



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# KAREN ROBARDS

## THE ULTIMATUM

A NOVEL

CHAPTER 1-2 PREVIEW

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**THE  
ULTIMATUM**



## Chapter One

It was a small, one-story house nestled all by its lonesome on the shore of Lake Michigan, some fifteen minutes outside the sleepy little town of Port Washington, Wisconsin. Turned silvery gray by natural weathering, its cedar shingle walls blended well with the towering line of shaggy hemlocks that all but hid it from the narrow road that passed in front on the way down to the lake. Had it not been for the muted light glowing through one of the back windows—a bedroom, he guessed—John Kemp might well have overlooked the house in the darkness of the overcast, moonless night. Approaching the house on foot, backpack riding high between his shoulder blades, his hands buried deep in the pockets of his black Polartec jacket to combat the late-October chill, he listened to the wind whistling through the trees, smelled the slightly brackish scent of the lake and observed the acres of woods stretching into the distance with satisfaction.

The isolated setting couldn't have been more ideal.

He was there to kill everyone who lived in the house.

In the house's sparsely furnished back bedroom, four-year-old Beth McAlister lay snuggled up in her bed next to her mother, Issa, stubbornly resisting sleep. She was too excited, too nervous. Too happy/sad/scared. First thing in the morning they were moving. Her suitcase was all packed and waiting with her mother's by the front door. Her father was on his way to get them: he would arrive sometime during the night. Which was where the happy part came in: she really wanted to see her dad.

When he was around things were better. Her mother was happier. Beth didn't feel afraid.

“...she said, I did it all by myself. So...” Dressed like Beth in flannel jammies, propped up on pillows against the headboard with a pile of covers pooled around her waist, Issa sounded tired as she read aloud from one of the stack of books Beth had kept out. The books were her favorites, and they would be packed away at the last possible minute along with Mousie, Beth’s stuffed kitten, which crouched now beside the pillow on which her head rested. Beth badly wanted a real kitten, but they never stayed in one place long enough. Her mother said, *One day*. One day they wouldn’t have to move any more, one day her dad would live with them full-time, one day—well, lots of things would happen one day.

Beth wished *one day* would hurry up and come.

She heard something—a faint crunch like a footstep on gravel—and looked away from the pictures in the book, past the lamp that cast a circle of light across the bed, toward where the plain white shade was pulled down over the window to block out the night. There was a gravel path out back that led from the patio to the lake. It went past her bedroom, and it crunched whenever anyone walked on it. Which it sounded like someone just had.

She sat bolt upright in bed, smiling.

“Daddy’s here!”

“No!” Issa had stopped reading to look at the window, too. Now she sat up and dropped the book and grabbed Beth’s arm when Beth would have scrambled out of bed to peek outside. “Don’t do that. Stay here.”

The look on her mother’s face scared her.

Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Mommy, what?”

“I don’t think it’s Daddy. Daddy would come in the car.” Whispering, too, Issa grabbed her cell phone off the nightstand. She started punching in numbers even as she flung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. “No. Oh, no. There’s no signal.”



That was bad, Beth knew. The harsh note of fear in her mother's voice made her heart start to pound. Before Beth could say anything else, Issa turned, grabbed her up off the bed and carried her out of the bedroom. Her mother never carried her anymore—Issa said she was too big. Issa was small and slender, with straight black hair and brown eyes, while Beth was blonde and blue-eyed, tall for her age and sturdy.

"Who is it? Who do you think's out there?" Terrified now, Beth wrapped her arms around her mother's neck and hung on.

"Shh! It's going to be all right. Remember the hiding game?" Hampered by Beth's weight, Issa half walked and half ran down the dark hall past the only bathroom. She turned into the laundry room, her bare feet making quick slapping sounds on the linoleum. She didn't turn on the light.

Beth buried her face in her mother's neck. Issa smelled of vanilla and soap.

"I don't want to play." Her voice came out all squeaky because her throat was tight.

"You have to. We have to."

Built into the wall on the other side of the washer and dryer was a big metal cabinet where they kept detergent and stuff. Issa dropped Beth's feet to the cold floor as she yanked the cabinet open, then crouched down to sweep a bucket and some cleaning supplies to one side.

"Get in." Issa's face showed white through the darkness as she turned back to her daughter.

"Mommy, no!"

"Get in."

