

Avenging Angels

Tenderfoot

By Kristen Ashley

TEASER CHAPTER

Chapter One

“The Prophecy” (Taylor Swift)

“All quiet on the Western front.”

“You were just dying to say that, weren’t you?”

“Well...duh.”

“Though, how do you know? You’re on the Eastern front.”

“Semantics.”

“Directions.”

“He’s late.”

“I’m not liking this.”

“Is this business usually this boring?”

In order, all the above was: Luna, Raye, Luna again, Jess, Luna, Jess again, Willow and Shanti.

My crew. My besties.

The Angels.

This convo sounded in my new ear thingy. One of the ones Arthur gave us.

It was fancy-dancy. It received *and* sent. In other words, it picked up my voice and the conversations I had. My girls could hear everything, and I didn’t have to speak into a wristwatch or something like that.

It was extra cool.

Then again, Arthur tended to spoil us, and as such, always got us the best stuff.

The ear thingies even matched our flesh tones so they’d be harder to see. Like *really* matched, as if they were made just for us. Mine was a peachy pink. Jess’s was an oliveish peach. Shanti’s was mocha. You get the picture.

Though, I wore my hair down, just in case.

I wasn't taking any chances because, with this loser I was going to be dealing with that night, I was our only shot, and I couldn't blow it. He went for girls like me (and Willow), and one could say Raye, Luna, Jessie and Shanti weren't at all like me (or Willow). And since he was Willow's ex, and he was giving her troubles, me and the other Angels were trying to shut him down.

It wouldn't do for him to see my ear thingy and the jig being up.

It'd taken some doing to get to the point of this fake date, even if he didn't know it was fake, including some reconnaissance (to others this might be considered stalking, though stalkers tended to *stalk*, and we were stalking as a means to an end—I liked to think that made all the difference so it didn't feel skeevy).

It also included me signing up to a dating app (not my thing at all, when I found my guy, it'd happen like it was supposed to happen...organically) and arranging for me to be in his vicinity because the app he used to prey on women was one that binged with a possible match when someone was close.

Seriously.

Creepy, or what? (I'll answer that...it was creepy.)

Why any woman would willingly allow strangers to know she was nearby, I had no idea.

I didn't suspect that app was going to have a long lifespan. I'd messed around with it, and unsurprisingly, the vast majority of people on it were men.

And I suspected many of those men were what we weren't but were forced to be under the circumstances: stalkers.

But there I was, after Kevin and I "matched." With Willow's guidance, the Angels created a profile for me he'd go for, and I had to admit, with no small amount of disquiet, what we wrote wasn't far from the truth.

Me and Willow's ex, Kevin, had been messaging each other for a week.

It was time for a meet.

Let me rewind.

My friends and I were the Avenging Angels. We were vigilantes (of a sort). We investigated crimes on our time off from being servers, baristas and bartenders at a fun, hip spot called The Surf Club.

We had a benefactor: Arthur. He was our Charlie. He seemed to have unlimited means, but none of us had met him, nor did we know who he was.

We also had a Bosley, but her name was Clarice, she was a high-powered, expensive lawyer, and she didn't like to be referred to as Bosley.

I know this sounds crazy, and maybe to some, it was.

But surprise of surprises, even with zero training, we were really good at this investigating stuff.

It might be dumb luck, but I was an optimist, so I liked to think of it as good intuition.

Since we started doing this, we'd solved the mystery of women going missing, abducted by a human trafficking ring.

We'd then solved the mystery of people from homeless camps also going missing, kidnapped to be forced labor in drug dens.

Now, we were doing this.

It all started when Raye was triggered, because her little sister had been kidnapped and murdered when she was super young, and her entire family had fallen apart. Raye descended onto a path of wreaking justice to injustice and eventually investigating the disappearance of a little girl (who, yeah, you guessed it, Raye found with zero training).

The rest of us got roped in (by "the rest of us," I mean Jessie, Luna and I).

