the quiet like a blade. I freeze. Below me, the rhythm of the music has shifted into a slow, mournful ballad. No heavy beat left to hide behind. The paintings are still staring. Especially the one closest to me. I squint at the tiny placard: *Desperate Man* by Gustave Courbet. It's a portrait of a man clawing at his own hair, wide-eyed

with pure, unhinged panic.

Relax, buddy. I'm the one committing the felony here.

Exhaling slowly, I refocus on the lock. It's a simple pin tumbler. Easy. Except—

A prickle runs down my spine. Every muscle in my body locks up, and I go statue-still, lungs fighting to stay quiet. I don't know what triggered it—sound, movement, instinct—but something's wrong.

Sliding the tools back into my pouch, I rock to my feet and press into the wall. My gaze sweeps the room. Past the paintings, the sculpture stands, the roped-off displays, until it lingers on the empty shadows between them. The ones too deep. Too still. A chill scrapes across my skin. No one else is supposed to be here. And yet . . . The feeling won't shake.

Something—or someone—is hiding in the dark.

If it's the latter, I've made a critical mistake.

Maybe even a deadly one.



CHAPTER 3

Ben

Dallas, Texas
Monday night

My eyes narrow on the figure dressed in black. I don't move. I can't. From where I'm tucked against the wall, it doesn't look like they've spotted me—but they know someone's here. At least that's my guess based on how fast they stopped trying to pick the library door's lock.

Whoever it is, they know what they're doing. Their movements are clean, practiced, and efficient enough to make my gut tighten.

The museum is full of priceless art, and a clever thief might choose a fundraiser to pull a job while everyone's distracted by a country star and free champagne. But this one? They're not interested in art. They're focused on that door. Who else besides me would be trying to break into the very room where Ramirez's laptop is sitting?

My mind spins. Two years deep undercover with Operation Shadow Broker, and my team combed through every one of Ramirez's potential enemies, looking for anyone who might want to take him down. The list was long, the task tedious, but in the end, nobody was reckless—or suicidal—enough to go after Ramirez head-on. At least, no one we knew about.

So who is this mystery figure in black?

My pulse hammers in my ears. Time's bleeding away and soon

Ramirez will be up here. I have two choices. Both will expose me. But one might give me the upper hand. Maybe.

“Who’s there?”

My voice echoes off the gallery walls. I brace, expecting the figure to startle, run—something. They don’t even flinch. The complete lack of reaction feels deliberate. A power play I wasn’t ready for.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” I say, keeping my position tight against the wall. My tone sharp. Steady. “This area is off-limits to guests.”

A scuffling sound pulls my attention a few inches left of where I’ve been looking. That’s when I realize they are moving. Blending into the shadows. I thought I had them pinned—but with tiny, imperceptible steps, they’ve been shifting just enough so that I’m mostly talking to a wall.

Unease coils through my muscles. Every instinct I have is screaming to go on the offensive, to drag whoever’s lurking into the light. But I can’t blow my cover. So I lean into the part.

“Museum security, you need to leave now.”

There’s a noise—small, so small I almost miss it—but unmistakable. A snort.

I blink. The moment of confusion barely has time to register before another sound cuts through the air: voices. Footsteps. I risk a glance over my shoulder. Two museum security guards are heading straight for me.

The shadow figure must hear them too, because they bolt—slipping deeper into the darkness and disappearing toward the back hallway. Instinct kicks in and I follow them. Not because I want to give chase. I *don’t*. As much as I’d like to unmask whoever’s screwing with my mission, getting caught up here isn’t an option. And I’m pretty sure “I was stopping a mysterious cat burglar” won’t hold much weight when the museum calls the police.

Ahead of me, the door to the stairwell clicks shut. I reach it just in time to catch a flash of black darting up the stairs. I hesitate, heart hammering.

Down is safer.

Down is smart.

Down is how I stick to the plan. But the figure in black just blew my mission—and when Special Agent Katherine Scott demands an explanation, I want a name.

I make my choice and go up.

If there's even a small chance I can ID whoever ruined eighteen months of undercover work, I'm taking it.

Slowly, I pry the door open and peek into the fourth-level gallery. I have no idea if the person I'm chasing is armed. Whoever's lurking is probably just as ticked off at me for interrupting their plans as I am at them.

I slip inside. Technically, I should have the advantage. I was just here. I know the layout. But whatever ease I felt minutes ago? Gone. Now, every dark corner between the sculptures and display cases looks ready to strike.

Turning back isn't an option. If museum security catches me skulking around, I'll have to explain, and there's no version of that conversation I like. The only way out is across the gallery, through the stairwell door on the far side. And the only thing standing in my way is the figure in black.

Movement by a window snaps my attention left. I pick up my pace, careful to stick to the shadows. A display wall stands between us, and as I duck past a spotlight shining down on an abstract piece, my shoulder brushes the frame.

I freeze. A soft red glow pulses behind the painting—a motion alarm. One wrong move, and this place will light up like a Christmas tree. Exhaling slowly, I ease back.

Behind me, the stairwell door bangs open. Male voices echo across the gallery. The guards. *Fantastic*. My time's up.

I pivot toward the stairwell, moving fast but quiet, rounding the corner—expecting my quarry to be long gone—only to find them less than ten feet away. They're facing me. Or at least, I think they are.

Darkness cloaks them so thoroughly, all I can make out are the whites of their eyes. Something about the way they're standing, the ten-

sion vibrating off them, feels . . . wrong.

There's no time to puzzle it out. The guards are getting closer. I spin toward the stairwell—only to hear footsteps coming up fast.

"I'm heading to the fourth level now," a voice says, followed by the sharp burst of static from a radio.

Backing up a few steps, I realize I'm pinned. Two guards behind me and one about to cut me off in front. I glance at the mounted security cameras. Someone on our tech team had better be awake at the wheel tonight.

