



IF LOOKS
COULD KILL

ANDI
MARQUETTE



Ylva

THE LAW GAME - BOOK 5

CHAPTER 1

“Here’s the target.”

Ellie took the folder and opened it. A photo was fastened to the inside cover, and the woman in it stared out at her, almost glaring. “Wait.” She looked up at him. “This is Marya Hampstead.”

“Yep.” Rick took his suit jacket off and slung it over the back of the chair at his own desk. He rolled his shirt sleeves up, something he did when he was in the office, and straightened his tie. Rick was built like a prize fighter, and Ellie figured he had his shirts custom-made to accommodate his musculature. A long scar marred the underside of his left forearm, pinkish against the brown of his skin, a souvenir of his service in Afghanistan.

“*The Marya Hampstead*,” she said. “Fashion mogul. Bitch on wheels.” And ultra-hot, she finished to herself. Seemed beauty was wasted on people like her.

He clicked the remote and brought up Marya’s portfolio on the big screen that hung near his desk. Hampstead glared out at him now, too. “You’re quick, Els. Guess that’s why you’re part of this unit of NYPD.” He flashed her a grin.

She ignored the ribbing and rolled her chair over to his desk. “What’s the deal?”

He clicked to another photo that showed Hampstead with a well-dressed man, entering a restaurant. She had her hand on his arm. “That’s Lyev Koslov,” Rick said.

“Looks familiar. Is he part of the Koslov family here?”

“Yep. The Koslovs might be tied in with international arms dealers overseas.”

“Define ‘tied in.’”

“Daddy Koslov—the head honcho—runs a company in Moscow that makes medical equipment. However, a couple of his shipments were intercepted in Turkey. The shit in the boxes was not scalpels or clamps.” He clicked to another photo that showed military-grade rifles and ammo.

“Where were they headed?”

“Yemen.”

Which was currently a hotbed of crazy, with layers of civil war, violence, and whatever other atrocities people dealt out to each other.

“There are complicating factors.”

Of course there were. “Which are what, exactly?”

Rick put another photo on his screen. It showed a dead guy, a standard autopsy photo that featured him from the pecs up; the stitched-up Y-cut on his chest was visible just above the sheet. A small black hole was positioned almost perfectly in the center of his forehead.

“And who’s this poor soul?” she asked.

“One of the Petrovs, but not of the New York Petrovs, though he is related. A second cousin of the boss here in the city. This dude was based in Moscow up until this past January. Then he wasn’t based on this earth at all.”

“Professional hit,” she said, leaning forward a bit. He looked like he was in his early thirties. “Not very old.”

“Thirty-two. Not married, and somewhat of a playboy.” Rick clicked the mouse and an autopsy photo of another dead guy showed up.

“Also execution.”

“This is another Petrov,” Rick said. “Also cousin to Boss Petrov.”

“Call me crazy, but I’m sensing a pattern.”

“Damn, you’re really quick,” he said with a little smile. “This gentleman was found in Prague about two months after the first died.” Rick pulled up a third autopsy photo. “Comes in threes, for now.” One more Russian guy, shot execution style. “This is yet another Petrov. His mother is a first cousin to Boss Petrov, and she’s originally from St. Petersburg. She married a Brit and still lives in London. His body was found there in June.”

“Okay, so it looks like the same hit man did all three. What ties them together besides the Petrov connection?”

Rick clicked his mouse again, and a photo of a local boss filled the screen, wearing an expensive suit, sunglasses, and standing outside one of the restaurants he owned in the city. He was in his mid-sixties, but he maintained himself, and he was always in the company of younger women, though he did have a wife.

“The Petrovs are also involved in arms dealings,” Rick said, sounding like a college professor. “We’ve been following this guy for a couple of years now. He’s on Interpol’s radar, too, but he’s pretty slick. All three dead dudes were involved in Petrov gun-running, though they managed to keep their hands clean. They arranged sales, apparently, serving as the middlemen between buyer and seller, but never got caught with anything.”

“So they were points of contact.” Ellie rolled her chair back to her desk, grabbed her coffee cup, and rolled right back to Rick’s.

“Most likely. And probably helped organize meetings and networking. So law enforcement overseas wasn’t able to make much stick. And then they turned up dead.”

Ellie sipped. “So what does any of this have to do with Lyev Koslov and Hampstead?”

Rick pulled the photo of Marya and Lyev up again. “We think there’s some kind of private territorial war going on between the Koslovs and the Petrovs.”

“An arms race, basically.” Figures. Any time there were guns and money to be made, people got greedy. And violent.

“Something like that. The thing is, the Koslovs don’t have a history in arms dealing, and Daddy Koslov insists his family isn’t involved, and he insists that he has no beef with the Petrovs.”

“But the Petrovs are blaming him for the murders.”

“Yep.” Rick took a sip of his diet soda.

“What about the guns that turned up in Koslov’s medical supply boxes in Turkey?”

He screwed the top back on the bottle and set it down. “Koslov claims he was set up, that those boxes were stolen from the supply warehouse in Russia. He’s got a police report to prove it.”

Ellie snorted. “Easy to fake that.”

“Yeah. Except Koslov seems worried. He’s wondering if somebody in the family has gone rogue and has personal beef with the Petrovs. He’s running tons of diplomacy right now with Boss Petrov, and word on the street is Petrov is giving Koslov time to see if that’s the case.”

“Could be Petrov is popping his own guys to set Koslov up to take a fall. Koslov’s empire is bigger than Petrov’s,

and he's been at the game longer." All this underground mob stuff could get really shitty like that.

"We thought about that, too. But Petrov personally worked with the men who died, and from what we can glean, they were good at their jobs. No mob guy is going to get rid of assets like that to make a point or set a trap."

Ellie frowned. "Okay, so basically, we want to know if Big Daddy Koslov is lying about arms dealing. If he's not, then we want to know if maybe Lyev is doing it or if somebody else is, and using Big Daddy's various businesses as fronts and killing off Petrovs because he wants their markets."