Recently, we recruited Shanti and Willow, mainly because Arthur picked Shanti, and she was tight with Willow, and Willow was having man problems, so we girls pulled her in because we figured that was what Arthur got us all together to do.

Not to mention, Willow was already a loose member of our crew. She worked with us at SC, we all liked her a whole bunch, she thought our Angel business was cool, so why not?

We had several storage units filled with cars we could use to get around without the danger of discovery of using our own with their pesky traceable license plates. And one unit was all kitted out as our personal Angels Headquarters, and it was *rad*. In fact, when we first got it, Arthur had put Andy Warhol-like portraits in it of all of us, including Shanti and Willow, so that was how we knew our numbers were going to grow.

We had equipment, and it wasn't only the ear thingies.

We were totally official (unofficially), and we had Tasers and a laser pointer to prove it.

So, during our surveillance, we'd found that Kevin got his jollies (and his luxury sustenance, not to mention a few stolen wallets, designer purses or cell phones) by hooking up with chicks he'd matched with on the Stung dating app. He'd ask them to dinner at a fancy restaurant, rack

up a bill of hundreds of dollars on wine and food that he intimated was on him, then “nip to the bathroom,” only to disappear and leave the chick to foot the bill. Alternatively, she’d nip to the bathroom, and he’d take anything he could grab and vamoose.

In the end, she’d be trying to foot that bill or deal with getting home without her wallet, phone or car keys.

Gross, right?

Oh yeah.

Totally gross.

Listen up girls, at the very least, take all your stuff when you use the bathroom on a first date. Maybe even a second (or third) one.

That wasn’t the only reason Kevin was far from a peach. From what Willow said, he was a total dick as a boyfriend too. He wasn’t a physical abuser, he was an emotional one, and that hurt just the same.

This meant that right then I was wearing a cute date dress that was off-the-shoulder with cap sleeves (that ended in tiny ruffles) and had a twirly, short skirt, all of this in a subtle floral print. I had loose-curled hair, perfect date night makeup, and on my feet were high-heeled pink strappy sandals with poofy flowers at the backs of my ankles.

And my girls were stationed inside and outside Oceans 44 by Scottsdale Fashion Square, one of the hip, trendy, see-and-be-seen, expensive restaurants in that tony locale.

We were going to catch him in the act.

What we planned to do after that, I was a little vague on (a little, as in, I had no clue). We had no authority to detain him. But Raye and Luna had a plan, and considering Raye and Luna were a little crazy (in a good way, but still crazy), I was thinking I was glad I didn’t know what they intended to do after we caught him.

“Wait, what?” Willow said in my earpiece. “What’s Trev doing here?”

“Trev?” Raye asked.

“Trev, Kevin’s best friend,” Willow answered.

“They’re Kev and Trev?” Jessie asked while laughing.

“I know, right?” Willow said, also laughing.

“I see him because he’s incoming, Lolo. He’s heading right to you,” Luna warned.

I watched the tallish, relatively good-looking, well-dressed guy walking toward me, attention right on me, and he was smiling.

“I’m not thrilled with this,” Jessie said. “It’s obvious he’s not here to be a lookout. He’s going directly to her.”

“Keep your shit sharp, Harlow,” Raye ordered.

I fought rolling my eyes.

I loved my girls, well and truly, but just because I was girlie (okay, ultra girlie) didn’t mean I was an idiot. I mean, *obviously* this change in plan meant I needed to stay sharp, but honestly, with what I was doing, I would be that anyway.

Though, truth told, Raye was probably just worried about this sudden change. My crew didn’t treat me like I was a moron. I was transferring, because there were other people in my life (Hi, Mom!) who did.

But it was good advice since the guy *was* headed right to me like his face had been on the profile of the dude I’d been messaging for a week, when it was not.

“Missy?” he asked as he made my table.

That was the name we decided for me to use undercover. We thought it was three parts uber-girlie, and one part being a guy might underestimate a woman named Missy.