My gaze cuts left—to the figure in black. They're edging toward the window. If they try opening it, the alarms will make both our lives harder. But they stop. And the wall beside them shifts. Not a wall—a door. One hidden so well it even has fake crown molding and a painting hung on it. In the space of a blink, the figure slips through and vanishes.

I start for the door—it's my only shot out of here—but when I get to the wall, there's no knob. The first two guards are only a room over now, and the third guard is calling out to them. Only a wall and this door separate me from getting caught.

My fingers scrape along the molding until I find the latch. I twist it and wedge the door open just enough to slip through into a low-lit hallway. Crates and frame boxes line the walls. This must be where they move the pieces in and out of the gallery. The hallway only leads one way, so I follow it, quick and silent, until I hit a service elevator and another set of stairs. No sight of the figure in black. Doesn't matter anymore. Saving this mission is the only priority.

"What are you doing?"

Ruby's voice crackles in my earpiece, making my heart spike. If she's checking in, I've already burned too much time. Ruby doesn't do patience. If I don't answer her fast, she'll come looking, and that's the last thing I want.

I can't drag another agent into this mess.

Sweat beads along my collar as I jog down the steps. I don't know where this stairwell exits, but I can't take the risk of popping out in the

middle of the gala. The guards are clustered on the fourth level. The third level should be clear.

I ease the door open and step into a narrow, dark hallway. It takes a second for my eyes to adjust. Then I spot the easels and half-restored paintings. The oily chemical smell hits me a second later—linseed oil, varnish, solvents. Conservation studio.

If I'm here, then—

I crack open the next door and confirm it. Across the hall sits the Mayer Library. Only now, I'm out of time. Ramirez and Rook could show up any second—or Ruby will. Neither option ends well.

Frustration tightens in my gut.

Movement across the gallery catches my eye. The figure in black, slipping between the exhibits. They don't know I'm here. Yet. So I take advantage. Moving swiftly toward them, I keep the pedestals holding sculptures between us.

"Stop." The word rumbles out, half growl, half command. To my surprise, they do.

It feels like déjà vu. Shadow against shadow. Facing off. Only now, they have two choices—run upstairs toward the guards or downstairs toward the gala.

I take a step forward, feeling like the tables have finally shifted in my favor. Until I see their hand move. Quickly, I shift left, putting a marble bust between me and whatever they're about to pull. Gun? Blade? Something worse?

But they're not aiming at me. Their hand presses against the wall, right next to a portrait of a woman reaching from a boat to rescue the shipwrecked.

I freeze, confusion cutting through the adrenaline. Then it clicks. The motion sensor. One nudge of that frame and the alarms will go off and chaos will descend. But—what about them? They'll be caught too. Unless . . .

They have a plan.

Who are you? The thought barely forms before they tap the frame. I brace for the shriek of alarms, the explosion of red lights, the pounding

boots of security. Nothing.

I glance wildly around, heart hammering, but all I hear is the honky-tonk twang drifting up from the gala. *Silent alarm.* By the time the realization hits, the figure in black is gone. *This would never happen to Bond.*



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

CHAPTER 4

— ✦ —
Cybil

Dallas, Texas
Monday night

This cannot be happening.

I skirt around a corner and dart into the women's bathroom, slamming the third stall door shut and twisting the lock. I attempt to jump onto the toilet seat—but my right foot skids across the slick plastic. I hear the splash a second before cold toilet water soaks my foot.

Welp, these shoes are going into the fire.

Swallowing a gag, I fight the urge to scream and extract my foot from its questionable bath. My pulse hasn't stopped battering my throat since I got caught at the door, and now I'm standing in some knockoff version of Karate Kid's crane pose on a public toilet, trying to figure out who the heck that man was.

At first, I assumed he was museum security. But he didn't call for backup. Didn't reach for a radio. Which means . . . something is wrong. Was he private security for Ramirez? A friend of Faux-Diesel?

All I caught was a glimpse—tall, broad shoulders, black tux. Absolutely zero identifying features that could separate him from the sea of overpriced cologne and cuff links roaming the gala tonight.

I wait—counting out ninety agonizing seconds—before stepping off the toilet and unlocking the stall door. I pause with every movement,

holding my breath to listen, but all I hear is the pounding of my own heartbeat. And the occasional drip of toilet water sliding off my toes.

I can't hide here forever.

Mr. Edmond has probably noticed my absence by now. With any luck, claiming I was in the ladies' room won't raise too many questions. But if I'm going to pull this off, I need to leave. Now. And not get caught.

I grab for the toilet paper to mop up my foot and find . . . one ply? *Of course.* It takes half a roll of the transparent stuff to dry my foot before I shimmy back into my gown, hide the bag again, and slip the lipstick recorder back into my clutch. First attempt: botched. But I don't give up.

No matter what messes I get myself into, it's hard to complain when the money hits my account. I need this paycheck to pay my rent, my student loans, to help my mom, and if I'm lucky, to maybe finally replace the underwear I've owned since college. *It's the little things.*

I crack the door an inch. No one's waiting for me.

Instead of risking the main stairs and a collision with Faux-Diesel, I opt for the side stairwell. There's still a chance I'll run into museum security, but back in my gown, I feel armored. One thing Mr. Edmond has taught me: Money buys invisibility. Nobody questions a well-dressed woman.

Moonlight spills through the windows, casting a silver glow over the gala. Bart Jennings is dancing across the stage, the crowd singing along, the whole place vibrating with energy. I should be focused on getting back to Mr. Edmond. But instead, it's the server carrying a tray of chocolate desserts who captures my full attention.

Surely I have time for one little choco—

"He won't die. But he'll wish he had."

The harsh whisper halts me in my heels, pulling my attention to a door that's been left slightly ajar. I glance back over my shoulder, knowing I should get back to Mr. Edmond. Instead, curiosity wins. It always does. It's what keeps the bills paid.