That was Issa's *I really mean it* voice. Beth crawled into the cabinet. It was metal and crowded with all the things her mother used to clean with, but the cleared-off spot was big enough for her to sit in. She did, with her back pressed

against the cabinet's side and her knees drawn up to her chin. Swallowing hard, she looked out at her mother.

"Please don't leave me." Beth knew she was probably whining, which her mother hated, but she couldn't help it. The cabinet was dark and cold and smelly inside, and she was really, really afraid.

"It won't be for long." Her mother's eyes were enormous shadowy pools in the darkness. Beth made a little whimpering sound, and Issa reached in to stroke her long, loose hair back, tuck it behind her ear. Her hand felt cold as ice. "We're going to play the hiding game just like we practiced. Remember? You stay in here and be as quiet as a mouse until I come and get you."

Beth could feel the tremor in her mother's fingers. She grabbed Issa's hand, held on tight. They *had* practiced, everywhere they'd lived for as long as Beth could remember, with herself huddled up in what Issa called a safe spot and being as still as she could be until Issa came for her and ended the game. But this was different. This was for real. This made her stomach feel sick.

"I'm scared," she whispered. "You get in the cabinet, too."

"Baby, I can't. I have to...go do something."

A muffled, metallic-sounding thud from the front of the house made them both jump. For a moment they stared in the direction of the sound. Then Issa yanked her hand free of Beth's grip and stood up.

"*Mommy*—" Frantic at the idea of being left, Beth started to crawl out of the cabinet. Issa shoved her back inside with both hands. Beth looked at her in wide-eyed surprise: her mother was never rough with her.

"You sit your bottom down and stay in there." Issa was whispering, but her voice was fierce. Her eyes bored into Beth's through the gloom. She pointed a warning finger at her daughter. "Don't you dare make one sound. You hear me? Not *one sound*. And don't you come out. I mean it."

Beth's lips trembled as she shrank back and sat.

"Good girl." Issa stood, and went up on tiptoe to reach for something on the shelf above the cabinet. For a second Beth could only see her mother's lower half, her blue-flowered pajama bottoms and bare feet. Beth knew what Issa was after: the big shotgun her dad had stashed up there and warned her never to touch. When Issa sank back down and the shotgun came into view, Beth couldn't breathe.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," Issa leaned over to tell her, and closed the cabinet door.

It was instantly dark, so dark Beth couldn't see anything. The quick pad of her mother's feet walking away told her that she was alone. She shivered, with cold and with fear, hugged her legs and felt tears sting her eyes. She wanted to cry, but she didn't. Crying made noise, and she was afraid to make noise. She opened her mouth over her knee, bit down. The fuzzy pajamas tasted weird, and felt bad against her tongue, but it kept her from crying.

She knew what was happening: The Shadow had found them. She'd known about the Shadow for as long as she could remember. The Shadow was why they kept moving to different houses, different towns. The Shadow was why her mother drew the curtains tight every night as soon as it started to get dark. The Shadow was why they only left whatever place they were living in to go to the grocery, or the doctor, or, every once in a great while, to church.

The Shadow was always out there somewhere, hunting them, wanting to hurt them.

Now it had found them. It was here.

Beth hunched her shoulders, trembling.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Issa shouted. She sounded like she was still in the hall. Her voice was shrill with fear.

Beth pressed her mouth so hard against her knee that she could feel her teeth sinking into her skin. It hurt. She didn't care.

*Bang.*

Beth jumped. She knew that sound: it was the shotgun. Her mother had pulled the trigger. She'd heard it before, when her dad had taken her and Mommy out to a big empty field and showed Mommy how to use the shotgun.

"All you have to do is point and shoot," her dad had said. "This thing'll take out a moose. And you can't miss."

And her mother had pulled the trigger, and the big gun had made that sound.

Now, inside the house, Issa screamed, jarring Beth into jumping again and then squeezing her eyes tight shut. The sound tore through the air, through the metal cabinet, through Beth's heart and soul, before being abruptly cut off. Beth was so scared she felt dizzy. She bit down hard on her knee and hugged her legs and rocked back and forth. Tears streamed down her face.

*Mommy.*

For a long moment she strained to hear through the darkness.

"Beth." It was a man's voice, soft and kind of gentle, calling her. Her eyes popped open. She stretched them wide, but she still couldn't see anything, not even her own hands or legs or feet. Just dark. "Be-eth."

Beth froze. *He was in the house.* Every tiny hair on her body stood upright. Her heart beat so hard it felt like a hammer knocking inside her chest.