I attempted to look confused, and when his smile broadened, I figured he bought it.

“I’m Jay, Bryan’s friend.”

Yep. They were using fake names too.

“He’s going to be late, and I was in the area, so he asked me to stop by and keep you company,” Jay/Trev continued.

Ugh.

Such a lie.

What were they playing at?

I pretended to shift anxiously in my seat. “I don’t feel really comfortable with that.”

Even as I said this, he slid into the chair opposite me.

“We’ll just have a cocktail,” Jay/Trev continued. “Maybe order some oysters. I’ll clear out when Bryan shows.”

Ah.

So, since Trev was “in the area,” he thought he could tag-team this and leave me with a bill that included Trev enjoying a twenty-plus dollar cocktail and some market price oysters.

“Abort,” Raye ordered in my ear. “This is bullshit and I don’t like it. We’ll regroup at the unit and figure out next moves.”

I pushed my chair back, saying, “Bryan has a phone. He could have texted to share you were coming. This doesn’t feel right. Tell him next time he’s going to spring a stranger on me, to—”

“Holy shit.” (Luna)

“What the fuck?” (Jess)

“Where’d he come from?” (Shanti)

“Woman,” I heard growled from the side of the table.

I looked that way, then up, and up, and *up*, right into Javier Montoya’s crystal-clear amber eyes in his drop-dead gorgeous face.

Nope.

Correction.

His *angry* crystal-clear amber eyes in his *furious*, drop-dead gorgeous face.

“Man, he’s good,” Raye breathed. “He appeared out of thin air.”

I didn’t have time to reflect on or admire Javier Montoya’s shadow-like ability to slip in under the radar of five women keeping close watch on me, especially doing this when the man was six foot six inches of hulking, defined muscle (something that earned him the nickname of Mountain).

I was too busy being peeved he’d showed up at all.

I was this for obvious reasons, and for other reasons that weren’t as obvious.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded.

“What are *you* doing here?” Javi returned.

“I asked first,” I retorted.

“But I’m getting an answer first,” he shot back.

“Uh...can I ask what’s going on?” Jay/Trev entered the conversation.

Javi turned his attention to Jay/Trev. It was still unhappy.

Jay/Trev understandably quailed under his golden glare backed by a mountain of muscled man.

“It looks like you’re on a date with my girlfriend,” Javi declared.

At these words coming out of Javi's mouth, my stomach plummeted in a happy way I did not like (but I did, and I didn't like that either), my skin tingled in an excited way I also did not like (but I did, etcetera), and my mouth wanted to form a smile (which I did not allow).

Suffice it to say, that traditional, organic meeting with my soulmate?

When I met Javi during our last big mission, I thought it was him.

In the months since, I discovered it was not.

So why was he here, out of the blue, claiming me?

"Holy shit," Raye whispered.

"What the fuck?" Jess snapped.

"Oh my God," Luna said.

"My *pregnant* girlfriend," Javi finished on a lie.

All those earlier sensations vanished, and my mouth dropped open.

"Um...what?" Jay/Trev asked.

"Javi!" I cried.

Javi turned back to me. "You steppin' out on me?"

Oh my goodness!

He was ruining everything!

Weeks and weeks of setting this up, *wasted*.

I pushed back my chair and stood, ordering, "Go away."

"No, I think I'll go away," Jay/Trev said, standing as well, doing it shifting to the other side of the table so he didn't have to get close to Javi.

Dang it!

Now what do I do?

"No, wait," I said to Jay/Trev, hoping to buy time to figure out how not to let this whole operation come to nothing because Javi, for some reason, was sticking his big (it wasn't big, it was perfect), fat (it wasn't that either) nose in it.

Jay/Trev shot me a look of disdain.

He was doing terrible things to unsuspecting women, and he looked at me like that?

Me!

"I'll let Bryan know he dodged a bullet with you," Jay/Trev said, and then he took off, pulling out his phone.

I whirled on Javi.

“Are you *insane*?” I snapped.