"Just one or two drops. I promise he'll never put his hands on you again."

I ease the door open and find two female servers crammed inside

what looks like an oversized broom closet. The brunette spins around, shielding the blonde behind her. I catch a glimpse—smeared makeup, teary eyes.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

The brunette’s eyes flash. “A guy out there got handsy with her. She asked him to stop. He took it as a challenge.”

I shift my focus to the blonde. Her chin is tucked as if she’s embarrassed.

“Are you hurt?” I ask.

Her head snaps up. “No, ma’am.”

She’s all professional polish. Neat uniform, tasteful makeup, blond hair twisted into a chignon, though some strands have escaped. Her makeup, or what’s left of it, is tastefully done, giving her that girl-next-door look.

“I wasn’t flirting,” she blurts. “I swear.”

Anger tightens in my gut. Why is the first instinct always to blame ourselves?

“Who was it?” I press.

Both girls hesitate.

“The man who put his hands on you,” I clarify. “I need to know.”

It takes a minute of coaxing, but finally the blonde describes him—a creep holding court at the bar. I don’t hesitate.

Yes, I’m late getting back to Mr. Edmond. Yes, this is probably dumb. But letting this slide isn’t an option.

It doesn’t take me long to find the man the server described. White tuxedo. Smug grin. Half perched on a bar stool, pawing at a woman in a red cocktail dress and flashing his watch like it’s some kind of mating call.

“You like what you see?”

Ew. I step up, flashing my brightest smile and thrusting my hand in his face. “I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Cybil Langford.”

His gaze bounces off Red Dress and lands on me. I don’t miss the relief that washes over her face before she slips away. He doesn’t seem as grateful for my interruption.

"Gee, that's a nice watch." I squint at it. "Is it a Casio?"

He looks genuinely scandalized. "Baby, it's a Rolex."

Baby. Kill me now.

"Wow. I bet it cost a lot." I run my manicured nails lightly along his wrist. "Mind if I take a closer look?"

He grins. Then yelps when I twist his thumb back at a painful angle—a useful move my uncle taught me when I started dating. "What are you doing?" he stammers.

"Shh." I lean in, sweet as poison. "We don't want to make a scene."

Around us, the crowd begins singing loudly with a familiar song. Perfect cover. He tries to squirm, but with the bar at his back, he's stuck.

"Listen, John Revolta, when a woman tells you to back off," I hiss, "you do it." I push harder, until I feel the joint shift. Fear finally flares in his eyes. "Got it?" I whisper.

He nods, sweating. I start to release him—when he lurches and clamps onto my wrist, yanking me closer. "Who do you think you are?" he spits.

I smile, all teeth. "I already told you. Cybil Langford."

He keeps my wrist low and tight, trying to make it look like an intimate conversation. Cute. Except now I'm thinking about how best to break his nose without splattering blood on my dress—

"Cybil."

The deep voice behind me freezes us both.

Sebastian Edmond steps into view, cool and lethal. His presence causes the man to drop my wrist like it burns. Irritation flares in my chest that it's Sebastian who scares the man, but he probably saved me from an assault charge.

"Mr. Edmond," he croaks.

Sebastian doesn't bother acknowledging the greeting. He signals to security with a flick of two fingers.

As security closes in, I rub my wrist. "I didn't need your help."

"You never do," Sebastian says dryly, flagging the bartender for a drink. "Where were you?"

It doesn't completely surprise me that Sebastian noticed I was gone.

He pays attention when it serves him—whether out of habit, suspicion, or that Edmond instinct to catalog threats and assets. He’s like the big brother I never asked for—the kind who’d absolutely rat me out to Daddy if it aligned with his agenda.

“Chasing down a waiter for more of those chocolate desserts.”

Sebastian arches a brow. “And that guy?”

“He got handsy.”

“With you?” There’s a sharp edge to his voice now.

I shrug. “Not me.”

His shoulders ease slightly, but suspicion still lingers in his watchful stare.

“Where’s Mr. Edmond?” I ask, shifting the subject.

“With George Washington.”

“What?”

Sebastian collects his drink. Sniffs it. Then takes a slow sip. “The museum has an oil painting of George Washington.” He tips his head in the direction of a hallway. “Dad wanted to see it before the meeting.”

Mr. Edmond might love America’s history, but he has a more . . . flexible relationship obeying her laws. At least, according to Athena. But he hasn’t been arrested for anything yet, which only feeds into my belief that the rich and powerful don’t get booked, they get buildings named after them.

“Has the meeting started?”

Sebastian tilts his glass, studying me over the rim. “Not without me.”

There’s always been an edge between Sebastian and his father. Part of it’s generational. Part of it’s a power struggle—one man unwilling to let go, one unwilling to wait his turn.

I’m reminded of the heated argument between Sebastian and his father. “*He’s killed for less.*” Those four words bring me back to my failed mission—and the man behind it. I search the sea of men in tuxedos around me. Maybe there’ll be some hint of recognition, a mole, a crooked nose, anything that will help me identify the person who hid behind a marble bust.

My gaze sweeps the crowd and stops on the security staff. Maroon

jackets, badges, hovering at the edges of the room. Bored and inattentive. Nothing about their posture suggests they're on alert and looking for me.

Which means . . . the man upstairs *wasn't* museum security.

My mind replays the earlier events. *Someone* caught me trying to break into the Mayer Library. Any decent guest in attendance tonight would've assumed I was a burglar and reported me, right? But he didn't. He chased after me, but only when the real museum security showed up.

Which tells me he didn't want to get caught either.

The thought rattles through my brain almost as loudly as the drumbeat from the band. The man upstairs wasn't supposed to be there either. So why was he? Who was he? My questions shudder to a stop when the next question comes: Did he see *me*? Like really see me? Enough to identify me?

