

## CHAPTER 1



*Johannesburg, South Africa*

Damian

Harold Dalton shoots up from behind his oversized desk so fast he almost stumbles over the wheel of his equally oversized chair. “What do you want?”

The coward is afraid. He should be. After all, he framed me and stole my diamond mine. He’s the reason I spent six innocent years in jail.

His fat chin quivers. He doesn’t take his eyes off me as I cross the floor. Taking my time to inspect the room, I make him sweat it out. The home office hasn’t changed, except for three more deer heads staring miserably from the wall.

“What do you want?” he repeats when I reach his desk.

“Ah. Whatever could I want?”

His fingers tremble as he splays them out on the desktop. The cocksucker is so arrogant he either forgot I got out yesterday or believed I left prison a defeated man. Any less of a self-assuming

bastard would've put a dozen guards in front of his door today. His mistake.

A liver-spotted hand glides toward the drawer where he no doubt keeps a gun, but I'm faster and stronger. My grip on his wrist makes him whimper. I can almost smell the fear in the sweat that stains the armpits of his shirt. I'm not the twenty-two-year-old man who walked through this door in a threadbare shirt. I'm a man in an eighty-thousand-rand suit, a man with a vendetta.

Six years is a long time, long enough to soak in the juices of your vengeance until your heart is cooked in all that bitter acid. Six years of cruelty and torture make beasts out of men. Six years in the company of the hardest criminals and most notorious mobsters also make the right connections and a fortune.

"What do you want, Damian Hart?"

This time, there's acceptance in the question, the kind only people with money can muster. Bribe money.

Letting go of his wrist, I take two pieces of paper from my inside jacket pocket and slide them over the desk. He unfolds the first, the proof of what he's stolen, and pales as he reads. The second is an affidavit the corrupt judge signed right after I'd cut off his finger.

The papers flutter in his hands. "Name your price. Most of my money is tied up in investments, but I have property. My house in Camps Bay is worth ninety million. I can sign over the deed in less than twenty-four hours."

Laughable. "Ninety million isn't going to cut it. I'd say one thousand four hundred and fifty-five days and a diamond mine worth billions deserve a little more, don't you think?"

"The mine belongs to investors. Only thirty percent is mine, and I can't simply give it away. The board has to vote on a change of ownership."

As if I wouldn't know. "I'm not after your small change, Dalton. I want your biggest asset."

The pastry layers of his face crease into a frown.

Turning the gilded photo frame strategically facing the visitor's chair around, I push it slowly toward him.

His eyes widen as comprehension sets in. Not even the threat of my presence is enough to prevent the anger from erupting on his features.

“You must be bloody kidding me,” he hisses, crumpling the incriminating pieces of evidence in his fists.

Angelina Dalton-Clarke.

Daughter of Harold Dalton. Widow of Jack Clarke. She inherited her late husband’s fortune. Worth billions, she’s the wealthiest widow in the country, and also the craziest. Her suicidal and self-harming tendencies had Clarke declare her incompetent and mentally unstable before he put a gun to his head and blew his brains out. Lina Dalton-Clarke isn’t allowed to touch a cent of her riches. Her father manages her finances. He has all the signing power. As her husband, that *chore* will fall to me.

“She’s mentally ill,” Dalton splutters.

“I read the reports.” It wasn’t difficult for a cellmate to hack into the medical files.

Dalton looks as if he’s about to have a heart attack. I wait until his face is purple, giving him time to live the beginning of his end, before I continue with my instructions.

“Send her to the library. I’d like to see my *asset* in person. Oh, and not a word about our discussion. I’d like to break the happy news to her myself.”

He stands frozen, staring at me with whatever sentiment is festering in his rotten chest. It’s only when I’m on the other side of the room that he jumps back to life, coming around the desk.

I hold up a hand. “I’ll show myself to the library.” Mockingly, I add, “I know the way.”

The helpless indignation on his face as I shut the door fills me with more joy than I’ve experienced in all those years his family stole from me.