“I’m not, but thinking you are.”

“It took weeks to set tonight up,” I informed him.

“Wasted effort,” he grunted.

“No kidding?” My voice was rising.

“I don’t understand this shit,” he stated conversationally. “You women got an issue, you just tell the men, and we’ll sort it for you.”

Was he...

Was he *for real*?

While I expended grave effort not to scream my frustration at the top of my lungs, Javi kept speaking, and he did this while assuming Jay/Trev’s seat.

“Now, tell me what’s up, and me and the boys’ll get on it.”

At this juncture, it was important to share that Javi was one of the Hottie Squad.

That was, he was a member of the Nightingale Investigations and Security team.

And they were all the baddest of bad-A’s.

The Angels had a loose association with the boys of NI&S that hinged mostly on Raye living with Cap, and Jessie being loved up with Eric, both of them NI&S men.

Oh, and when the Angels got to the parts of our investigations that might include blood and guns and direct run-ins with bad guys (not to mention the police), the NI&S team stepped in.

But before that, Javi had been a Shadow Soldier.

Nope.

The Shadow Soldier. He’d been the first and he recruited all the rest.

In other words, a vigilante, like the Angels, except they were all men, they had matching tattoos, and two of them sadly got dead not too long ago, so the NI&S team snapped the rest of them up and absorbed them into their operations.

As previously mentioned, Javi was also a man I had a huge crush on, and not just because he was incredible to look at, he had a deep, rough voice that did things to my heart (and other places as well), the most unusual, beautiful eyes I’d ever seen and an amazing body.

No, it was because he had a finely honed sense of right and wrong, and the drive to do something about it, he loved his mom a whole lot, and he treated his men like brothers and grieved the ones he lost like he'd lost his own blood...

And again, as mentioned, the very first time we met, sparks flew. So many of them, I was singed, and the burn felt *awesome*.

Since then...nothing.

He made no moves.

He made no plays.

None of either, even if he'd had ample opportunity. He was a member of our group. So I couldn't say I saw Javi every day, but we all hung out together a lot.

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe those sparks weren't what I thought they were, firing from us both.

Maybe they only fired from me.

Or at least, all evidence was suggesting that.

But now, he was there, messing up our carefully crafted plan to put a stop to Kev's (and now Trev's) shenanigans, and that was not okay.

I was also not okay being in this classy, romantically lit restaurant with the most gorgeous man I'd ever laid eyes on sitting across the table from where I stood, looking like he was my guy.

My man.

My soulmate.

Therefore, I snatched up my bag and started to flounce away.

And yes, I flounced when I was angry. It came naturally. It was how I moved. I'd tried not to flounce, and it was like trying not to breathe.

I was just a girl who flounced.

I got five feet before my hand was seized in one much larger and stronger than mine, and I wasn't flouncing anymore.

I was being dragged, discreetly, but being dragged nonetheless.

“Holy shit.” (Luna)

“Oh my God.” (Raye)

“What the fuck?” (Jessie)

“Okay, he’s being an asshole. But it’s still hot.” (Shanti)

In order not to make a scene, I decided to let Javi pull me out of the restaurant and continue to do it even as he nodded to the valet outside who tossed him a set of keys, and then Javi walked us to a big, shiny, granite Toyota Tundra that was parked close to the front doors.

But, let's face it, I allowed this mostly because he was holding my hand.

It was the first time he'd touched me in that kind of way.

So I wanted it to be about me not making a scene, but it wasn't.

It was because his hand felt good wrapped around mine. It was big. Warm. I could feel the callouses, so it spoke about him. It said he was a man who worked. He was a man who didn't put on airs. He wasn't soft. He got stuff done.

And it was so big, my hand got lost in his, and that felt so...danged...good.

Like he could shelter me. Protect me. Wrap me up in him so the hurts of the world could never get to me.

And...

Yeah.

That was mostly what was on my mind as he towed me to his truck.