My fingers fly to my hair, yanking loose bobby pins until the tight chignon falls loose over my shoulders and curtains my face. I'm no longer annoyed with Athena for forcing me to change out of my dress. If the man from upstairs is looking for me, I'm hoping the clothing change will throw him off. Still, I feel vulnerable. Exposed.

I'm *not* as invisible as I want to be.

"I think I'll go make sure your father has everything he needs," I tell Sebastian, already moving before he can stop me.

CHAPTER 5

Ben

Dallas, Texas
Monday night

The alarm spreading through me is shifting into panic. Every worst-case scenario barrels through my brain. Did someone make us? Has our mission been compromised? My pace quickens as I shove through the stairwell door and round the corner—straight into a server. With deftness, he quick-steps to the side and manages to keep all the champagne flutes upright on his tray.

I apologize and lift a glass from his tray. I'm not about to drink it, but I need something to keep my hands from clenching into fists. Heat radiates under my tux, my pulse pounding against the stiff collar. I resist the urge to rip the bow tie from around my neck. *Did James Bond ever have this much trouble with formalwear?*

Forcing a tight breath through my lungs, I seamlessly melt into the crowd on the second-floor mezzanine. I need to look natural. Casual. Like a guy just enjoying the concert, not a guy who nearly got caught by some—what, exactly? Thief? Avid enthusiast of eighteenth-century literature?

Something doesn't add up.

An art heist during a gala is brazen, but as far as I know there's no art *inside* the Mayer Library. Just books, magazines, and a few of Winston

Churchill's writings. All the valuable pieces are displayed *outside*, lining the halls. And if someone wanted those, why trip the motion alarm? Why risk drawing attention to both of us?

I scan the crowd, instincts sharpening. A museum security guard leans against the wall nearby, looking . . . bored. Not like someone who just got an alert about a silent alarm going off. Another quick sweep of the room confirms it—no tension, no crackling radios, no urgent chatter. Nothing but casual disinterest.

My confusion sharpens into realization.

The alarm wasn't triggered—it was a distraction.

I was played.

The truth hits like a sucker punch. Whoever that was, they weren't after priceless art. They weren't reaching for the painting to steal it. It was a distraction. A threat. They weren't trying to shake the museum security. They were trying to shake *me*. They knew the painting was protected by a silent alarm and they banked on me reacting exactly the way I did. Like an amateur. I took the bait and probably left them upstairs, free to do the one thing I needed to do—get inside that library.

My jaw tightens. I check my watch. I need to figure out how to salvage this mission—and fast. I wait until Bart Jennings hits the chorus, the crowd singing along loud enough to cover my voice, before speaking low into my comms. "We have a problem."

It takes a second before Ruby responds, her voice tight in my ear. "You see him too?"

Him? The first thing that flashes through my mind is the figure in black. I didn't have a chance to communicate with Ruby when it all went sideways, but if anyone could spot a deviation in our mission plan, it's her. If she saw someone before I did, maybe it's the guy who just blew apart my op.

"Who?" I ask, already sweeping the mezzanine for any familiar threat.

"Below. At your nine o'clock."

My gaze moves around the room, trying to spot where Ruby's watching me from. I've learned to stop being surprised at Ruby's ability to see

things and yet remain unseen. When I don't find her, I shift my focus left, searching the crowd like I'm expecting to see the figure in black from upstairs. I don't. The face I *do* see turns my blood ice cold.

Sammy Pawson.

What's he doing here?

He's leaning against a column, popping shrimp into his mouth like he's tailgating, not crashing a black-tie gala.

"What are the odds," Ruby says dryly in my ear, "that a man who enjoys firebombing businesses also enjoys two-stepping?"

Her irony jolts me into motion. I hit the stairs fast and weave through guests and servers, heading toward where I saw Pawson standing. He's already gone. A discarded shrimp tail glistens in an empty champagne glass nearby—lazy evidence he was ever here.

I pivot in a full circle, searching the room for the man who once used a tire iron to rearrange the bones in another man's face for parking in the wrong spot.

Instead of getting five to ninety-nine, Sammy "The Paws" Pawson walked out of the courthouse a free man. The victim decided not to testify, and the prosecutor couldn't prove the coercion. Now Pawson's back on the street, rumored to be doing contract work for Lorenzo Ramirez—which likely included killing Agent Danny Morales.

His presence at the gala immediately has me on edge. There's only one reason a guy like Pawson shows up at a gala like this. And it means my night has just gone from bad to worse.

"How'd it go upstairs?"

Speaking of bad. "Not good."

"Meaning?"

"Someone else was there."

The music's too loud for anyone nearby to overhear, but I keep moving in the direction of Ramirez's table, hoping Pawson might be there too. Then I'll find out why.

"Who?"

"No idea."

Now's not the time to get into the details. When I reach a corner

tucked near a marble statue of Lady Godiva, I slow enough to add, “They were trying to break into the library. Took off before I could see who it was.”

“Did they see you?”

“Not well enough, I don’t think.”

“You don’t *think*?” Ruby’s tone sharpens. “What do you think they were after?”

I hesitate for half a second. As far as I know, there’s nothing valuable inside the library. *Nothing except Lorenzo Ramirez’s laptop.* Ahead of me, I spot Ramirez and Rook posted at their table, drinks in hand, laughing with the gala hosts. Who else would be gunning for Ramirez’s laptop? And what happens if they get there before me?

Maybe it’s not too late.

“I need to get back up there.”

“The meeting’s about to start.”

I catch a glimpse of Ramirez and Rook pushing up from their seats. I’m already backtracking toward the stairs leading up to the third floor.

“I know.” My eyes scan the crowd as I move. It’s pointless because I don’t know who I’m looking for, but I’m convinced the figure in black is still in the museum. “I just need a few minutes.”