The Shadow. That was who was in her house. She knew it, she could feel it. The Shadow was a man, and he had found them at last.

Her insides twisted. Her mouth was all sour, like fear had a taste.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. You can come out now.” The voice sounded closer. The Shadow was walking down the hall toward her. She could hear his footsteps, hear the barely there rustle of cloth.

*Mommy. Where are you, Mommy?*

“Beth,” he called. “Beth, come on out.”

If her mother was still out there with the shotgun, the Shadow wouldn’t be walking down the hall.

*Mommy—*

More tears rolled down her cheeks. Her nose was running, but she didn’t dare sniff. Lifting her head, she wiped her nose on her sleeve instead.

“Your dad sent me.” The Shadow was outside the door to the laundry room. His voice sounded so close that she shrank back against the wall behind her and tightened her grip on her legs. Her breathing stopped. She trembled so hard she was afraid of making the cabinet rattle. “I’m here to take you and your mom to him. Come on, honey, we don’t have much time.”

Staying as still as she could, Beth stared blindly into the darkness. Her eyes streamed tears. Her nose ran some more. She wanted to go to her dad. She wanted it so much. But—

Mommy knew she was in the cabinet. Mommy would come and get her if she wanted her. The Shadow was trying to trick her.

*Be quiet. Don’t come out.* She could almost hear her mother warning her. Shaking, she squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to breathe.

“Beth.” The Shadow didn’t sound so nice now. He was farther away—she could hear his footsteps moving toward her bedroom. “No more games. Come out right now. Your dad’s waiting for us.”

There was a rattle from her bedroom. She knew that sound: it was her closet door. When it slid open, it made a



sound like that. He was looking in the closet, searching for her. He would check under the bed—

Cold little prickles of sweat popped out on her forehead. Mommy—he'd done something bad to Mommy or she would be talking and making sounds. If he found her, Beth, he would do something bad to her, too.

Should she try to run or—

“Beth, if you don't come out right now you're going to be in big trouble. You don't want to be in big trouble, do you?” He was next door, in the bathroom. If she was going to run, she needed to go *now*. Or was it already too late? She heard him open the closet, pull the shower curtain aside, open the cabinet under the sink. If she moved, if she ran, would he hear her, too?

The laundry room was next. She was crying full-on now, muffling the sounds with her hands pressed over her mouth. Her chest heaved. Her leg muscles were so tight they ached. She wanted to burst out of the cabinet and run as fast as she could toward the front door as badly as she had ever wanted to do anything.

She pictured the long narrow hall, the heavy, black-painted door at the far end of the living room. She would have to reach that door, pull it open, push out through the screen door that sometimes got stuck—

The Shadow was a grown man. He was faster. He would catch her.

She could hear him leaving the bathroom, walking toward the laundry room. Butterflies were inside her stomach. She felt freezing cold.

*Mommy, what do I do?*

Beth tried to pray, but the only prayer she could think of was *Now I lay me down to sleep* and that was no help.

“Beth.” He was right outside the laundry room door. He sounded mad. The laundry room light came on. Inside, the cabinet was no longer pitch-black. Petrified, she realized

that she could see the bucket and the cleaning stuff and the lines of brighter light around the door. When he opened the door, he would be able to see *her*. “I’m not going to—”

A cell phone rang. His cell phone, she knew because he answered it. “Yeah.”

He was close, so close. She’d missed her chance to even try to run. There was only one way out of the laundry room, and he was standing right there in the doorway. When he quit talking on the phone, he would search the laundry room, look in the cabinet. Even though she knew he would see her the instant he opened the door, she pressed back against the metal wall, trying to be as small as possible, trying to disappear. Her heart pounded so loud that it sounded like a drum beating in her ears.

“I’m wrapping up now,” he said into the phone. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

He was walking again. Beth could hear him. He was heading away from the laundry room, down the hall, toward the living room and the front door.

“Bye, Beth,” he called as he left.

*He didn’t look in the cabinet. He didn’t find me.*

He’d left the laundry room light on. She could see all the cleaning supplies, the lines of light around the cabinet doors.

She heard the front door open and close.

She stayed where she was, frozen, listening.

Was it a trick? It might be a trick. He might still be in the house somewhere waiting for her to come out.

She didn’t know what to do. She wanted to crawl out of the cabinet and run away just as fast as she could. She also wanted to stay right where she was, still as a rabbit when a dog was nearby.