He opened the passenger side, and I wished I hadn't released the surprised squeak that came when he reached under my hair, plucked the earpiece out of my ear (how did he know it was there?!), shoved it in his jeans pocket, picked me up...

Yes, *picked me up!*

...and dumped me in the passenger seat.

I was stunned immobile by these moves. So much so, he'd closed my door, rounded the grill and pulled himself up beside me before I had a reaction.

But it was too late.

He'd fired up his truck, there was an incessant beep, and over it he demanded, "Belt up."

I had no choice but to do so since we were moving.

After I accomplished that, even though my fingers were fumbling due to being both extremely ticked off and feeling something else, something deeper, scarier, the beeping went away, I turned to him and shared irately, "My car is there."

"We'll send Cody to get it."

Cody was another former Shadow Soldier, current NI&S Hottie Squad member.

"Cody doesn't have my fob."

Javi didn't reply.

I'd been around these men enough I translated his silence. "He doesn't need my fob to start my car."

"We have fobs for all you women's cars," Javi stated.

Although this was insane (I mean, how did they do that?), it shouldn't surprise me. Raye with Cap, Jessie with Eric, we knew the Hottie Squad looked after us. They'd hacked into the cameras trained on the Oasis parking lot (Oasis Square was the apartment complex where we lived). They had the code to the gate to the courtyard. They also had other things to keep tabs to keep us safe.

But it surprised me.

Actual duplicate *car fobs*?

"You have actual car fobs?" I asked as he turned onto Goldwater.

"We have actual car fobs," he answered. "But, just sayin', for fifty bucks, he'll get your fob from the valet."

I really didn't want to think that fifty dollars would earn the key to my car handed over to a stranger, but since my car wasn't all that much to write home about, and cost of living wasn't either, I suspected fifty bucks would get someone the key from the valet.

"Okay, let's move on to you dragging me out of that restaurant and poking your nose into Angel business," I said.

"Yeah," he replied. "Let's move on to that. What are you women up to this time?"

Up to?

Gah!

"We're not *up to* anything," I retorted. "We have a new mission."

"And that's what I'm askin' about."

"And me not answering should be your indication I'm not *gonna* answer."

"Then it's good I shut that shit down before you got your ass in a sling."

Oh boy.

Did he know about Kev and Trev?

I tested the waters. "Do you know about Kev and Trev?"

"Kev and Trev?"

He didn't know.

This time, I didn't reply.

“Was that Kev or Trev?” he fished.

“I think, at this point, I’d like to talk about you dragging me out of the restaurant, taking my ear thingy, then picking me up and dumping me in your truck.”

“You were walking away from me, and I wasn’t done talking to you,” he explained, like doing what he did was the most natural thing in the world.

I was already staring at him, but when he said this, I stared harder.

When I could find my voice, I asked, “Did it matter that I was done talking to you?”

He glanced at me. I could see by the city lights his gaze dropped to where I was sitting next to him. He then looked back to the road.

I guessed that was his answer, and it actually was, since it obviously didn’t matter where I was in our conversation at the restaurant since I was where I was right then.

I didn’t know what to do at this juncture. I was in his truck. I didn’t know where he lived.

What I did know was that we were headed in the direction of where I lived.

With my choices being yelling at him, attempting to find calm and explaining the myriads of reasons what he did was not okay, giving in and sharing what the Angels were up to, and going silent and fuming, I picked fuming.

Therefore, I turned to stare straight ahead and commenced fuming.

Flounces came naturally to me, and fuming did the same.

When I was with my girls, time taught me I could share my mind. I could be me just as I was. They made it safe. They loved me. I loved them. They were the sisters I never had.

Elsewhere in my life (Hi, Mom!), none of this was the same.

Elsewhere in my life, I did not speak my mind.

When I got angry, I flounced. I fumed. I didn’t share because it wouldn’t matter. What I thought, what I felt, had no meaning. And the only way to nurse emotion was to do it inwardly, experiencing the totality of it myself.