“What about Pawson?”

The man with bricks for fists is nowhere in sight and apprehension shoots through me. Was it Pawson upstairs? No way. Pawson would rather bash your face in than run.

“Send a message to tech. See what they can find on the cameras,” I say.

“Got it. Don’t be stupid.”

“Got it.” The rote answer slips from my lips. I learned early on that Ruby’s version of affection is all stickers and thorns—pep talks sound like death threats, and encouragement comes in the form of exasperated sighs, but after a failed mission in which her partner almost died three years ago, she doesn’t fool around with chance.

And I won’t either.

I reach the stairwell, relieved to find the door still unattended. I slip

inside and take the stairs two at a time, confidence growing with every step. This time, if anyone questions me, I can tell the truth. Or at least my version of it. I'm expected for the meeting with Ramirez.

The gallery lights are brighter now, illuminating all the nooks and corners where someone could hide. My anger at being played flickers back to life, fueling my pace. I round the corner—and smash straight into a woman. Her purse hits the marble floor with a clatter as she stumbles backward. I instinctively reach out, steadying her with a hand to her arm.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see—"

The words catch midair. My gaze locks onto a pair of brown eyes. And for a second, the world tilts. *No*. It can't be. A strange wave of familiarity crashes over me—raw and visceral. I know those eyes. And I'm *absolutely* not ready for the impact. I brace a hand against the wall to steady myself. Of all the places, all the nights, all the impossible odds—there's no way *she'd* be here.

Yet here she is.

In a blink, I'm back to summers long gone, when those same brown eyes belonged to a girl who stole a piece of my heart—and maybe shaved a few years off my life. With no thought on my part, the name rips from my mouth. "Cybil Langford?"

Her eyes widen just a fraction. Recognition flickers—and then vanishes behind a wall of ice so fast, I almost doubt I saw it. Almost.

My gaze sweeps over her. Not in a lewd way, but in a *can this woman really be the same girl whose shirt I used to stick worms down?* way. When my eyes meet hers again, I realize my mistake.

Was I admiring the way her dress accentuates her curves beautifully? Sure, but I can't help it. A lot has changed, and the years have been good to her. But the real mistake—the fatal one—is that I showed I know her. And if I know who she is . . . she knows who *I* am. The *real* me. Not the alias I need to protect at all costs. *Me*.

"No," she says sharply.

I blink. "What?"

"No," she repeats, twisting away from me as she crouches to scoop

up her fallen belongings.

No? Confusion churns through me like a slow, heavy fog. A tube of lipstick is next to my foot along with a snack-size bag of M&M's. I reach for the lipstick just as she does—and instinct kicks in first. I snatch it up before she can. Her hand freezes in midair. Honey-brown eyes snap to mine, sharp and clear. And this time there's no mistaking it.

It's her. My Cybil. Okay, not *mine*—but the Cybil of summers spent at her cousin's ranch in Cypress Creek with my best friend, Rex.

"I need that back and you need to leave," she says coolly.

The iciness in her voice makes me second-guess everything. I straighten to my full height, handing the lipstick back. "I'm sorry. You just look . . . familiar?"

"Do I? Must be my chin."

Her chin? I glance at it automatically—yeah, it's a nice chin—but that's not what's pulling at some deep, frayed memory inside me. It's *her*.

And if it *is* Cybil, she doesn't recognize me.

Rather than feeling grateful or relieved that my cover and the last eighteen months of undercover aren't blown, I feel . . . *offended*? Insecurity buzzes under my skin. Sure, I'm older. I've let my facial hair grow a little. But—

"This part of the museum is closed off to guests."

Leave. The smart move would be to walk away. She doesn't know who I am. Or maybe I'm wrong. It's been, what—ten, twelve years? I could be mistaken, but I know I'm not. There's a familiar tension thrumming in my chest that has only ever occurred around one woman.

I don't walk away. I belong here. She does not.

"I'm sorry?"

It takes me a second to realize I spoke the thought out loud. "You said this area is closed to guests. But *you're* here."

She arches a single brow. "I'm working."

I lift an eyebrow right back. "Here? In this hallway? By this door?"

"You really need to leave." She pulls out her phone and gives me a dismissive look, twisting away.

Unfortunately, my foot's on the hem of her dress.

There's a rip.

Annnd she's falling.

My timing is good. My execution? Not so much. I lunge for her but misjudge the distance. My hands land at her hips just as we both collide into the door. My shoulder hits first with a thud, but her head lands safely against my chest.

I'm still trying to rebalance our tangled bodies when the door swings open under our weight. We stumble forward—a graceless, flailing mess. My gaze drops to the hem of her dress, now ripped past anything PG-13 and heading north.

A heavy hand lands on my shoulder. I look up into the chiseled, scowling face of a man who looks like he was carved from anger and gym memberships. And judging by the bulging tension in his jaw, he's two seconds from knocking me out cold.

He snarls. An actual snarl. And it makes me the tiniest bit jealous I've never been in a snarling situation myself. When I track his gaze downward, realization slams into me. My hand is still resting on Cybil's hip, fingers grazing the exposed skin where her dress tore.

I jerk my hand away fast and straighten, stepping clear of the man's bruising grip. My gaze slides down the length of the table—to the older man seated at the end of it. Across from him, Ramirez's laptop sits, practically glowing like the Holy Grail of incriminating evidence.

Behind me, the elevator dings—and the stakes grow. Lorenzo Ramirez steps into the room, Rook at his side. Everyone is eyeing us with suspicion. I need an excuse. Fast.

"Cybil?" the older man at the table says, his voice low and curious.

My attention swings to the woman at my side. She's glaring at me. Oh, it's *absolutely* her.

"I'm sorry for the interruption, sir," she says smoothly, stepping around me and tugging at her hem with impressive dignity. "I was coming to see if there was anything you needed before your meeting."