"Nailed it. The last thing anybody wants is a mob war between two powerful Russian families like this, especially when it's so damn easy to get guns up the I-95 corridor. They could flood the city with them."

"That's such a lovely thought, Rick. Thank you. As if we're not already inundated with assholes."

He laughed, and Ellie looked at the photo of Marya and Lyev on the big screen again. "So what the hell does Marya Hampstead have to do with this?"

"We don't know. We're trying to figure that out. We're also trying to figure out what Hampstead's relationship to Lyev Koslov is. And what he's up to with her."

"When was this picture taken?"

"Almost two months ago."

Ellie frowned, skeptical. "The guy's a businessman. She's a businesswoman. Her dad does international banking in the UK. These two probably met at a party or some dinner or something and had a fling. That's how they do it in those circles."

“Totally possible. Except Daddy Hampstead spends a lot of time with Koslov holdings overseas, and we’re not sure what he’s up to. He’s been spotted in Moscow, cozying up to former KGB.”

“Practically everybody in the Kremlin is former KGB, including Putin.” Ellie rolled her chair back to her desk and took one of her cinnamon Jolly Ranchers out of a drawer. She unwrapped it and put it in her mouth. “Businesses over there are probably full of ex-KGB, too,” she said around the candy as its spicy kick filled her mouth.

“True. But Jonathan Hampstead has ready access to all kinds of international contacts, and he’d be able to get the money to help broker a few arms deals.” Rick sipped his soda again.

“So we’re targeting her to get to Daddy Hampstead.” Her tongue burned a little from the cinnamon.

“And Lyev Koslov.”

“Even though she hasn’t been seen with him for almost two months.”

“But he might be hanging out with her dad, still.” Rick gave her a look over his shoulder.

“And what about Jonathan Hampstead? Maybe he’s taking care of all the Petrovs.”

Rick studied her. “That thought has crossed my mind, but there is zero evidence to support it.”

“Seriously?” Ellie raised her eyebrows. “Assassins-R-Us on the deep web. Burn phone. Meeting, payment, done.”

“Again, we have zero evidence for any of that. And he’s an international businessman making money hand over fist. He doesn’t need to run arms.”

“No, but people still do it, no matter how much money they make legitimately.”

Rick shook his head. “We’ve got no evidence, Els. So let’s stick with what we know.”

“Fine. Rain on my damn parade. When was the last time Marya saw Dad?”

“A month ago in London. He’s British and based there. Plus, she has fashion shit she has to do all the time over there and in Paris. His ex-wife—Marya’s mom—is Greek. The ex still lives in London, too, and it seems she’s still cordial with dad and daughter. Marya is a British citizen, but like a lot of international business-types, that hasn’t been a roadblock to running Fashion Forward and living here. Read the file and see if you can fill in some holes.” He pointed at the screen. “We’re starting this op in about a week. By that time, you’d better know Hampstead’s favorite music, what wine she likes, and the kind of toilet paper she uses.”

Ellie raised her eyebrows. “C’mon,” she said. “People that rich pay others to wipe their asses.”

He laughed. “Then find out what the servants buy.”

Ellie took a drink of cold coffee. “So how is this going to go down?”

“We’re putting someone inside.”

“Inside what?”

“Hampstead’s outfit. Fashion Forward publications.”

Ellie nodded, approving. “Ambitious. Who gets that job?”

He grinned at her, like a shark.

She stared at him. “Oh, no. Hell, no. I know nothing about that shit.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll get you ready.” At her expression, he picked a piece of paper up from his desk and handed it to her. “Hampstead is looking for an intern.”

Ellie didn’t read it. “No. I’m too old.” And she really hated everything to do with the world of fashion.

“Tough economic times, all kinds of people take internships. Besides, we couldn’t set you up as another fashion mogul. Hampstead would see through that faster than you go through that damn candy.”

“An *intern*?” she repeated and almost choked on the candy. Her throat burned, and she coughed.

“We’ll take a few years off you. And get you a younger haircut.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?” She picked up her smartphone and looked at her reflection in its blank screen.

“Please. You’re about to enter the world of competitive dressing. They probably have secret arenas for their clothing wars. You need to look polished—not too polished—and definitely not cop.” He set the remote on his desk and picked up his soda again.

“What does ‘definitely not cop’ mean, exactly?”

Rick grinned again.

“No. Rick, this is not going to work. I’m the last person for this job. What about Sue? She’s pretty. Put together. And she reads *Cosmo*. Bet she knows about this fashion stuff.”

“Sue’s good, but you have much more undercover experience.”

“Good time to break her in.”

Rick set his soda down and crossed his arms, which made him look like some ancient guardian statue. “You have the experience and the chops for this assignment. Hampstead can be intimidating.”

“Sue can be a total hard-ass.”

“But we think your sunny disposition makes you the better match for Hampstead’s personality.”

“That sounds really wrong.”

He laughed. “Don’t worry. We’ll get you ready for it, and we even got you a fashion consultant.”

She stared. “I dress fine. No complaints from anybody.” She chewed the rest of her candy.

He cocked his head. “Not for this assignment. Didn’t you see *The Devil Wears Prada*?”

“That right there is what this is. And Sue is a way better fit. Have you seen her when she’s in street clothes?”

“Sorry, Els. You’re the pick.”

She glared at him. “There’s no guarantee I’ll get the job, anyway.” She reached for another candy.

“Not to worry. Here’s the folder on you and your new past.” He handed it to her. “You do have to knock ’em dead in the interview. Well, halfway dead will work, because Hampstead’s reputation as a bitch on wheels, I believe you said, means they’re not going to care too much what warm body occupies an internship. Temporary jobs like that, no problem.”

She popped the fresh candy into her mouth. “When’s the interview?”

“Three days.”

She coughed again.