I’m from a poor upbringing, but I’m not a complete commoner. I know the rules of the gentry, which is why I give it some time before going to the library. Who knows what state Ms. Dalton-Clarke is in? She may be lounging around in sloppy attire or sunbathing naked.

Her hair may be a mess and her face scrubbed clean of make-up. She may need a few minutes to make herself presentable. I'm guessing most women, when faced with an enemy, would amass whatever power they can, even if said power is derived from six-inch heels and red lipstick. Any lesser appearance than the show she puts up for the world will put her at an unfair disadvantage for the surprise visit, and although I don't give a shit about playing fair, I do believe in treating a woman like a lady when it matters. Telling her she's going to become my wife definitely matters.

At my order, Mrs. Benedict, the same old housekeeper from before, grudgingly serves me a cup of Earl Grey on the terrace. It's not by coincidence I've wandered out here. It's the spot where I'd been sitting when Angelina Dalton came to me on the infamous night that sealed my fate. What will it be like to finally face her again? The onslaught of emotions at the thought is a familiar cocktail of apprehension, excitement, and a bloodthirsty need for justice. I'd lie if I say lust isn't running thick under the surface of it all. Who can blame me? She's been the focus of my fantasies, both the vengeful and lustful kind, for the past six years.

Earlier in her father's study, I barely glanced at her photo. I didn't have to. Her features are imprinted on my mind, even if we only met that once, an angelic face with outer space blue eyes and a golden cascade of hair. I see her in my dreams and with my eyes wide open. When I close them, I see her walking to me through the French patio doors with a beautiful display of innocence and vulnerability. It's a night I can never forget. It's a night when the best and worst moment of my life collided. Whilst Dalton wins the grand prize for fucking me over, she takes the trophy for snatching my heart in a few seconds flat only to throw it back in my face. She's my best, and my worst. She had no right to be pretty and nice to me when she had no intention of falling as hard for me as she made me fall for her.

The memory is always fresh, always new. Poor as fuck but armed with youth and ambition, I'd donned my only button-down shirt and set out to meet her father not at his office, but at his house. It was an

idiotic idea. Any man with a little experience of high society could've told me I'd be out of my depth with the formal dinner, from the four forks and knives lined up next to the gold-rimmed plates to the hand-rolled cigars that concluded the five hour-long ordeal. Between the other guests in their tuxedos, I stood out like a mongrel dog among racehorses. I stepped outside for air and sat down on this very terrace wall. I was freezing my butt off without a jacket in the middle of June when she exited in that pretty white dress, her curls pinned in some fancy up-do, with a fucking green granny shawl sporting a couple of holes wrapped around her shoulders.

"Aren't you cold?" she asked in a voice that rang as beautiful as their fancy dinner bell.

The ignorance of a rich girl. What the fuck did she think? My teeth were chattering and my knees knocking together. I wanted to go inside where it was warm, but I needed another minute to get my shit together. I wasn't going to let the older men with their expensive clothes and knowledge of cutlery intimidate me. I carried my future in my pocket, a discovery that was going to put me on the map, but I was yet to speak to Dalton, the man who was going to help me make it happen. I was nothing but a poor bastard, and I didn't want to answer her, not really, because admitting to being cold would've been admitting to things I didn't want the exquisite young woman staring at me to know.

Before I could think of anything appropriate to say, she unwrapped that ugly shawl from her frail shoulders, exposing the thin straps of her impractical evening dress, and draped the moth-eaten wool around me.

"There." She didn't quite smile, but she looked pleased. "It was my grandmother's. It makes me feel safe."

I stared at her like a fool, dumbstruck by the beautiful, wealthy girl who'd given me her warmth and safety. That's how her father found us when he stepped through the doors. The minute his gaze fell on us, his eyes turned colder than the winter night. He walked over with an empty tumbler in his hand, his steps unhurried but urgent.

Putting an arm around his daughter, he said, “Go inside, Lina. You’ll catch your death in this cold with no coat.”