His meeting?

Her earlier words—"I'm working"—echo in my brain as I watch her move into place beside the older man, all composed professionalism.

Meanwhile, my heart is hammering against my ribs, trying to process *why* Cybil Langford is working for anyone associated with Lorenzo Ramirez.

The snarling man looks at me and growls, "Who are you?"

"No one," Cybil answers crisply, before I can even open my mouth. The conviction in her voice stings worse than it should. "Just some guy I bumped into in the hallway."

"Looked like a little more than that," he answers back, and I immediately hate him.

"Please, Sebastian." Cybil gestures vaguely at me. "Him? Give me some credit."

My pride is taking hits like I'm in the ring with Mike Tyson. I don't know why it bothers me that she doesn't recognize me, but it does. And the irony of our worlds colliding again, right now, when everything's at stake? I'll have to unpack that later. Right now, if I want to protect my cover and keep Cybil safe, I need to play along.

"My apologies," I say stiffly, glancing at Ramirez. "She tripped on her dress."

"You stepped on my dress," Cybil corrects without missing a beat.

"Semantics."

She cocks her head, sweetly savage. "Is it?"

The challenge I see in the glare she's sending excites me. I want nothing more than to accept, but not here. Not in present company. I glance at Lorenzo Ramirez. "My apologies for the delay, sir."

"A real knight in shining armor, huh?" I don't miss the sarcasm or the suspicion in Pug Face's words. "How about you rejoin the party, Mr. . . ."

In for a penny . . .

"Craig," I answer smoothly.

At the edge of my vision, Cybil's eye twitches. It's the smallest tell—but I catch it. And my face cuts into a wide smile. *There's no going back now.*

"My name is Craig Miller."

CHAPTER 6

— ✦ —
Cybil

Dallas, Texas
Monday night

Craig Miller? It takes everything in me to keep my jaw from unhinging. *Craig freaking Miller?* I must've heard that wrong. Had to. But when I spare a glance in Ben's—not *Craig's*—direction—he's flashing me a smile.

And. Then. He. Winks. *Winks!*

Does he think this is a game? Some kind of joke? Probably, and unfortunately, I recognize the infuriating glint of humor dancing in his eyes. There's only one reason he'd use *that* name. He's caught me in my pretense and knows that I know *exactly* who he is.

Shock doesn't even begin to describe what I felt the second my eyes landed on Bennett Bradley in the hallway. I thought fatigue was playing games with my brain. No way was my cousin Rex's best friend, and the tormentor of my summers, standing in the same hallway, at the same gala, in all of Dallas—in *all of Texas*—as me.

But here he is, barely resembling the boy in torn jeans, dusty boots, and T-shirts that I remember. He's grown into a man who fills out a tuxedo like a Hemsworth, and dang it if the way he's looking at me doesn't stir up something I'd left abandoned near the old oak tree at my aunt and uncle's ranch twelve years ago.

I thought I had him almost convinced he was wrong, especially when I saw a flash of confusion settle into the fine lines around his eyes, but like a tick on a bloodhound, he won't shake loose. Just like when we were kids.

And now he's standing in front of my boss sending me what probably looks like a flirtatious wink—and lying.

But I don't react.

I can't.

Not here.

Upbeat country music hums in the background, but the air between us is thick with suspicion. Mostly aimed at Ben. Except for the two men I don't recognize standing across from Mr. Edmond—their attention is zeroed in on me.

The first man, tall and broad, looks to be in his late sixties. His dark features, sharp eyes, and tailored tuxedo emphasize wealth, power, and a ruthless intelligence compared to the man next to him. The other man has a lean, wiry frame and a beaked nose that gives him the look of a vulture.

These are the men Mr. Edmond and Sebastian are here to meet. The kind of men who don't leave witnesses when things go sideways. The kind of men whose attention I don't want. Not when I have a listening device stashed in my clutch.

I cannot get caught.

Clutching the torn slit of my dress, I blow out a slow, measured breath. I'm trying to look casual while my heartbeat goes into overdrive for reasons I really don't want to unpack right now. The only thing I like unpacking is a box of chocolates—sweet, reliable, and never out to ruin someone's life. Unlike Ben, whose sudden reappearance is about five seconds from blowing everything up.

Focus. I force my attention to Sebastian, noting the suspicion furrowing his forehead. I need to get Ben out of here before his juvenile sense of humor gets us both in trouble.

"I'm very sorry, gentlemen," I say, injecting just the right amount of fluster into my voice. I turn to Ben and grit out, "Mr. Miller and I didn't

mean to interrupt your meeting.”

Before I can herd Ben back to the gala where I can demand answers from him, the first man’s voice cuts through the room.

“Are you leaving, Mr. Miller?”

It’s deep. Authoritative. Clear. It takes me a moment to realize—he thinks he’s talking to Ben.

“No, sir, Mr. Ramirez,” Ben answers smoothly. “I’m ready when you are.”

I nearly flinch at the name. Ramirez. *The Ramirez.*

Sebastian hesitates for a second before giving Ben a clipped nod and stepping stiffly aside. “Follow me, Mr. Miller,” he says, his voice flat, before leading Ben to the conference table.

Wait. What? Ben knows these guys? And they know him? No—not Ben. *Craig Miller.* The confusion must be plain on my face, but if Sebastian notices, he doesn’t show it. He just turns to me, cool and dismissive.

“You should return to the party, Cybil.”

Heat surges up my neck. Dismissed. Under any other circumstance, I wouldn’t think twice about Sebastian’s power play. I’m not part of this meeting. I’m not even supposed to be up here. But tonight’s different—and Sebastian’s words slice through old scars I thought I had healed. Vulnerability I haven’t felt since the last time I saw Ben lances through me, sharp and unwelcome.

