

*Excerpt from White Nights by Anna Zaires and Charmaine Pauls*

Turning away from the sink, I look back at the wounded man, making sure everything is okay with him before I go check on my other patients.

At that moment, I catch a pair of steely blue eyes looking at me.

It's one of the men standing near the victim, likely one of his relatives. Visitors are generally not allowed in the hospital at night, but the ER is an exception.

Instead of looking away, as most people will when caught staring, the man continues to study me.

Both intrigued and slightly annoyed, I study him back.

He's tall, well over six feet in height, and broad-shouldered. He's not handsome in the traditional sense. That's too weak of a word to describe him. Instead, he's magnetic.

Power. That's what comes to mind when I look at him. It's there in the arrogant tilt of his head, in the way he looks at me so calmly, utterly sure of himself and his ability to control all around him. I don't know who he is or what he does, but I doubt he's a pencil pusher in some office. This is a man used to issuing orders and having them obeyed.

His clothes fit him well and look expensive. Maybe even custom made. He's wearing a gray trench coat, dark gray pants with a subtle pinstripe, and a pair of black Italian leather shoes. His brown hair is cut short, almost military style. The simple haircut suits his face, revealing hard, symmetric features. He has high cheekbones and a blade of a nose with a slight bump, as though it had been broken once.

I have no idea how old he is. His face is unlined, but there's no boyishness to it. No softness whatsoever, not even in the curve of his mouth. I guess his age to be early thirties, but he can just as easily be twenty-five or forty.

He doesn't fidget or look uncomfortable as our staring contest continues. He simply stands there quietly, completely still, his blue gaze trained on me.

To my shock, my heart rate picks up as a tingle of heat runs down my spine. It's as though the temperature in the room has jumped ten degrees. All of a sudden, the atmosphere becomes intensely sexual, making me aware of myself as a woman in a way I've never experienced. I can feel the silky material of my matching underwear set brushing between my legs and against my breasts. My entire body seems flushed and sensitized, my nipples pebbling underneath my layers

of clothing.

*Holy shit.*

So that's what it feels like to be attracted to someone. It's not rational and logical. There's no meeting of minds and hearts involved. No, the urge is basic and primitive. My body has sensed his on some animal level, and it wants to mate.

He feels it too. It shows in the way his blue eyes darken, lids partially lowering, and in the way his nostrils flare as though trying to catch my scent. His fingers twitch, curl into fists, and I somehow know he's trying to control himself, to avoid reaching for me right then and there.

If we were alone, I have no doubt he'd be on me already.

Still staring at the stranger, I back away. The strength of my response to him is frightening, unsettling. We're in the middle of the ER, surrounded by people, and all I can think about is hot, sheet-twisting sex. I have no idea who he is, whether he's married or single. For all I know, he's a criminal or an asshole. *Or a cheating scumbag like Tony.* If anyone has taught me to think twice before trusting a man, it's my ex-boyfriend. I don't want to get involved with anyone so soon after my last, disastrous relationship. I don't want that kind of complication in my life again.

The tall stranger clearly has other ideas.

At my cautious retreat, he narrows his eyes, his gaze becoming sharper, more focused. Then he comes toward me, his stride graceful for such a large man. There's something panther-like in his leisurely movements, and for a second, I feel like a mouse getting stalked by a big cat. Instinctively, I take another step back, and his hard mouth tightens with displeasure.

Dammit, I'm acting like a coward.

I stop backing away and stand my ground instead, straightening to my full five-foot-seven height. I'm always the calm and capable one, handling high-stress situations with ease, yet I'm behaving like a schoolgirl confronted with her first crush. Yes, the man makes me uncomfortable, but there's nothing to be afraid of. What's the worst he can do? Ask me out on a date?

Nevertheless, my hands shake slightly as he approaches, stopping less than two feet away. This close, he's even taller than I thought, a few inches over six feet. I'm not a short woman, but I feel tiny standing in front of him. It's not a feeling I enjoy.

"You're very good at your job." His voice is deep and a little rough, tinged with some

Eastern European accent. Just hearing it makes my insides shiver in a strangely pleasurable way.

“Thank you,” I say, a bit uncertainly. I *am* good at my job, but I didn’t expect a compliment from this stranger.

“You took care of Igor well. Thank you for that.”

Igor must be the gunshot patient. It’s a foreign-sounding name. Russian, perhaps? That would explain the stranger’s accent. Although he speaks English fluently, he’s not a native speaker.

“Of course.” I’m proud of the steadiness of my tone. Hopefully, the man won’t realize how he affects me. “I hope he recovers quickly. Is he a relative?”

“My bodyguard.”

Wow. I was right. This man is a big fish. Does that mean—

“Was he shot in the course of duty?” I ask, holding my breath.

“He took a bullet meant for me, yes.” His tone is matter-of-fact, but I get a sense of suppressed rage underneath those words.

I swallow hard. “Did you already speak to the police?”

“I gave them a brief statement. I will talk to them in more detail once Igor is stabilized and regains consciousness.”

I nod, not knowing what to say to that. The man standing in front of me was nearly assassinated today. What is he? Some mafia boss? A political figure?

If I had any doubts about the wisdom of exploring this strange attraction between us, they’re gone. This stranger is bad news, and I need to stay as far away from him as possible.

“I wish your bodyguard a speedy recovery,” I say in a falsely cheerful tone. “Barring any complications, he should be fine.”

“Thanks to you.”

I give him a half-smile and take a step to the side, hoping to walk around the man and go to my next patient.

He shifts his stance, blocking my way. “I’m Alex Volkov,” he says quietly. “And you are?”

My pulse picks up. The male intent in his question makes me nervous. Hoping he’ll get the hint, I say, “Just a nurse working here.”

He doesn’t catch on, or he pretends not to. “What’s your name?”

He's certainly persistent. I take a deep breath. "I'm Katherine Morrell. If you'll excuse me—"

"Katherine," he repeats, his accent lending the familiar syllables an exotic edge. His hard mouth softens a bit. "Katerina. It's a beautiful name."

"Thank you. I really have to go."

I'm increasingly anxious to get away. He's too large, too potently male. I need space and some room to breathe. His nearness is overpowering, making me edgy and restless, leaving me craving something that I know will be bad for me.

"You have your job to do. I understand," he says, looking vaguely amused.

Still, he doesn't move out of my way. Instead, as I watch in shock, he raises one large hand and brushes his knuckles over my cheek.

I freeze as a wave of heat zaps through my body. His touch is light, but I feel branded by it, shaken to the core.

"I would like to see you again, Katerina," he says softly, dropping his hand. "When does your shift end tonight?"

I stare at him, feeling like I'm losing control of the situation. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?" His blue eyes narrow. "Are you married?"

I'm tempted to lie, but honesty wins out. "No, but I'm not interested in dating right now."

"Who said anything about dating?"

I blink. I assumed—

He lifts his hand again, stopping me mid-thought. This time, he picks up a strand of my hair, rubbing it between his fingers.

"I don't date, Katerina," he murmurs, his accented voice oddly mesmerizing. "But I would like to take you to bed. And I think you'd like that too."