The silk of her dress accentuated the tightness of her ass and the shift of her globes as she turned and obeyed.

Dalton’s breath fanned my face, reeking of whisky. His words were soft-spoken but loaded enough to lash like thunder. “She’ll never be yours. She’s destined for someone worthy of her.”

I couldn’t answer, not because I didn’t have a quick comeback. I grew up rough. I knew how to throw back subtle insults, but he’d punched me in the gut with the truth. It had nothing to do with me not being worthy of her. It was that I *did* want her to be mine. I just didn’t know it until he’d said it, but it was suddenly out in the open, the truth set free by his words, my worst nightmare of a fantasy set in motion. That fantasy haunted me for every long, lonely night I fucked my fist in jail.

“Come on in.” Dalton tilted his head toward the house. “I’m ready to see you about that business proposal.” At the doors, he turned, his figure a stark outline in the light. “Do take off that shawl. You look ridiculous.”

Inside, I sought Lina out despite Dalton’s warning, telling myself it was to return her shawl. I blatantly trespassed in corridors that weren’t leading to Dalton’s office or the dining room until I found her. She stood in front of the guest bathroom with Mrs. Benedict showing a fur drape at her and mumbling something about her mother turning in her grave. I never did give her back her shawl. I didn’t want Mrs. Benedict to take it away. I draped it over a chair back, hoping she’d find it. Then I’d gone to her father’s study and she’d married Clarke, the man who’d granted Dalton the excavation rights for the mine he’d stolen from me.

Pushing the bitter memory aside, I leave the Royal Albert teacup on the garden table—a perversely careless act for such pricy crockery—and go back inside. Dalton is nowhere to be seen. He’s probably planning my murder for stealing his princess, the one I’m not worthy of. Isn’t karma a funny thing? If Lina turned as self-destructive and

batshit crazy as her medical reports claim, our situation is ironically reversed.

She stands in the middle of the library when I enter, not in front of or behind the desk, but right in the middle, between nothing and the fireplace. I take a few seconds. The moment is huge. I'm not going to rush it. It's not what I expected. It's not my memory reincarnated. Nothing is left of the angelic girl from that evening in June. She doesn't come to me with kindness. Her back is stiff and her posture regal. The tip of her nose is tilted to the ceiling, her chin high.

What does a crazy person look like? Not like her. Maybe. It's hard to say. Take me, for example. You'd never say how warped I am just from looking at me. Does wearing a green granny shawl to a fancy dinner qualify as crazy? Does self-sabotage count as insane? I close the door quietly, like one would close a church door. I'm not sure why, only that I feel like I did when I held my mother's hand, and she led me down the aisle toward the portrait of Mary carrying the baby Jesus in her arms.

At the sound of the click, Lina's back turns even more rigid. Her ribcage expands and contracts too quickly, as if she's battling to breathe. Taking more time, longer than any *normal* person would find comfortable, I study her. With her hair like spun gold and her skin like bone china, she could easily be a fairytale princess, but that's not what I see when my gaze drops to her lips. They're a darker shade of pearl, full and shimmery. Lip balm. It's not lipstick or gloss. There's no mascara on her golden lashes or blush on her cheeks. No cosmetic courage. No high-heeled power. What she resembles is an ice queen—cold, untouchable, unobtainable. From head to toe, she's dressed in black. A polo-neck top with long sleeves covers her from her neck to her wrists. A wide skirt brushes her ankles. Black boots peek out from underneath. The top is tight fitting and the waistband of her skirt broad, accentuating her slim shape and small waist.

She stands quietly until I've done my evaluation. When I finally approach, she meets my eyes with a hint of loathing. The gold and green specs seem to light up the darkest of blues as her gaze flashes with distaste.

I smile. Good. I'm glad she looks at me like that, or I may have gotten lost in the strange unworldliness of her eyes, a dark galaxy dotted with green and gold stars.

"Mrs. Clarke."

"Mr. Hart."