“You’ll need to pack a few things. You’ll be based out of an apartment in Brooklyn, close to the bridge. It’s fully furnished, so just take clothes and sundries. Maybe some food.”

“Oh, yeah. That,” Ellie muttered.

Rick grinned. “And right now, you need to meet with your fashion consultant so she can get a sense of you and all your skin tones and your seasonal palette. Or however that works. I’m thinking you’re more spring,” he said as he motioned toward the door. “Though I know some blondes who look good in fall colors.”

“You’re enjoying this far too much.”

“You have no idea.”

She grabbed another candy and followed him, wondering if combat boots were a thing yet at Fashion Forward.



Ellie watched another video from the recent Fashion Week in the city—which had taken place a couple of weeks ago. Marya Hampstead had given a rare, two-minute interview. She was almost cordial in this one, though still a little prickly. Okay, Ellie conceded. She was attractive, and someone who would turn Ellie’s head in a crowd. A helpful trait in the fashion industry, too, which relied on that sort of surface appeal. Plus, she sounded good. Articulate, well-formed sentences in a clear British accent. That probably got her major points on the American circuit. Because who didn’t love a James Bond-ish British accent on this side of the pond? That had to be hot, whispering in your ear with that.

She clicked to another video. This one showed Hampstead entering a trendy nightclub in Los Angeles over Christmas. She gave a perfunctory wave to the paparazzi—seriously? They stalked fashion moguls, too?—and went in, with a guy on her arm who looked like he could have been a linebacker for the NFL. Ellie had seen the same guy in a few other videos, but Hampstead’s file said he was part of her security detail.

Ellie ran the video back and paid more attention to the body language between him and Hampstead. Seemed platonic. But you never knew. Didn’t lots of straight female celebrity types bang one of their bodyguards now and then? She grinned. Probably lots of straight-acting celebrity dudes did, too. In this case, given Marya’s looks and accent, hell, if Ellie worked security for her, she’d want to hit it with the fashion queen, too.

Her coffee was cold, but she drank it anyway as she ordered Chinese delivery. She’d spent the last two days in her apartment, studying Marya Hampstead, and memorizing her own background that Rick had provided. At least they let her keep her first name. Ellie recited her new life history again, making sure it came naturally. She already had a bunch of her regular clothes ready to go to the new apartment, and supposedly, the department was dropping off some clothing there from the fashion consultant.

Christ. Fashion consultant. Ellie made a face, though the consultant was professional and actually easy to work with. Still, she’d never thought those two words would ever be mentioned in conjunction with her name or an assignment.

The department had also constructed a social media presence for her new self, and her handlers were ensuring that it was updated with relevant info. She wondered how many of the followers were fake as she scrolled through her posts and Tweets about news in the fashion industry, cute dogs, some cooking stuff—her new self was quite the cosmopolitan type. But not too much. Nothing that would draw questions or comments. The goal was to get mostly benign “likes.”

Ellie had made a few posts herself, just to get used to it, since she didn't maintain a presence in her real life. Being in law enforcement precluded that, and she preferred a low profile.

Her food arrived, and she moved her laptop to her coffee table so she could eat on her couch while she worked. Hampstead had been into fashion from an early age. Kind of weird, to be all obsessed with fashion like that all those years. Ellie wondered if Hampstead couched everything she talked about in fashion. If someone mentioned the weather, would she bust out the fall line or something?

Ellie's phone rang, and she groaned when Gwen's name showed in the ID. She set her carton down and answered. “Hey. What's up?”

“Hi, Ellie. Sorry to bother you, but do you think I could get my blender this weekend?”

“I'm not sure I'll be around. Can I drop it by your office tomorrow afternoon? I'll just leave it with Trudy.” So we don't have to see each other and relive the dissolution of the almost-engagement, she added silently.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It’s fine.”

“I’ll probably be available. We could get coffee.” Gwen sounded mostly professional.

“Thanks for the offer, but—”

“I understand,” she said, and she sounded sad.

“No, it’s not that.”

Gwen waited, and Ellie hated that she could still read her.

“Okay,” Ellie admitted. “It is kind of that. I’m not ready yet. But I also just started a new assignment, and you know how that goes.”

Yeah, Gwen knew only too well how that went. Ellie’s weird hours, how she couldn’t talk much about her work, how she used her job to avoid intimacy—all the things that made Gwen call it quits.

“Maybe next time.” Gwen filled the space easily, saving Ellie from having to talk anymore about the fact that after ten months, she still didn’t want to deal with her face-to-face. “I really appreciate that you’ll drop the blender off. I think that might be the last of my stuff over there.”

“If I find anything else, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks. And Ellie, I still care about you. Just because we didn’t work as partners doesn’t mean we can’t work as friends. Talk to you later.” She hung up before Ellie could respond, and it was probably just as well, since Ellie didn’t have a response anyway.

It had been a bad idea, getting involved with a lawyer. How could that even have worked? Especially since Gwen was more the settling down type and Ellie really wasn’t. For now. Gwen had figured it out and let her down easy,

everything considered, though Ellie had to cancel the order on the engagement ring. The whole breakup could've gone a lot worse. And eventually, she'd have coffee and maybe even a meal with Gwen. Just not right now. She picked up her food and clicked onto another link about Marya Hampstead, and as she chewed, she decided she should find another law enforcement type if she wanted a relationship.

CHAPTER 2

“Damn.”

“Don’t even.” Ellie glared at Rick, and he laughed.

“Maybe we’ll keep the fashion consultant on a bit longer.”

She flipped him off. “I’m not even going to dignify the inherent sexism of that with a comment.”

“You just did.” He grinned.

She flipped him off with both hands and strode purposefully across the room to her desk, pleased that she could do it in heels and look badass, too. The other guys in the room went silent.

“What?” she snapped at the closest two.

“Nothing,” they both said as they looked away.

“Who knew O’Donnell was a woman?” another guy said from the other side of the room, bringing a bunch of snorts and laughs.