Therefore, our trek down Camelback then 7th was entirely silent.

Javi’s truck was so big, he wisely didn’t attempt to park in one of the allotted visitor spots in the complex’s narrow, hard-to-maneuver parking lot. He parked on the street right near the entrance.

He hadn’t even switched off the truck when I was out.

I nearly broke an ankle jumping down from the height of the truck, but I kept my feet, and more importantly my dignity, as I again flounced, this time doing it up the drive to the courtyard gate, feeling Javi follow me.

I let myself in the gate and it didn't fall shut right behind me because Javi caught it and entered after me.

Some of my Oasis neighbors, Bill, Zach, Patsy and Sally, were in the courtyard, enjoying the somewhat cool (it was May in Phoenix, so we wouldn't get really cool until October) evening night by the pool with some cocktails.

They all turned toward us when we appeared, and I knew they were going to call out greetings, but they saw Javi behind me, so they did not.

This wasn't because he was huge and scary.

This was because they all knew him, and me, and I'd probably not kept my crush on him as secret as I should have, so me all dressed up in date clothes and Javi bringing me home shocked them silent.

I walked directly to my apartment and let myself in.

Javi, of course, came in right after me.

The door snicked shut and I heard him turn the lock.

I tapped my toe on the foot switch of a standing lamp that looked like a tulip—green stem, spiked leaves, white tulip-shaped shade and all.

I then turned on him and put my all into ignoring both him staring in open shock at my décor (a reminder, I was ultra girlie and everything about me reflected that, absolutely everything) and how I felt that Javi was standing in my space, somewhere he'd never been, somewhere I'd wanted him to be for six whole months.

"I'm home safe," I pointed out the obvious. "You're off your self-imposed duty now."

His attention shifted from the teal-green-and-white-striped, large glass mushroom that was one of the things that adorned my white, curvy coffee table, to me.

"Props, you women want to do good things for good reasons," he began. "But that doesn't mean you know what you're doin' when you do them."

Mm-hmm.

This announcement made me no less fume-y.

Nope.

It made me more.

A whole lot more.

I tossed my clutch to the dusty-rose velvet covered, semi-structured beanbag chair, crossed my arms on my chest, and returned, “Sorry, except for the last five months with NI&S, where did you get your formal training when you and your Shadow Soldiers were taking on the streets?”

“I got it on *the streets*,” he shot back. “As in, livin’ on them for most my life.”

He had me there.

“It isn’t like this is my first rodeo,” I retorted. “You knew I had the ear thingy—”

“Ear thingy,” he muttered, like me calling it that proved his point.

I ignored him and carried on. “My guess is, you knew all the girls were there, taking my back. I was in no danger having dinner with a stranger at Oceans 44. Even if I knew beforehand he’s a big jerk.”

Javi appeared to be losing patience, but for the most part (and what was beginning to freak me), he was no longer angry. He didn’t seem much of anything, but he was this like he was trying to be like this.

Like there was a mask he’d put on to hide something from me.

And I hadn’t known him from birth, but since I’d met him, Javi had always been a kind of put-it-all-out-there guy.

But then, still wearing his mask, he put it all out there.

And I would wish to the bottom of my soul he hadn’t.

“Raye, she can take care of herself,” he declared. “Luna, the same. Jessie gets the life because she’s lived it. Not you. Your parents are both doctors. So is your brother. On both sides, your mother and father come from money. You grew up in a six-bedroom house with a pool and a tennis court. You went to Phoenix Country Day. You had a nanny. A woman of my culture lived in your pool house and vacuumed your floors, did your grocery shopping, your laundry and cooked your food. And you walk into uncertain situations wearing shoes you can’t run in. You got no fuckin’ business doin’ that Angel shit, and my guess is, you know it as much as I do.”

It should weird me out he knew so much about me, stuff I’d never told him, but in that moment, I couldn’t get weirded out because I was far too ticked.

“Obviously, since I’m doing it, I know nothing of the sort.”