She speaks. For six years I passed the sleepless hours of my nights trying to recall the exact sound of that voice, wondering if—hoping that—it has changed. It's not what I'd hoped for. It's not harsh or cracked or flawed. It's still like a bell, clear and resonating strongly.

"I see I've been announced."

Her level stare defies my assumption. "I remember you."

Just because of that angelic voice, I start counting her shortcomings. She locked herself in a room for over two years. She refused to see anyone, sometimes even her husband. "How can you blame him for killing himself?" people ask. "With a wife like her..." and they leave the sentence hanging.

She tried to commit suicide by throwing herself out of a second story window of their home. That was before the husband shot himself, so it couldn't be blamed on the tragedy of his death. Speculation has it mostly as the other way around. He shot himself after her suicide attempt.

She spent a year after his funeral in an institution with a fancy name, which is just another term for an asylum. For that year, she was nursed back to health from her alternating disorders of bulimia and anorexia. Doesn't look like they've achieved much. She can do with another few kilos.

The worst is in her eyes. It's in her silence as she stands there, letting me weigh her and find her too light. Too damn much. The coldness and craziness appeal to me. I'm a man intimately acquainted with broken things, enough to know what stands in front of me is ruined, not broken. I still want her, as much as—no, more—than when she was eighteen and sweet and a princess. A memory of Dalton bringing her into the dining room, dressed in that white frock that showed the cleavage of her small breasts and tight buttocks, flashes



through my mind. I knew what he was doing. He was parading her, showing off his bargaining chip.

She waits patiently. Maybe locking yourself up does that to you. It ruins your mind but teaches you virtues.

“It’s been a year,” I say.

She doesn’t ask.

It makes me want to shake a reaction from her, but instead I lash out with my words. I lash out with my eyes, filling them with disapproval. “Do you still have to wear black?”

Her voice is collected, indifferent. “I’m mourning.”

“He’s been dead for a year.”

“I didn’t say who I’m mourning.”

Gripping my hands behind my back, I walk around her. Her head turns as her gaze follows me, but she stops at three o’clock, allowing me to look at places she can’t see, like her sculptured back. It’s too bony, the way her vertebrae show through her top, and somehow there’s perfection in even that. Frailty. Vulnerability. Femininity. I’ve never found skinny women attractive, but Lina is a first for me in everything. It’s a fact that no longer surprises me.

I stop in front of her, drawing her gaze back to me. “Is it true?”

She waits.

I caress the lines of her face with my gaze. “Are you crazy?”

“Aren’t we all to a greater or lesser degree?”

That damn, musical voice. There’s no judgment there, just a factual statement. Clever. It wins her this round. There’s nothing to argue.

“I suppose you’d like to know the reason for my visit.”

She looks straight into my black, soiled soul. “I know why you’re here.”

“Is that so?” I give her a smile that’s meant to be intimidating. “Tell me.”

“For the same reason they all are.”

*They all are.* I fucking hate the sound of that. “What reason is that?”

“To marry me for my money.”

My vision goes blurry. My anger ignites and unjustly escalates. She makes me see things I don’t want to, images of many rivals on one

knee, asking for her hand. That's where they went wrong. I won't be asking.

"Yet," I drop my gaze to her naked ring finger, "you rejected everyone."

"For the same reason I'll be rejecting you."

I smother a laugh. On second thought, I let it out, cold and soft. I round her again, like a buyer evaluating livestock. I lean into her, like an owner staking a claim. She smells of an exotic perfume, something musky and oriental, alluring and deadly, like a pretty, poisonous flower. She's toxic to me. God knows I've suffered every classifiable, slow-killing symptom, but I can't resist.

"If you think I only want you for your money," I whisper against the shell of her ear, "you're sadly mistaken."

A shiver runs over her body. It starts at her nape and ends at the base of her spine. I feel it where our bodies are touching, separated by two layers of black clothes. This time, my laugh is silent, unnoticed at the back of her head. I don't need to win a round over her with a mocking smile. This round is mine.