“So all it takes is a skirt and a pair of heels?” someone else joined in. “Let’s get the consultant to work on you,” she said to the other guy.

“Nah, it’s the haircut.” Rick flashed Ellie a grin.

“Shit, O’Donnell. You’re about as hot as Hampstead is.”

“Shut up, Wes.” Ellie hadn’t had her hair this short since her recruit days. She put a handful of cinnamon Jolly Ranchers into the handbag she’d been given to

coordinate with the outfit she wore. “And be glad I don’t have my boots on.” She gave him a look and did a drag queen snap.

Several of the guys whooped and laughed. Ellie grabbed another handful of candy. This was probably going to be at least a ten-piece day. She put the short jacket on that matched her skirt, black suede with smooth black leather accents. The consultant had recommended something with classic lines but a little edgier. Hence the black suede/black leather and the light gray shirt that sported burgundy collar tips. She’d provided a pair of black suede heels and neutral hose to complete the outfit.

Ellie picked up her handbag as well as the large canvas tote bag that held Gwen’s blender. Rick frowned when he saw it.

“What?” Ellie hefted it. “We’re in New York. People carry all kinds of shit all the time with them. Besides,” she added, “it gives me a little extra credence. I’m a busy woman, dammit, and I have places to be after this interview.”

He shrugged. “A blender? I’d have gone for another pair of shoes.”

“They’re in there, too.” She addressed the rest of the staff in the room. “Here’s your show.” She flashed her most charming smile and sashayed toward the door, drawing cheers and whistles.

“Work it, O’Donnell,” Rick said behind her. “I knew you’d be perfect for this job.”

“It’s only because I look better in heels than you do.”

“That’s totally it. Better than any of the guys here.”

“Don’t knock it.” She used her hip to push the door open to the parking lot. Rick gestured at one of the unmarked cars that didn’t look as much like a cop car as the others.

“To reiterate,” he said as he pulled into traffic, which would only get worse once they hit midtown Manhattan, “We’ve got a team across the street and two floors above Fashion Forward, if you need anything or something goes nuts.”

“Rundell Realty,” Ellie recited. “And across the street, thirty-third floor, Wi-Tech.”

“What’s your name?”

“Ellie Daniels.”

“Where are you from?” Rick glanced at her, as traffic crawled.

“Indianapolis.”

“Date of birth?”

“July twentieth, 1987.”

“We took four years and change off you. How does it feel?”

Ellie took a cinnamon candy out of her purse. “My knee still bugs me a little. Can we go back a few more years?”

“We aren’t miracle workers,” he deadpanned. “Where’d you go to school?”

“Indiana University. I majored in business but did theater on the side and got really into costume design. Love me some community theater,” she deadpanned back at him.

“Where were you before you decided to chase your high-fashion dreams?”

“Wayne and Stevens, doing ad copy.”

“So what kind of toilet paper does Hampstead use?”

“She’s a Charmin girl, all the way.”

Rick looked at her, since they were at a red light.
“Seriously?”

“Nah. I figured that when the help wipes her ass, they’d want to use a soft brand.”

He chuckled. “Too much. How do you feel?”

“Same as I ever do before a new assignment.”

“You’ll rock this role, too. What’s your current address?”

She recited it back to him, the apartment just over the river in Brooklyn.

“Good.” He stopped the car a couple of blocks from the Fashion Forward building without trying to find a spot along the curb, drawing several honks from people trying to get around him. He held his fist out and Ellie bumped it with hers.

“Kick it,” he said, his standard well-wish.

She grabbed her purse and tote bag. “Thanks, sweetie,” she said, and she leaned in and pecked him on the cheek. “In case anybody’s watching.”

“I may never wash this cheek.”

“Dude. Chicks don’t dig dirty cheeks.” She was out of the car before he could snap another retort.

Since she hadn’t worn heels in a while, Ellie kept her pace even and stayed near the buildings. It would not rock if she face-planted in the streams of pedestrians on the sidewalk. Plus, heels clearly made things like blenders heavier. She’d be glad to dump it off at Gwen’s after this. She made it to Fashion Forward without any embarrassing incidents and checked in with the security guards at the

counter in the lobby—one of those marble-and-glass affairs designed to look corporate and impressive. They provided a temporary passcard that allowed access to the elevator. Once on board, she hit the button for the thirty-first floor.

After a quiet ride up, the doors opened into a carpeted, tasteful foyer, and Ellie pushed through the glass doors into the lobby for Fashion Forward, which was nearly as impressive as the first floor's, and far more stylish. The colors here popped, as the appropriate terminology went, but not in an annoying or distracting way. Lots of blues and greens with splashes of red on the upholstery of the chairs and area rugs. Art that was probably done by important people hung on the walls, lending even more color and vibrancy to what otherwise would probably have been a sterile corporate space. Hampstead and her people clearly knew how to do decorating, too.

"Hello," Ellie said to the receptionist, dropping her voice a little to sound a bit more sultry. "I have an eleven o'clock with Tyler Jackson."

"Ah, yes. He'll be right out, Ms. Daniels." The receptionist smiled at her, all sleek business, but clearly ready for the runway herself, since she had the lithe look of a model. "Would you like some coffee?"

"I would love some."

"Do you have a preference?"

"Regular, a splash of cream."

Beautiful Receptionist got up and went through the open door behind her. Ellie set the bag with the blender on the floor, thinking that Gwen did totally owe her a cup

of coffee, at least, because the damn thing was heavy and lugging it around New York hadn't been one of Ellie's better ideas.

Fashion Forward had a lot of traffic, with people coming and going through the lobby. No Russian arms dealers, she was pretty sure. Yet.

"Here you are," Beautiful Receptionist said, and Ellie took the cup from her.

"Thank you so much." She sniffed then tasted a bit. Of course there would be beautiful coffee here, too. That was a definite perk to this assignment.