Suddenly, he was in my space, the tip of his perfect nose brushing mine, and I was so shocked at his quick movement and unexpected nearness, I wasn't breathing.

"You're marking time here, Harlow," he whispered irately. "And I know you know *that*."

With his proximity, the scent of him, which was not cologne, it was all about a mountain of hot guy, and all of that doing a number on me, I had no choice but to stammer, "Wh-what are you talking about?"

"You're slumming," he declared, his words making what felt like a boulder block my throat. "Probably to prove a point to your parents for whatever stupid-ass reasons you got. You're gonna hang with your girls while it's fun. Then, when it's not, and they all get hooked up, you're gonna find a doctor or a lawyer or a banker or whatever the fuck and move into your own six-bedroom house with a pool and a tennis court, get a nanny, and a Latina that makes good tamales to cook your family's dinner."

He didn't just say that to me.

I stared into his amber eyes.

But...he did.

And now I understood why there had been no plays, no moves.

I'd been *so* wrong about those sparks.

Javier Montoya not only didn't like me.

He *didn't like me*.

Having this laid out so brutally for me, I wanted to cry, I really did.

I could flounce with the best, fume even better, but I was heck on wheels crying. I had to unfollow good news accounts on Insta because I couldn't scroll through stories of kindergartners giving kids with cancer returning to school standing ovations, or firefighters holding cats they saved from fires without losing it every time a heartwarming story came up on my feed.

I didn't know how I found the strength, but I found the strength not to cry, and instead, in a wavering voice, I said, "You don't know me."

"Figure I know you better than you do yourself."

"And how do you figure that?" I asked, even if I really didn't want to know.

"I didn't have money or a nanny or a maid to cushion the shit of life, Harlow. You live what I lived, you learn to read people, and you're an open book. This Angel shit is a lark for you. It

means something to Raye. To Jess. Even to Luna. To you, it's a story to tell the new friends you're gonna get about the days when you were single and looking for a thrill."

"The new friends I'm going to get?" I whispered, unable to raise my voice further, because that hurt most of all.

"The boys at NI&S do well. But Mace and Stella don't have that huge fuckin' compound in Paradise Valley because Mace is worth a couple hundred million dollars. It's because Stella is. You're gonna aim for the top, and bein' you, you're gonna get it."

I again asked a question I didn't want the answer to. "Being me?"

He moved away enough to take in my tulip lamp, my glass mushroom, the baby-pink, shell-shaped toss pillow on my seafoam-green couch, then back to me.

And then he dealt his death blow.

"Everything about you is designed to land a man who'll take care of you the way you expect him to."

I vaguely noticed the flicker of remorse that flashed in his eyes when there was no way to hide my reaction.

That reaction being, I flinched like his words were a physical blow and I instantly stepped away from him like he was a threat.

"Harlow—" he started, the tone of his deep, gruff voice no longer irritable and matter-of-fact, the mask he'd kept on his handsome face dropping, but I refused to read what it said.

I backed away to my bean bag, not taking my eyes from his as I bent to the side and nabbed my clutch.

"Babe," he murmured, not moving but tracking my movements closely, that look on his face demanding to be let into my brain as I battened the hatches to keep it out.

I continued to keep my eyes on him as I backed down my hall to my bedroom, just as Javi continued to watch me.

I closed the door between us and locked it, not that it would keep him out if he wanted to get in.

But he didn't try to get in.

I didn't hear the front door close, so to make my point, I did what any self-respecting girl would do.

I dug my phone out of my clutch, opened my Sonos app to the apartment-wide speaker system that, yes, my father bought me for Christmas, and it was expensive, and I activated it.

I then played Taylor Swift's "The Prophesy," because everyone knew Tay-Tay could say it better than anyone.

I didn't know if Javi got it.

I just knew, when the song was over, I heard the front door slam.

And that was when I threw myself on my bed and did what came naturally.

I let myself be weak.

Which meant I shoved my face in my comforter...

And I sobbed.

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