She steps away, putting space between us. Her head is turned to the side, but she's not looking at me. "You can't make me."

"Think again."

She twirls around, eyes a bit wider and nostrils barely flaring. There's the tiniest crack in her veneer, and there she is, the crazy woman behind the curtain of ice. The jugular vein in her neck flutters like a trapped butterfly. There's fire in her, yet.

She places soft emphasis on every word. "I said no."

"You're making the mistake of assuming it was a request."

The frost is back in her eyes, her chin tilted haughtily. "Leave before I call a guard."

"You don't want Daddy Dearest to die, do you?"

The little color left in her cheeks vanishes. She's a wax doll, unnatural and startling beautiful.

"Bribery. Tsk-tsk. A High Court judge, no less." Taking a photocopy of the signed affidavit from my pocket, I hold it up for her to see. "When this goes public, your daddy ends up in prison. He won't make

it out alive. I've made enough friends in six years to make sure of it. A phone call, a message via a guard is all it'll take."

She's big enough to drop her bravado and read the text. When her eyes meet mine again, there's something else. Fear. More than fear. She's terrified. "How did you get this?"

Not the question I've been expecting. "Does it matter?" I have blood on my hands for the piece of paper I'm clutching, and I'd spill it again.

"Is it fake?"

"If there's one thing you should know about me, it's that I never bluff."

"Does he...?" She swallows. "Does Harold know?"

"I assume he's having your bags packed as we speak."

Her chest rises and falls. Claspng her hands together, she drops her gaze to the floor. A few seconds pass. I let her have them to process what's happening.

When she lifts her unworldly eyes back to me, they're composed. Serene, if not sad. She's already accepted what she can't change. Some may see her lack of fighting as weak. I see it for what it is, a trait of a survivor. She's doing what she must to get through this. It doesn't strike me as the kind of behavior of someone with self-destructive tendencies. The ease with which she does it tells me it's a practiced skill.

"The ceremony will take place on Saturday at the Anglican church in Emmarentia. Four o'clock. Don't be late. You won't like the consequences."

Gripping her fingers, I press a kiss to her hand. Her skin is cold, but her palm is clammy. Inclining my head, I bid my fiancée goodbye.

There's nothing more to say.

Now we wait.

Until Saturday.



Lina

RUNNING TO THE TOILET, I empty my guts for the second time. My body heaves, not getting the message from my stomach that there's nothing left. When the wave finally passes, I slide to the floor, clutching the toilet with both arms and resting my forehead on the rim. I'm hot and cold, shaking all over. I'm frightened.

When I can't put off getting dressed any longer, I force my legs to stand. Bent-over, I make it to the basin. In the overhead cabinet is a bottle of pills, but there's no pill for what I'm suffering from. There's no medicine that will help. Shaking two tablets against nausea from the brown bottle, I swallow them dry. It takes a few breaths for my stomach to settle and a while before my strength returns.

This bathroom, I hate it. I hate the beehive tiles and the spa tub. It's been mine since I can remember, but I never wanted it. I've never been happy here. I always wanted to leave, and now that I have to, again, I'm afraid. There's no way out of this, though. I can't let Harold die. If he does, what I want most in the world is gone with him.

After splashing cold water on my face, I go to my bedroom. My wedding dress is laid out on the bed. It's a simple cut with lace overlaying a silk lining. The pillbox hat with net veil lies next to it. It feels like I'm dressing for my own funeral, tying a bond with another cruel man. I sensed Damian's desire to hurt me in Harold's library. I suppose I've become good at reading that underlying darkness some men crave.