*Mommy. I have to find Mommy.*

Taking a deep, ragged breath, she crawled to the cabinet door and pushed.

*Boom.*

The sound was so enormous that it knocked her backward, knocked the door closed behind her, shook the cabinet. It swept over and around her, expanding through the air and snatching her breath away and blowing out her ears.

A split second later the force behind what made the noise smashed into the cabinet, into *her*, like a giant wave. It grabbed the cabinet up and blew it skyward, higher than the clouds it felt like, tumbling her around inside it like a sock in a washing machine and tumbling the cabinet end over end, too. There was a blast of scorching heat, an explosion of orange light and a terrible burning smell.

Screaming, she was knocked against the hard metal walls until at last the cabinet slammed into something solid and fell to earth, crushed like a soda can by the hand of a giant.

Beth never even knew when she hit the ground. For her, the world had already gone black.

Crouched on the side of a hill overlooking the destroyed house, Kemp surveyed the inferno he'd created with clinical detachment. He was almost finished: the people inside the house were dead. The job had been more trouble than he'd anticipated. The frightened, submissive woman he'd been expecting to encounter had fired at him with a shotgun, and if he hadn't jumped back, the night might have gone very wrong right there. As it had happened, though, he *had* jumped in time and she hadn't been combat savvy enough to take cover immediately after discharging her weapon. He'd been able to take her out with a silenced .44 round to the forehead while she was still holding her gun, so the whole thing had worked out. He wasn't all that sorry he hadn't found the kid. Shooting little girls wasn't really his thing, and blowing the house up with her in it had worked just as well.

He was facing what was left of the house now from maybe sixty yards away. The fierce orange glow of the leaping flames lit up the whole area, including the wooded hillside he was on. The heat actually felt good on this cold night. He'd been careful to choose a spot in the shadow of some tall pines so that no matter how bright the blaze got he wouldn't be seen. He took a minute out of the process of setting up to admire the giant bonfire that was hungrily consuming what little remained of the house's charred frame. He savored the fire's savage crackling, the sparks shooting upward of fifty feet high, the burnt-plastic smell of the C-4 he'd used.

Most of all he savored the sight of the headlights on the narrow road out front as they raced toward the destroyed house.

Just as his caller had advised him, the man of the house was on his way home.

Mason Thayer's eyes would be glued to the flames, his thoughts centered on the fate of his sweet little family, his training and instinct and reflexes subordinated to terror and grief.

The car reached the house and braked so hard it fishtailed. Kemp felt a surge of satisfaction: he'd come up with a way to take out the man everyone said was too dangerous to take on.

*The wages of sin*, he mentally taunted his target. Dropping down on one knee, he raised the sniper rifle to his shoulder, trained its sight on a spot about two feet above the top of the driver's door and waited.

The wait was only a few seconds. The door shot open and a man, tall and lean against the flames, leaped out.

Kemp smiled as he blew Thayer's head off.

Mission accomplished: he'd killed everyone who lived in the house.

## Chapter Two

*Twenty-two years later*

There's a saying among grifters: if you're playing cards and you don't know who the sucker at the table is, it's you.

Bianca St. Ives was struck too late by those wise words as she fled up the ancient stone steps in the dark, dank, crooked stairwell as though her life depended on it—which it did. Her heart galloped from her headlong race to escape before what gave every sign of being a trap snapped shut around her. Her head spun from the horrifying discovery, made exactly two minutes and twenty-six seconds before, that she and the quartet of world-class criminals she was attempting to commit the robbery of a lifetime with were quite possibly the suckers at this particular table.

*I'm not going down like this.* The mere thought of it sent what felt like an icy finger sliding along her spine. Shimmying open the lock on the heavy metal security door at the top of Bahrain's Gudaibiya Palace's cellar stairs with a practiced jiggle of the pick she carried, she reached through the deliberately provocative slit in her tulle-over-silk skirt to clip the pick back into place high on her thigh. Then she pulled the door open, cast a quick look around and stepped out of the gray gloom of the stairwell into the dimly lit hallway.

The musty smell was replaced by the scents of roasting meat and heavy spice. Of course. The large industrial kitchen was located directly to her left, on the other side of the wall.