Before I can move, Mr. Edmond speaks up, smooth and unbothered. “Cybil, would you mind finding Margot Stanton downstairs? She’s handling the Edison project, and I’d like to set up a meeting as soon as my schedule allows.”

His is a polite dismissal, wrapped in an assignment. But the weight of too many old memories pressing against my chest makes his request sting. I answer in a voice that barely sounds like mine. “Yes, of course, Mr. Edmond.”

Sebastian shifts his attention to Ben and Mr. Ramirez. “Shall we begin?”

I have no choice but to leave. Doing anything else would only raise flags and bring more unwanted attention to myself. Who am I kidding?

More flags are waving now than when the baton team takes the football field for the halftime show. But I'm the only one who sees them.

Panic swells inside of me. What is Bennett Bradley doing here? Why is he in a meeting with my boss, Sebastian, and a man named Mr. Ramirez? And why do they believe he's Craig Miller?

I need answers.

With a shaky breath, I subtly unclasp my clutch and offer a polite, empty smile to the room. Then, as I step toward the door, I let my heel catch the edge of the rug. I stumble forward, grabbing at a side table while my clutch spills across the floor. Again. Wallet, phone, bobby pins, and the tube of lipstick scatter like confetti. Perfect.

"I'm so sorry," I say, trying to sound mortified.

Mr. Edmond moves to help, but I wave him off. "I've got it," I insist, crouching as gracefully as I can manage in this dress.

Ben doesn't move. He just watches, hands in pockets, like he's enjoying the show. And it's a harsh reminder of exactly why I never wanted to see him again. I scoop up my things—everything but the lipstick—and shove them back into my bag. Mr. Edmond stretches his hand to help me up.

"One too many glasses of champagne, I guess." I give a sheepish smile as he pulls me to my feet.

I haven't touched a drop of champagne. But between nearly getting caught earlier and Ben's unexpected reappearance, I feel drunk on stress.

Ben's eyes track me, a tiny frown pulling between his brows. I ignore him and the rest of the men watching me as I back out of the library. The door closes behind me and I exhale for the first time in minutes. Finally, something went right.

I slip my phone from my clutch. With one tap, I activate the recording device hidden inside the lipstick. Wherever I am in the museum, it'll transmit the audio and upload it straight to Athena's server. I don't have to be anywhere near that room. Or Ben. Ever again.

A small, smug smile tugs at my lips. *Mission accomp—*

"Cybil."

I freeze.

Sebastian stands in the doorway, holding the lipstick between his fingers. "You forgot something."

Ice floods my veins. I walk back and take the lipstick from him, forcing a tight, casual smile. "Thanks. That's my favorite lipstick."

Suspicion gleams in Sebastian's eyes. I meet his stare without flinching. After a beat, he smirks and closes the door on me. Annoyance churns in my gut. My night—my mission—has been ruined twice.

I retreat down the hall, my heels clicking over the polished floor. Once I reach the elevator and get inside, the doors close and I let myself slump against the wall. This night cannot get worse. I dig through my clutch, find my emergency stash of M&M's, and rip the packet open with my teeth. I pour in a mouthful directly from the bag, letting the sugar calm the rising tide of humiliation and panic.

I'm not supposed to feel this way anymore. Small. Left out. Forgotten. The girl who wasn't enough. I twist the ring circling my thumb. *I'm not that girl anymore.*

The elevator dings, and I swipe at my eyes before the doors slide open. The gala is still in full swing—laughter, music, champagne. It all feels overwhelming, and I need space. I make quick work of locating Margot Stanton and scheduling a meeting before I weave my way through the glittering crowd to escape into the cool night air of the sculpture garden and sink onto a bench near the exit.

It's nearing midnight, but only a few guests are trickling out, collecting their cars from the valet or catching a rideshare. I envy them. I'd love nothing more than to exchange this dress for pajamas and crawl into bed. I look at my empty M&M's bag. *With more chocolate.*

But no. Upstairs, Ben Bradley is sitting in a high-stakes meeting, under a fake name, and I'm here with an empty bag of candy and no new information to give to Athena—

Except . . . that's not true.

I have names.

Ramirez and—Ben.

Something doesn't feel right. What's he doing in there? Lying?

I pull out my phone and hover over a text to Rex. They were best

friends once. Maybe he knows something. But it's late—dragging Rex into this mess feels wrong. He's nosy. He'd want answers I can't give. Definitely not a good idea.

Instead, I google Ben. And get—nothing. Full name? Nothing. Facebook? Dead end. Instagram? Ghost town. I even check *DateDash*, the cursed dating app Joy signed me up for after my coffee shop date with a guy whose idea of fun was showing me his vintage dental tool collection. *In what world is tooth extraction romantic?*

But the app gives me nothing. Apparently, glowed-up Bennett Bradley doesn't need a dating app to meet women. And I doubt he'd be dating women who think flossing is a love language. Not that I care. *I don't*. And to prove it, I shove my phone into my clutch just in time to spot movement across the courtyard.

Ben.

He's walking alongside Ramirez and the vulture-faced man, heading toward the valet. The meeting's over? That was fast. Too fast.

I fumble to pull my phone back out and open my camera app, trying to snap a photo. The glare of the lights makes the image fuzzy. Ramirez and the vulture slide into a black Mercedes. Ben shifts and I can't get a clean shot of the license plate.

I scramble forward, ducking behind a potted tree to try again, but before I can snap a photo, the Mercedes peels away. Ben lingers for a moment—and then a woman in a black dress approaches him. They talk. Or . . . it *looks* like they're talking. It's weirdly stiff. Not flirtatious—but not casual either. A black SUV pulls up and Ben takes the keys from the valet.