Moving behind the screen, I strip naked in front of the full-length mirror. I always do. I do so I can look, so I can remember who I am. Turning sideways, I study the scars that line my arms, first the left, then the right. I count every unsightly, embossed line, unevenly spaced from my shoulders to my wrists. Sixteen on the left, twelve on the right. Each one represents the loss of a part of my soul at the price of my life. The parts of me I can't see in a mirror are too ugly even for me to face. When I can't stomach more, I pull on a random set of underwear from the drawer before stepping into the dress. I fix my hair into a tight bun and secure the hat with pins. There's no one to go through this with me. I'm alone. I long for my mother with a fierceness that cripples my heart. It's her pearl earrings I fasten on my ears,

and my grandmother's necklace I clasp around my neck. It makes me feel close to them, as if I'll draw strength from their spirits.

"The driver is ready," one of Harold's bodyguards says from the open door.

I glance at him in the mirror. It's Bobby, one of the kinder ones. He's not looking into the room, but straight ahead. By now, the guards are used to the fact that I never close a door. Respectfully, they don't stare. That's what crazy women do. They get dressed with an open door in a house full of men. Closed doors give them anxiety attacks. That's the real reason the men don't look. They're afraid of insulting Harold by admitting with their curious staring just how crazy I am.

"Harold?" I ask cautiously.

"He already left."

Getting to my feet, I grab a clutch bag in which I've stuffed my phone, anti-nausea pills, tampons, and tissues. I never go anywhere without tampons and tissues. My period is irregular, often arriving when I'm under more duress than normal.

"Do you have everything?" he asks.

I nod. My single suitcase has been taken to Damian's house earlier. He sent a driver to collect it.

"Let's go then," he says. "Mr. Dalton will skin me alive if we're late."

I don't show Bobby my fear. Fear makes you vulnerable. It makes you an easy victim. I hand him my bag while I fit my shoes.

"I'm ready," I announce.

I don't have a choice.



## Damian

THE BELLS TOLL in the stone church tower. It's a haunting and beautiful sound. Rare. They only use the bells for special occasions because they're old and fragile. The fact that they're using them for me tells the witnesses in the church I'm a man to be reckoned with. There's not a face turned to me without fear. It's there, in their fake smiles and

plastered-on expressions of goodwill. They're only here to witness the beginning of the fall of the Dalton empire.

One, two, three. The last dong falls like a verdict on four. The sound reverberates through the acoustic interior, carrying on the dubious silence that follows. When the sound dies down, the guests stand, and the organist starts playing. The first notes of *The Wedding March* fill the space. It's dramatic and theatrical. I picked it specifically, just like the cascades of white roses and the thick candles burning in golden candelabras on both sides of the aisle. Facing the entrance, I await my bride.

Despite the flamboyance, there's something in my chest, a tightness that borders on nerves when the doors don't open immediately. My posture is straight and my face stoic, but my hands ball involuntarily into fists. I only relax slightly when the double doors start swinging inward. A fan of light falls into the shadowed church, letting sun into the somber, cool interior. The beams burst through everywhere, up toward the gallery where the organ is playing and down over the stone floor. They keep on stretching, reaching, until the doors are fully open. It's blinding. After the darkness inside, I have to blink for my eyes to adjust. Like a revelation, a figure stands in the midst of all that pure white. I almost breathe easier, but not yet. It's a long walk down the aisle, and an even longer way to saying yes.

Dalton stands next to the door. As the music goes into the second sonata, he offers his arm, but Lina steps past him, as if she doesn't see him, and then she stops. I don't have time to ponder the observation, because the sonata is in full swing, and she's still not moving. My heart beats faster. My breathing speeds up. She's a silhouette of a shadow, obscured by the light. I can't make out her face or expression, just that she's not fucking moving. Dalton goes forward. She trips slightly as he nudges her. I'm about to shoot to the end of the aisle and drag her to the altar by her arm when she finally puts one foot in front of the other.

Something in me lifts, making me feel weightless, but it only lasts a second. The same someone who opened the doors closes them. The daylight is expelled, and the interior is once more basked in a gloomy

light. It's then that I make out her face, her figure, her dress. Her fucking dress. God help me. I fist my hands so hard my knuckles crack. From her fashionable little hat to her elegant shoes, she's dressed for a funeral. In front of all these people, she makes a mockery of me, coming to me in black.