*No one around.* Twitching the nuisance-y train of her shoulder-baring black evening gown out of the way, she carefully eased the door shut. Then she started walking,



fast, but not so fast that it would raise suspicions if somebody happened to catch a glimpse of her. Given the high-profile nature of the black-tie event she was attempting to rejoin, and the proliferation of security guards as well as nearly undetectable surveillance cameras, it was impossible to be completely certain that there were no watchers in this staff-only area no matter how careful she was. The rapid *click-click* of her elegant stilettos on the marble floor made her wince: the sound seemed preternaturally loud in the high-ceilinged, narrow space, but what could she do? Tiptoeing was a nonstarter.

As in everything in life, projecting confidence was the key to success.

Even while running for her life. No, *especially* while running for her life.

She was still finding it almost impossible to wrap her head around what had happened: the two hundred million in cash their crackerjack gang had joined forces to steal was already gone when she got the vault open. One disbelieving glance inside the steel-walled underground chamber and it had become staggeringly obvious that they had a disaster on their hands: the vault was empty. The mountain of bright orange money bags, each of which held one hundred thousand dollars in untraceable US dollars, that had been inside it as recently as six hours prior, was simply not there anymore.

Could anybody say *holy freaking screwup*?

*Thump.* The sound heralded the sudden opening of a swinging door a few yards in front of her. It was all she could do not to jump with alarm as a man unexpectedly emerged from the kitchen. He checked at the sight of her.

*"Kya main aapki madat kar sakta hun?"* he said as the door swung shut behind him.

Bianca just managed to keep walking toward him as her brain automatically adjusted to the language, which was

one she was semifluent in. *Can I help you?* was what he'd asked her, in Urdu. Okay, not exactly threatening despite the frowning look he was giving her. Short and compact, he wore traditional Arab garb. His long, grizzled beard was bound into a neat spike with rubber bands. From his language, which was not that of the Bahraini upper class, and the fact that he was there in the restricted area where outsiders were absolutely not permitted, she concluded that he was most probably part of the regular palace security staff.

*Thank God he didn't catch me coming through the door from the cellars,* she thought even as she shook her head as though she didn't understand. Urdu was not a language that her alter ego would be expected to know. Doing her best to look both apologetic and clueless, she said in English, "I'm looking for the ladies' room."

Fortunately for her, men rarely suspected attractive young women of anything nefarious. His eyes slid over her once more, this time with barely veiled appreciation. Then he gestured toward the gilded, arched double doors that had been her goal all along. "Go back into the ballroom. There is a ladies' restroom along this wall to the right."

This time he spoke in English, too.

"Thank you."

Giving him a drizzingly sweet smile, she glided past him and slipped back into the packed ballroom, trying not to look as agitated as she felt.

*They must have known we were coming.* That terrifying thought snaked through her head as she inserted herself into the crowd of laughing, chatting partygoers and started making her way toward her chosen exit at the far end of the room. Her stomach churned with the force of it. It opened up so many harrowing possibilities that her blood ran cold.

The plan had been to take the money, replace it with identical bags filled with counterfeit bills and close up the

vault again so no one was aware that a robbery had occurred. Her role had been to get herself invited to the ball that was taking place in this, the palace above the hidden vault, obtain by whatever means worked (she'd used a combination of charm, sex appeal, carefully researched knowledge of the mark, sleight of hand and good old-fashioned double-sided tape) the key, the code and the fingerprint necessary to access the vault, and open it. She had done so, and would have returned to the ballroom at that point to deflect any possible suspicion from herself while the others carried off the cash, but the entire carefully thought-out plan had crashed and burned as soon as she'd beheld the empty vault.

For a terrible moment she'd been immobilized. Then every instinct she possessed started screaming, *Get out*. One of the rules that had been relentlessly drilled into her head over the course of years of training was, *Don't be a hero*. Which, as she had learned the hard way, meant save yourself first, and at the expense of everybody else if necessary.

She was now on her way to safety. She had the cover of the conversation and noise and activity in the ballroom to mask what she was doing. It wouldn't slow her down; it posed no additional risk. That being the case, she seized the opportunity to alert her confederates that the night had just gone horribly wrong.

"They're out of shrimp." It was all she could do not to scream that prearranged signal to abort the robbery into the burner phone that was her emergency means of communicating with her father, Richard St. Ives. Though right now, as head of their team and the operation's mastermind, he was using the false identity of Kenneth Rapp. What he'd been expecting to hear, what she would have said once she'd gotten the vault open if everything had gone according to plan, was, "The champagne's Krug, and

it's divine." The code was necessary because surveillance was unpredictable. Even in the absence of cameras, remote scanners or other types of listening devices were often able to pick up conversations at a considerable distance. Thus once an operation started, they communicated only when absolutely necessary, and they never, ever said anything during a job that could alert authorities or anyone else who might be listening to what was going down.