"Hi, Ms. Daniels? I'm Tyler." Another beautiful person. Tyler Jackson was a generically handsome, slim white man with impeccably styled hair, exquisitely trimmed goatee, and a button-down, blue pinstripe shirt that probably cost a couple hundred dollars tucked into equally expensive gray trousers. His tasteful bowtie added to his fashion mag looks.

"Oh, good," he said. "You've already got coffee." He gestured at her cup and smiled at the receptionist. "My office is right over here." He smiled at Ellie, too, and she made sure her purse strap was stable on her shoulder before she picked up the tote bag.

They went through a set of glass double doors into a hallway beyond, also tastefully appointed in great colors and excellent art. Tyler's office was down the hall to the left, and he had a great view of the city. He sat down behind his desk—an urban Ikea-looking thing—with his back to the view. All the furnishings in his office looked as if they'd come out of a Swedish furniture showroom.

“Please, sit,” he said. “How are you on that coffee?”

“Fine, thanks.” She took one of the chairs that faced his desk, grateful to put the blender down. He had a copy of her résumé on his desk.

“So, Eleanor—can I call you Eleanor?” He looked at her over his desk.

“It’s Ellie. And yes, you can call me Ellie.” She smiled. Gwen had said Ellie’s smile could charm practically anyone. Tyler nodded, seeming to be happy about that. He was pinging Ellie’s gaydar, though she generally thought of big cowboys on the covers of heterosexual romance novels when men were named Tyler. She’d have to finish her dossier on him in the next couple of days.

“Excellent. So, Ellie, why are you interested in an internship at Fashion Forward?”

She crossed her legs—carefully, since she was wearing a skirt—and gestured at her completely fabricated résumé. “As you already know, I was involved in theater during college as a costume designer. I’ve been doing that on the side since, but I also volunteer at fashion venues. After the most recent Fashion Week, I decided I wanted to get more involved in the industry. An internship here, I think, will provide invaluable experience and hopefully some ideas for what aspect I’d like to pursue in greater depth.” That sounded pretty good, she thought. Not too stupid.

He nodded and sat back in his chair. He propped his elbows on the armrests and steepled his fingers. “I understand that. But the question is, why Fashion Forward?”

“Marya Hampstead is known internationally, and her work at this company has set numerous trends. When people want to know what’s next, they look here.”

“As good as that sounds, I’m assuming that you’ve also heard the rumors.” A trace of a smile graced his perfect lips.

Ellie leaned back, making herself look more relaxed and confident. “I’m guessing you’re implying the rumors about Ms. Hampstead’s reputation with staff.”

“And everyone else, yes.” He studied her, and it was a little unnerving, like a spider scoping out a bug.

She studied him back. “It’s irrelevant. This internship isn’t permanent, and I want to learn whatever I can from Ms. Hampstead and the staff at Fashion Forward.”

He smiled again, and it seemed genuine. “Excellent. When can you start?”

That knocked her back a little, but she recovered quickly. “Monday.” It was already Friday, so why not? Wasn’t like she was getting out of this assignment. She might as well get it over with.

“Super. If you have some time now, I can show you around and get you set up with our human resources department.”

Her expression must have broadcast her confusion because he laughed, and that, too, was genuine. “Look, the reality is, if anyone is willing to be an intern here with Ms. Hampstead, then we go with it.” He stood, and she did, too.

“So the rumors are true?” she asked, looking to forge a little bit of a bond with him and remembering what Rick had said about Hampstead’s reputation and how practically any warm body would do.

“Oh, yes,” he said, eyes seeming to twinkle.

“You’re not even going to take me in for an interview with her?”

“Oh, no. I’m her long-suffering senior staffer. She relies on me to do the hiring and firing, and I generally have a good idea about who’s going to work out—meaning, who’s going to be able to complete the internship—and who’s not. Ready?” He came around the desk and gestured toward the door.

As Tyler walked her around the various offices on the floor, Ellie studied the layout, listening, nodding, and smiling appropriately as he chatted about who did what in terms of the magazines Fashion Forward handled. She’d get a better sense come Monday, but for now, she watched how others responded to Tyler. Since he was Hampstead’s senior staffer, they might think he was her spy. For the most part, however, she didn’t get that sense from the other employees. Maybe they all banded together as protection from the dragon lady.

“Here are all the forms we need you to fill out,” Tyler said after he’d taken her to the HR office. “Bring them back with you on Monday. We’ll get a copy of your driver’s license then.”

“Thank you.” She took the papers and slid them into the tote bag. “And thank you so much for this wonderful opportunity.”

“Let me know in a couple of weeks if you still feel that way.” He smiled, and his cell phone rang with Madonna’s “Vogue.” Ellie barely managed not to laugh.

“We’ll see you Monday at nine,” he said as he took his phone out of his pocket. “Can you find your way out?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent.” He answered the call, and Ellie left.

She walked slowly toward the main lobby, hating the blender but hoping she might get a look at the legendary Queen Bitch of Fashion Forward, but alas, such was not to be. Staffers moved purposefully around her, and the beautiful receptionist nodded at her as she left. At least three men checked her out before she got to the elevator, and she decided that the woman Rick had lined up to do Straight Eye for the Lesbian on her must’ve done her job right. She hardly ever wore skirts or heels, but she knew how to rock both if she had to.

Except right now, she really wanted to adjust the crotch of her hose. And she really needed to be a little more careful with walking because she tripped as she got off the elevator. Smooth. She caught herself and blamed it on the blender. Once outside, she set the bag with the blender down and dug in her purse and put her sunglasses on. The air was a little humid and warm for late September, though she knew it might change in the next couple of days. Weather in this city was always dicey.

She somehow managed to hail a cab, which pulled over almost immediately—a miracle. As she moved toward it, a man who looked familiar walked past her. Daddy Hampstead. Interesting. She waited for a moment, assessing, and decided to follow Marya Hampstead’s father for a while. So she waved the cab away, regretting it because it was the fastest she’d ever gotten one, and

walked after Jonathan Hampstead, her persona just another New Yorker carrying a bunch of crap.