The woman melts back into the gala. And I'm left wondering who she is—and why she's making my stomach twist. *And why didn't I get a photo of her?*

I hate how distracted I am because of *him*. Ben's already getting into the SUV. Before I can overthink it, I hustle after him—but the torn hem of my dress catches under my heel and I nearly face-plant. It's like my wardrobe has a personal vendetta against me tonight. Regaining my balance, and a smidge of dignity, I glance up in time to see Ben's brake

lights flash red—and then he's gone.

"Excuse me, ma'am." A thin man with a pencil mustache steps around me, pointing to a blue Prius with an "I Brake for Speedbumps" bumper sticker. "That's my Uber."

"Sorry," I mumble as I step back, but when the door opens, a flash of inspiration hits. Or at least that's what I'm going to call it as I watch the man fold himself into the back seat of the Uber.

And before I can talk myself out of it—I climb in after him.

"Hey! What are you doing?" he squawks.

"Howdy, folks. My, what a handsome pair you are," the Prius driver chirps. She's a white-haired woman with thick glasses and enough tie-dyed bear stickers on her dashboard to qualify for Grateful Dead sainthood. "Fun night?"

Fun? I snort. "If running into the guy who excels in being a major pain in my side counts as fun, then yes. Totally fun." I open my clutch and pull out all the cash I have. "I'll pay you"—I count it fast—"One hundred and twelve dollars to follow that black SUV."

"No," the man beside me whines, shoving his phone in my face. The Uber app glows accusingly. "I've already paid forty-six dollars for Debbie to take *me* to my apartment. Get out of my Uber."

"Y'all are gonna have to speak up," Debbie says, cupping her ear. "I gave up my hearing for Jerry Garcia." Her car smells faintly of peppermint and cats, and there's a collage of tabbies dangling from her rear-view mirror. "If you two wanna get cuddly back there, I won't hear a thing," she adds brightly.

"Ew," I blurt. The guy next to me gives me a look like I'd be lucky. I roll my eyes. Though, if he doesn't have a finger dental drill from the 1870s, he's a step up from the last guy. Barely.

I point at Ben's SUV, desperate. "Listen, my brother's in that car and he's about to propose to the wrong girl. She hates cats, doesn't recycle, and drives a Hummer." I shove the money forward. "Please. I have to stop him."

"This is ridiculous," the man groans. "Get another Uber."

"Hold on, honey," Debbie says.

Yes. I brace myself against the seat, expecting a fast and furious chase. Instead, Debbie flips on her blinker and *eases* out of the parking lot at roughly the speed of a tortoise on Benadryl.

What is happening? My heart's racing faster than Debbie's Prius. Heck, Jerry Garcia's probably rotting faster in his grave.

The guy next to me snorts and crosses his arms, settling in for what is clearly not his best night. That makes two of us.

"Um, Debbie." I lean forward. The light's green and we're three cars back. "Can you catch up?"

"I've got you," Debbie promises and hums along to the radio as she *casually* accelerates.

Ben's SUV is already pulling ahead, changing lanes.

"Can you drive any faster?" I plead.

"Of course," she beams. "But these electric cars only get good mileage if I stay just under the speed limit."

My foot is practically pressing through the floor mat, as if sheer will-power could make this Prius fly. "Debbie," I beg, "I'll give you another hundred dollars if you catch up to that SUV."

There goes my grocery money for the week. I'm going to be living off ramen and a prayer—but I *have* to know what Ben is doing here. Why he lied.

"Please, Debbie," I add, desperate. "Can you go *any* faster?"

Her eyes flash at me in the rearview mirror and she gives me a sympathetic nod. "I can try."

The guy beside me is tapping away on his phone. "Maybe you should've Uber-hopped into a Corvette."

"Maybe you should've asked your mommy to pick you up."

"That's ridiculous," he huffs. "Mom never misses *The Late Show*."

How is this my life?

I scoot forward, gripping the front passenger seat as Debbie's Prius picks up a whole seven miles per hour. Ahead, Ben's SUV is at a yellow light. This is our chance to catch him—but at the last second, Ben veers right.

"Right lane, Debbie! Right lane!" I yelp.

Debbie flinches, and I instantly feel guilty, but we can't lose him. She inches toward the turn, painfully slow, and I'm clenching my jaw so hard I'm one stress fracture away from a dental bill I *definitely* can't afford.

By the time we round the corner, Ben's car is gone.

"Where to next, honey?" Debbie asks, doing a little dance of excitement in her seat. "I feel like one of them NASCAR fellas."

I don't have the heart to tell her she'd be lapped by a riding lawn mower. "Looks like he's up at that Starbucks," I say instead. "You can drop me off there."

Debbie beams, pulling into the parking lot. "Save him from himself, dear."

Save him? The only thing Ben needs saving from is his own juvenile antics—and I didn't sign up for that circus. "Yes, ma'am."

The guy in the back seat leans forward. "This isn't going to affect my Uber rating, is it?"

I roll my eyes and climb out of the Prius. Debbie gives a proud little rev of the engine before zooming away at the breakneck speed of five miles per hour.

Making my way to the outdoor seating, I sag onto a chair, the adrenaline crashing hard. This night has gone from bad to worse. I failed to record the meeting. I have nothing but names. And I'm stuck eating ramen for a week. Which I can live with—I'm not afraid of the sodium. But Bennett Bradley popping back into my life? That was a whole other level of heartburn I wanted to avoid.

About the Author



Emilie Haney @ EAH Creative

Natalie Walters is a bestselling and award-winning author who loves thrilling adventure, quick-witted characters, fun banter, and romantic tension with all the sizzling chemistry. She writes sweet and stabby suspense for readers who crave plot twists, emotional stakes, and just enough mischief to make you wonder if that shovel in the trunk is for gardening . . . or something else.



Connect with her online at nataliewalterswriter.com.

Instagram: [@nataliewalters_writer](https://www.instagram.com/nataliewalters_writer)

BookBub: [@nataliewalters](https://www.bookbub.com/authors/nataliewalters)