"What did you say?" Richard's deep, cultured voice was sharp with shock.

"They're out of shrimp," she repeated. Clouds of expensive perfume, released as she nudged her way past pockets of chatting guests, made the air seem thick. She was having trouble finding enough breath to get the words out. "*They are out of shrimp.*"

"I understand." Richard disconnected abruptly: message received.

The specially configured burner phone now became a liability. Bianca felt like a kid playing hot potato as she looked down at it clutched in her hand. She pushed a button to wipe its memory. Unfortunately, there was no convenient trash can or other place in which to dispose of it in sight. Dropping it back into her evening bag to be dealt with later occurred to her, but that created a loose end that might come back to bite her. It was always possible that, even turned off and wiped, the thing could still be emitting a signal that might allow someone to track her.

Next order of business: find somewhere to ditch the damned phone.

Turned out that under the circumstances the best place to dispose of it was in the pocket of a tux, she concluded as she threaded her way through more layers of densely packed guests. Brushing past the elderly gentleman whose jacket she'd targeted, Bianca neatly deposited the phone in his pocket. The man kept right on talking without feeling a

thing. No surprise. She was *really* good at—She nearly stopped dead. She nearly gasped.

*He* was there.

Her father's sworn enemy stood almost directly in front of her, his head turned a little away as he said something to a beautifully dressed woman on his left. Bianca's throat went tight as her eyes fixed on the hawk-like nose, the heavy bone structure of the face, the thin mouth and narrow dark eyes beneath bushy gray brows, the thinning dark hair, the swarthy, pockmarked skin. It *was* Laurent Durand—there was no mistake. He was close to her father's age of sixty-four, but while Richard was tall and elegant, the ultimate silver fox, Durand with his burly body and dour expression looked like the gendarme he'd once been, even in a tux.

Her heart stuttered before ramping up to a thick, slamming rhythm. That she managed to keep moving and let her gaze slide past him as if he was of no more consequence to her than any other guest was solely due to a lifetime's worth of practice in keeping her cool. The sight of the French Interpol agent, champagne flute in hand as he made himself at home among the black-tie crowd, was a blow almost as stunning as the empty vault had been.

Careful not to look at him again, she altered her path to give him a wide berth while at the same time picking up her pace. On autopilot now as she hurried toward the exit, Bianca was still in the process of officially if silently freaking out at Durand's presence when it hit her with all the force of a baseball bat to the head: *holy hell, we've been played.*

Whatever had happened to the money, whoever had it now, she and her team had been set up to take the fall.

It was the only thing that made sense.

Durand had been trying to catch her master-thief father in the act for as long as she could remember. Under the *nom de guerre* Traveler, apparently bestowed on him because no



one in authority was quite sure of exactly who he really was, Richard was a legend in the circles of those elite criminal and law enforcement entities who knew he existed, who followed his crimes, who admired and/or hunted him. He was on every major Most Wanted list in the world, including several that ordinary people had no idea even existed. He assumed a different identity for each job, and the list of his aliases was long. He was credited with some of the biggest robberies, cons, swindles, etc., of the past twenty years, many of which he'd actually been responsible for. He'd never been formally charged with a crime, never even been arrested, yet his reputation was such that he was automatically a suspect in any big, well-planned, successful operation that went down.

Exactly when and how he'd become Durand's Holy Grail Bianca didn't know, but that's what he was. She'd been taught to fear him like a mouse does a cat.

Durand was there, and the money was not.

*It can't be a coincidence.*

She could only conclude that Durand had somehow become aware of tonight's intended robbery and was there to oversee what he was expecting to be the takedown of his career. His men might very well be closing in on her *now*.

The thought made Bianca's palms sweat. Her breathing quickened. Her skin prickled, as if predatory eyes were suddenly boring into her from everywhere. It was all she could do to prevent herself from casting spooked glances all around.

*Chill out*, she ordered herself. Durand wasn't going to catch them with the money for the simple reason that they didn't have it.

Didn't matter, she realized grimly a couple of long strides later. The money was gone, the team of thieves of which she was a part was on the premises and Durand could pin the

crime on her father and the rest of them while whoever really had the cash made off with it scot-free.