He didn't go into the Fashion Forward building, though he gave it a glance as he passed. And then a couple more. Ellie knew that trick. He was checking reflections in the glass. She stopped and pretended to dig around in her purse, also checking the reflections.

Well. That was also interesting. A couple of guys dressed in very sharp suits caught her eye. They were crossing the street behind her, coming toward the Fashion Forward building. And they stuck out because they weren't talking to each other. Instead, their gazes were locked onto Daddy Hampstead. They looked like a Russian security detail. Or something much worse. The shorter of the two reached inside his suit jacket in a way that indicated he probably had a gun.

She stopped rummaging in her purse and walked briskly after Marya's father, which wasn't a big deal in New York. Everybody who wasn't a tourist walked fast here. Including the heavies behind her. Jonathan Hampstead stopped as if he was studying something in the window of a clothing store. The heavies stopped, too. Ellie slowed her pace, and pretended to dig in the tote bag with the blender for something. She was like a damn archaeologist, sifting through all her crap all the time. Jonathan moved to the door of the shop, looking like any other casual shopper, like he had all the time in the world.

He went inside, and the Russians bolted toward the store. Ellie acted, deciding that it wouldn't do this op any good if Daddy Hampstead was either killed or kidnapped—

or both—by Russian gangsters. So she tripped and fell toward one of the men, swinging the tote bag as if she was trying to keep her balance. She ran into the one guy, and the blender-laden bag connected with the knee of the other. Hard. He yelped and staggered back while the other guy tried to disentangle himself from her.

“Oh, my God. I am so sorry,” she said as she pushed off the man she’d run into, catching a whiff of his cologne. Something sweet, like 1980s Polo. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I am all right,” he muttered in accented English.

“I’m so sorry,” she said to the taller guy, who was limping a little, trying to walk it off. He said something in Russian, face dark with anger. A few other people slowed, curious at what had happened, then continued on their way when it was clear it was nothing serious or interesting enough for them to film and post on social media.

“Can I get you an ice pack?” she continued, looking around as if there was an ice pack stand somewhere. “I’m so, so sorry. I can be so clumsy. My friends are always telling me that. Are you sure you don’t need an ice pack? I have some Advil—”

“No,” the taller man snapped. He said something to his companion in Russian, and they hurried to the store Hampstead had gone into.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Ellie called after them, but they ignored her. She checked the blender. Good thing Gwen had bought a seriously solid one. The thick glass was fine, and the motor part looked okay, too. She’d provided Hampstead a little extra time to go out the back. For a

businessman, he seemed pretty savvy about potential street fights. Maybe he watched a lot of thriller movies.

She flagged down another cab, and this one took its New York time, but once she settled in its interior, she checked the area outside the store Hampstead had gone into. The Russians hadn't come out of it, yet. They'd probably gone out the back, too. She sucked on another candy, knowing that her weekend work now included slogging through tons of photos of local Russian gangsters. Halfway to Gwen's office, Ellie texted her: "Let me know if anything's weird with the blender. I'll buy you a new one."

CHAPTER 3

“Those things’ll kill you,” Rick said. He set a fresh cup of coffee on her desk as he picked up the pile of candy wrappers with his other hand and threw them in her nearby trash can.

“Oh, and this won’t?” Ellie gestured at the coffee.

“At least it’s not full of sugar and red dye number ninety-two or whatever. So, have you figured out who was messing with Daddy Hampstead?” He perched on the edge of her desk, and even though it was Saturday, he wore dark trousers and a button-down shirt open at the collar. She knew he kept a couple of ties neatly folded in one of his desk drawers, in case he needed to “represent,” as he called it. She, however, wore jeans and an NYPD polo shirt.

“Pretty sure this is the shorter guy.” She adjusted her monitor so he could better see.

“He looks familiar.”

“Leo Zaretsky ring any bells?” she asked as she printed his photo and the little bit of information on him.

Rick didn’t answer for a bit as he sipped his coffee. For such a big, muscular dude, he took his coffee seriously and sipped delicately. “Oh, yeah. Got it,” he finally said. “He runs with the Petrovs.”

“Priors on this guy?”

“Never been able to nail him for anything. Dude’s slick, like most of them are.”

Ellie sipped her own coffee and stared at the screen. “So chances are the other guy hangs with the Petrovs, too.”

“That’d be my guess.”

“Mr. Unknown is the guy with a sore knee today after he ran into the blender in my bag.” She unwrapped another cinnamon candy, and Rick frowned. She popped it into her mouth. “What?” she said at Rick’s expression. “You should try one. Gives a whole new dimension to coffee.”

Rick pushed off her desk. “Guess it was a good thing you had that blender with you. Speaking of which, why did you? Trying new techniques for undercover weaponry?”

She snorted. “If only. It’s Gwen’s. I took it back to her yesterday.”

His expression remained impassive. “And how’s that going?”

“You mean how are things with my former almost-fiancée, who I still can’t be around for more than a few minutes after ten months?”

He sipped his coffee and watched her.

“We’re civil. She’s much nicer than I am. But then, that’s not hard to do. I’m not the easiest person to live with.”

“Who is?” He gave her a shrug. “So, anybody interesting on the dating horizon?”

“Why no, Dr. Phil. And would you also like to know what toilet paper I use?”

He grinned. “Already do. So how about we grab a beer later?”

“Sure. What time?”

He glanced at his watch. She liked that about him, that he wore one. Not something you saw much anymore. “It’s almost three-thirty now. Six?”

“Sounds good. See you there.” She didn’t have to ask where. They always went to the same out-of-the-way neighborhood bar that catered to cops and jocks, the two not always mutually exclusive.

“Later.” He picked up his blazer from his desk chair and left. She turned back to the screen and continued her quest to ID Mr. Unknown, aka Mr. Sore Knee. Ninety minutes later, she still hadn’t found anything on him in US law enforcement databases so she tried Interpol. Ten minutes later, she found him. Mr. Sore Knee had a name and a record.