It was the perfect crime. Only, it was someone else's perfect crime.

*Go. Go. Go.*

For all of their sakes, she couldn't allow herself to be caught.

Battling equal parts fear and fury, she called on every ounce of experience she'd acquired over a lifetime's worth of dealing with dicey situations to help her remain outwardly composed as she reached one set of the tall French windows that led from the ballroom to the terrace and pushed them open. Four dozen yards and a flight of twenty-three descending steps was now all that stood between her and escape.

After the air-conditioned chill of the ballroom, the wall of baking heat that she burst out into was welcome. Flames from the scented flambeaux set into sconces on the terrace's stone balustrade lit up the night. The bittersweet smell of frankincense-infused smoke blew toward her on the hot breeze, which was a mild precursor to the strong, sand-bearing *shamal* winds that were a feature of the months that would immediately follow this date in late May. Beyond the palace gates, traffic was still heavy on Bani Otbah Avenue. Lights, from cars, from offices, from the windows of the blocky apartment buildings that housed most of the city's residents, from the King Fahd Causeway bridge that linked Bahrain to its closest neighbor, Saudi Arabia, testified to the fact that the prosperous, well-populated city of Manama continued to bustle even as midnight approached. Ultramodern skyscrapers towered above the spires of ancient minarets against the star-studded night sky. The murmur of the sea could be heard beneath sounds of traffic.

Rushing across the terrace without, she hoped, giving the slightest appearance of rushing, she barely noticed any of it. For once, the exotic beauty of her surroundings was lost on her. Her focus was all on the enormous stone lions that crouched with their backs to her, guarding the head of the stairs: her immediate goal.

*We've got to get gone.* Her pulse thundered with the urgency of it even as she silently counted down the remaining distance: thirty-two yards, thirty-one...

Whoever was behind this could have found out about their plans, tipped off Durand to his old enemy's intentions and taken the money themselves.

Or maybe the whole thing had been a setup from the beginning. Maybe Durand had arranged it. Maybe the money had been bait, designed to lure her father and their team in and then moved for safekeeping before they could steal it. Maybe the only reason law enforcement hadn't been downstairs waiting in the vault when she'd reached it was because at the last minute Richard had shifted the entire operation forward by exactly one hour so that he could get back to England in time to see his other daughter—Bianca's seven-year-old half sister, Marin, who had no idea Bianca even existed and whom Bianca had never officially met—perform in some ridiculously cheesy little-girl dance recital and Durand had somehow missed the time-change memo.

Forget about the heat. Bianca felt cold all over again.

No way were they going down for something they hadn't even actually done.

*Twenty yards. Nineteen...*

Theft in Bahrain was punishable by a public lashing. Many of those upon whom the sentence was carried out didn't survive. Picturing it was enough to make her dizzy, which was stupid and counterproductive and something she absolutely did not have time for.

Reminding herself of why she really didn't need to worry about that particular fate provided a quick cure. Given the dirty nature of the missing money, it was unlikely that, if captured, any of them would live long enough to go to trial, much less come face-to-back with a lash. They'd be murdered within the hour to keep them quiet about what they knew.

She made an unamused sound under her breath: What was that saying about dark clouds and silver linings?

"Miss Ashley!"

Every tiny hair on the back of Bianca's neck shot upright. Jennifer Ashley was the name she was currently using. Without looking around or slowing her stride or giving any indication whatsoever that she'd heard, she pulled her small compact out of her evening bag, flipped it open as though to check her makeup and used the mirror to identify the man calling to her, *chasing* her, as one of the prince's personal bodyguards. Her stomach clenched: this could not be good.

He was close. Too close, head-and-torso-filling-up-the-mirror close, his heavily accented voice sharp and distinct as it cut through the waves of music and laughter and conversation that spilled from the French doors he'd left open behind him. Oh, God, she needed to *move*, without making it look like she was running away.

Snapping the compact closed, she thrust it back into her purse and lengthened her stride, silently cursing her four-inch heels for slowing her down.

"Miss Ashley, stop!"

Her skin crawled. He was catching up fast, she could tell from his voice.

*Two yards. One...*

The stairs were right *there*.

Reaching the backside of the lions, she picked up her full skirt with both hands in preparation for a hasty descent to

the limo—*her* limo—that was at that very moment pulling up below.

“Miss Ashley!”

A hand clamped onto her arm.



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The Ultimatum

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