“Well, hello, Mr. Yuri Laskin,” Ellie muttered as she printed out his photo and the summary of his bad deeds, which included fraud, arms dealing, and several assaults. He was also wanted for questioning in a couple of high-profile murders in Berlin. Last known sighting was in Warsaw three months ago. Until yesterday. *International criminal sidelined by blender injury*. Ellie sat back. The Petrovs seemed to be targeting Jonathan Hampstead. Why?

She’d try to find out. But not until tomorrow. Ellie shut down her computer, gathered her things, and left, knowing that there were two things she could count on at the moment. Rick would beat her to the bar, and he’d have her beer waiting.



Second day at the new job, and Ellie arrived at Fashion Forward early. For all the things the guys teased her about, tardiness was not one of them. She yawned. She'd settled into the new apartment Sunday night, and she'd had a hard time sleeping as she adjusted to the sounds of the new location.

The elevator dinged, and she stepped in with a few other people. She ended up next to the buttons and was about to press hers when four other people crowded on, in a cloud of varying degrees of cologne. This was clearly Ellie's lucky day, because one of them was Marya Hampstead.

"Floor?" Ellie asked her as if she didn't know. Three impeccably dressed young men served as Hampstead's entourage, and they glanced nervously at each other and at Hampstead, who was on her cell phone, ignoring them in that way that people who wielded power had.

"Thirty-one. Thank you," she said to Ellie before returning to her phone convo. She hadn't taken her gajillion-dollar sunglasses off.

Ellie didn't have to press the number because she already had done it for herself. She leaned back against the elevator's wall, pretending to check her phone. Okay, Marya Hampstead was seriously attractive in person, even without all the fashion spread airbrushing. Today, she had kind of a classy glamour thing going on, with a slim black skirt suit with white accents and tasteful—oh, my God, did she just use that word in her inventory about another person?—black heels. Hampstead's dark hair was piled onto her head in a way that made it look carefree, but Ellie was sure she probably had someone work on

it for an hour. Lucky stylist, getting to run their fingers through Hampstead's hair.

"That's *your* problem, isn't it? If you can't provide a quality product by the expected deadline, I'll find someone who can," Hampstead said in her smooth British accent to the unfortunate party on the other end of the phone. Everything sounded good with that accent, including a tongue-lashing. Which conjured other, far more vivid and inappropriate images for Ellie as she surreptitiously admired the way Hampstead filled her clothes. Not a good idea, to have the hots for the target. She studied her phone again to keep herself from checking her out more.

The elevator stopped at fifteen, leaving Ellie with Hampstead and her entourage and one other man.

"No product, no payment, no further business," Hampstead said, and though she hadn't raised her voice, the temperature in the elevator seemed to drop. The three men looked at each other again, still nervous.

"I expect so," Hampstead said with finality and hung up.

Ouch to whoever that was. Ellie moved a little so the non-Hampstead guy could exit at the twentieth floor, and that put Hampstead within inches of her. Ellie inhaled a little, curious about Hampstead's cologne. Whatever it was, it was understated with just a trace of something citrusy. She approved. Some people drenched themselves in cologne, like Leo Zaretsky last week.

"I want to see the latest layouts before lunch," Hampstead said to the three pretty boys. Her tone left no room for argument. Or even chatting. They all nodded

in unison at her, but remained silent. Probably for the best. The elevator stopped and the doors slid open. Marya Hampstead got off first and her entourage followed. Everybody stopped what they were doing and greeted her as she passed. She tossed them all dismissive waves, and the three guys with her peeled off and went to do whatever it was they were supposed to do with the layouts.

Ellie could see how Hampstead got her rep, but on the other hand, she appreciated a woman who wouldn't be pushed around. Nobody paid attention to Ellie as she walked through the lobby, but that was fine. The less noticeable she was, the more information she could gather and, hopefully, the sooner she'd be done with this assignment.

"Hi," Ellie said to her officemate when she entered.

Liz, a perky brunette who looked like she should probably be posing for photos in a Midwestern cornfield, glanced up from what looked like some printouts of a magazine spread. "Oh, hi. I put a page on your desk to check. Just proofreading on some ad copy. Nothing too scary, since it's only your second day."

"Okay." Ellie set her bag on the floor under her desk and took her blazer off, which she hung on the sleek coat rack near the door. "Want some coffee?"

"Love some. Italian roast."

"Okay. Be right back." Ellie smoothed the front of her skirt and went back to the main reception area. Beautiful Receptionist smiled at her as she passed the circular counter and went through the doorway into a kitchenette where the coffee machine was, with a variety of high-

end flavors and strengths. She loaded up a pod for Liz and waited for the cup to fill. A guy came in, and Ellie recognized him from the elevator ride up as one of Marya's morning posse. Dark hair, perfectly styled, medium height, slender, bowtie. Dapper.

She smiled at him in greeting, and he gave her a blank stare before he checked the display rack of available coffee pods and removed one from the French roast slot. He tapped it nervously on the counter as he checked his phone. Ellie stepped aside so he could load his pod up. If he was still in Marya's crosshairs, he probably was in a bigger hurry than she was.

Once the machine had filled his cup, he took it and headed for the doorway just as somebody else entered. Ellie saw what was coming, and she winced as the newcomer bumped into Mr. Dapper. The coffee splashed onto his shirt, and he jumped back, swearing, trying to hold what was left in the cup out from his body.

"Shit," said the new arrival, a man Ellie didn't recognize. "I'm so sorry."

Mr. Dapper set the half-empty cup on the counter and pulled several paper towels out of the dispenser. "Fuck," he said woefully as he dabbed at the big brown splotch on his chest. Too bad his shirt was light blue.

"Are you okay? Did you get burned?" the new arrival asked.

"No," he said. "At least not yet. The coffee was for Ms. H."

Ellie imagined him putting his hand to his head in an "oh, no" motion.

“Oh, shit,” the other guy said.

Ellie watched the exchange with interest. Ms. H was probably Hampstead, she guessed. “Do you have another shirt?”

He looked at her. “Yes, but Ms. H needs her coffee in—” he looked at his phone. “Seven minutes. I can’t go into her office looking like this.”

Hampstead had clearly earned her dragon lady rep. “Go change your shirt,” Ellie said. “I’ll take her coffee in.” She loaded up another French roast pod, slid a cup under the spout, and hit start.

“She takes it—”

“Black. I noticed.” Ellie smiled at him. “I’m Ellie, for future reference.”

“Khalil.”

She looked at the other guy, also dapper, but blond and a lot taller. “Marco,” he said.

“Nice to meet you.” She removed the cup from the machine. “I take it she doesn’t do lids.”

“Hates them,” Khalil said.

Of course she did. “Okay, then. If you would drop this cup—” she handed Liz’s covered coffee to Marco—“To Liz over in the office a few doors down from Tyler Jackson, I’d be much obliged. That gives Khalil here a chance to go to his office and change.”

Marco handed him the purple folder he was holding. “Cover up,” he said, and Khalil took it and held it over the stain on his shirt.

“Thank you,” he said to them both. “Three minutes.” He ducked out.

“Seriously?” Ellie muttered. Marco apparently heard her, because he stared at her, wide-eyed.

“Have you not met her?” he asked in a hushed tone.

“This’ll be the first time.” She picked up the coffee cup.

“Oh, my God. You’re new.”

“Brand spankin’. Wish me luck. And get that coffee to Liz.”

He nodded and followed her back into the reception area. Ellie walked purposefully toward the dragon lady’s office, which was, of course, in a corner location, so it probably had amazing views all around. And whatever else rich and powerful people kept in corner offices. Maybe hot tubs and full bars. Dance floors? Nice furniture, at the very least.

She held the coffee carefully as she approached the double doors, preparing for either a body to come flying out after tangling with Hampstead or Hampstead herself yanking the doors open imperiously to gaze upon her minions.

Neither happened. In fact, one of the doors was partially open. They swung inward, so Ellie stepped forward and knocked twice on the open door. Hampstead probably didn’t like people entering her office without permission, even if the door was open.

“Yes,” came the response. It was kind of hot, that one word in Hampstead’s accent. She’d like to hear Marya say it again, under very different circumstances.

“Your coffee,” Ellie said as she entered, fighting an urge to add “m’lady.”

Hampstead was standing at a nearby conference table, sleek and urban chic, like the rest of her tasteful and

Euro-minimalist office. The table was covered with layouts for one of Fashion Forward's publications.

Hampstead surprised Ellie by taking the coffee from her directly rather than ordering her to put it somewhere. And Ellie had been right. She was surrounded by views of the city out the two walls of windows. But the view of Hampstead was much better.

"Thank you," Hampstead said, adding another layer of surprise with the politeness. "And you are?"

"Ellie Daniels. Intern. Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Hampstead." She didn't offer her hand because Hampstead's body language didn't suggest a handshake.

"You were on the elevator this morning." She seemed to be studying Ellie, sizing her up. And clearly, the sunglasses Hampstead had worn that morning were designed to keep people from getting caught in her eyes, because that's exactly what happened to Ellie.

"I was," Ellie said, pleased she didn't sound like she was admiring the shifting shades of gray in the eyes of the dragon lady.

Hampstead sipped the coffee. "Tyler did mention that he'd hired someone. And where is Khalil?" Her tone wasn't demanding. Rather, the question was just something she tacked onto the end of the sentence, like, "did you remember your umbrella?"

"A phone call in the coffee room." Ellie met Hampstead's abrupt change of topic just as smoothly as Hampstead had injected it. "Something about the layouts. He said he absolutely had to attend to it in order to ensure you got the correct draft or something to that effect. He threw

himself on my mercy to bring you coffee. He'll be here in a few minutes."

"I see." If Hampstead was skeptical, it didn't show on her face. Fortunately, a knock at her door interrupted whatever Hampstead was going to say next. Marco poked his head in, tentative, as if he was dreading having to clean up a scorch mark in the carpet that had been Ellie Daniels, intrepid intern. He seemed shocked to see her standing a few feet from Hampstead, unscathed.

"Ms. H?" he said to Hampstead. "Are you ready for the meeting?"

She nodded, brusque, and motioned at the table. He came in, followed by a few other young men, a couple of men who looked to be in their forties, and three women, two in their thirties, Ellie gauged.

"Nice to finally meet you," Ellie said to Hampstead as she left, not expecting a response. She ducked out of the office and saw Khalil hurrying toward her in the corridor, wearing a different shirt. "Here's your cover story. You took a phone call in the coffee room about the layouts," Ellie said to him with a grin. "And enlisted my help delivering the coffee."

"Thank you," he said as he rushed past. "Are you okay?"
"Fine."

He hesitated, as if he wanted to ask her another question, but went into the office instead. Ellie went back to the coffee room to get herself a cup before she went back to her own office.

Hampstead hadn't been quite what she'd expected. Maybe Ellie had caught her on a good day, even with the

incident on the elevator. And interesting, how Hampstead had remembered her. She paid attention, and that could be a problem since Ellie had wanted to stay under Hampstead's radar. She figured Hampstead would just dismiss her as one of the many acolytes roaming the halls of Fashion Forward, but it didn't look like that was going to happen.

Hampstead was also much more attractive in person than in photos and videos, and it didn't have much to do with her physical appearance, which was nice, but rather with her eyes. Ellie had caught a glimpse of their depths beneath the armor of the dragon lady, and in spite of herself and this assignment, she wanted another look.

Coffee in hand, she checked her hair in the reflection afforded by the microwave door and went back to her office.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

IF LOOKS COULD KILL

BY ANDI MARQUETTE

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