

CHAPTER 1



Christina

“*I* want to show you something.”
Whenever Evie says that, I don’t want to see it.

But no isn’t an option.

She takes my hand and leads me from her bedroom to the elevator at the end of the hallway. The red light blinks when she pushes on the button. We stand side by side, our full-length images reflecting in the steel of the door.

We could’ve been twins. We’re the same height and weight, and, thanks to hair dye, we’re both blondes. Evie’s natural color is wheat blond. Mine is mahogany brown, but the shoulder-length strands have been expertly colored to match Evie’s shade down to her platinum highlights. My diet has been adapted so I weigh the same as her. If we strip naked, my breasts are smaller and my hips narrower. However, with the high necklines and wide skirts of our identical evening gowns, the difference in our build is hardly noticeable.

The elevator pings.

“Come,” she says, tugging on my hand when the door opens.

We step inside.

I check my watch, not a Rolex like hers but a good imitation. “We’re going to be late.”

She stares at the floor numbers above the door. “They can wait.”

“Your father won’t be happy.” If there’s one man I don’t want to piss off, it’s Bell Warren.

A frown scrunches up her face. “It’s not like I want to go to the party.”

I try to sound upbeat. “It’s your engagement party.”

“Exactly.” She blows out a sigh before meeting my gaze. “It’s not like I want to marry Nathan Stone, either.”

Biting my lip, I consider my answer. I want to tell her it will be fine, but I don’t know Nathan. Neither does she. All we know is that the marriage will further her father’s business. The alliance will unite two of the most powerful crime families in Johannesburg. Together, the Warrens and the Stones will own most of the private diamond mines in South Africa.

The elevator stops on the underground level. Overhead lights flick on as we exit into the hallway. The air is cool down here. Goosebumps run over my naked arms. Our heels clack on the tiles as we make our way to a room I’ve visited once. It’s the vault where her father keeps his most valuable antiques and paintings. He’s an enthusiastic collector. Some say he’s trying to compensate for his lack of character with exquisite artwork and priceless gems.

Evie punches in a code on the electronic wall panel. I’m surprised she knows it. Reflexively, I memorize the numbers. I won’t visit the room alone. I don’t have a death wish. It’s just something I’m used to doing. I’ve been memorizing Evie’s ID and bank account numbers as well as her secret pin codes from the age of sixteen. She’s twenty-four now, and I’m one year older. Nine years make for a lot of practice.

The metal door slides open soundlessly, revealing a room with a marble floor and gold-framed mirrors.

“There.” She lets go of my hand and points at the waist-high pillar in the center. “Let’s go have a look.”

“Won’t we get into trouble?” I ask, but she’s already halfway across the floor.

I glance over my shoulder before I follow and stop next to her.

In a glass case on top of the pillar sits the biggest diamond I’ve seen, and, thanks to Bell Warren’s business, I’ve seen a lot. This one is over sixty carats, nothing short of a wonder. It catches the light from the spots in the ceiling and throws it back in rainbows that bounce off the mirrors.

“It’s worth a few trillion,” Evie says, studying the stone. “Actually, it’s priceless.”

Like the first time Bell brought me here, I can’t stop staring at its pretty sparkle. Bell showed me the gem to demonstrate his wealth and power. The stone is pure, and its color is perfect. It’s a pity it’s tainted with blood.

The diamond was discovered on a plot of land Daniel Malan prospected in Cullinan. According to rumors, Daniel owed Bell money, and everyone knows how Bells collects his debts. To save the lives of his family, Daniel paid his debt with the diamond and signed over his prospecting rights to Bell.

Not one month later, Daniel was killed in a carjacking. People say he arranged his own murder for his life insurance policy to pay out. Allegedly, it was the only way he could provide for his wife and sons. Roman, the eldest, took the reins and built a new business with his inheritance. He’s thirty-three years old now and a billionaire in his own right. I’ve never met him, but not a single person in Johannesburg is unfamiliar with his name. He’s the head of one of the most notorious mafia families in the country. The Warrens and the Malans have been at war for as long as I can remember.

I look at Evie more closely. “Why are you showing me this?”

Her tone is clipped. “I wanted to see it before Nathan puts a ring on my finger.”

Touching her arm, I ask, “Why?”

“I wanted to see how much I’m worth.” She stares at the sharp angles of the perfect stone with a hateful expression. “This is the real reason why Nathan is marrying me.”

I drop my hand. “Don’t think like that. Mr. Warren chose you a husband who’s wealthy and powerful enough to protect you. Your father loves you.” When she turns her face to me quickly, I add, “In his own way. Why else would he employ someone like me?”

Her shoulders sag as she lets out a sigh. “Maybe I just want to defy Dad while I still can.”

I don’t have to ask why. Evie hates her father. She’s always been a pawn to him. Her unwanted engagement to Nathan is proof of that. Yet she’s powerless to prevent the marriage from happening. Bell doesn’t take no for an answer. He’ll kill for the simple reason of proving a point.

Footsteps sound in the hallway. My breathing spikes. We shouldn’t be here. I know all too well how Bell punishes disobedience. My muscles pull tight as the steps draw nearer. As if conjured by my thoughts, Bell Warren himself appears in the doorway. He wears a white shirt and a black bowtie. A waistcoat stretches over his round stomach. Pausing inside the door, he takes in the scene.

I swallow.

“Evie?” he says, the fat layers around his eyes tightening.

“Yes?” Evie and I reply simultaneously.

Since working for Bell, everyone calls me Evie. I’ve been trained to react to the name.

His lips curve into a practiced smile that he directs at me as he walks toward us. “What are you ladies doing in here?”

Evie faces him with smooth features and a relaxed stance. “I wanted to show Christina the diamond.”

The smell of his cologne reaches my nostrils long before he stops in front of us. It makes me want to gag.

“The vault is off-limits.” He crosses his arms behind his back. “Don’t come here again unless I give you permission.”

He doesn’t wait for our agreement. It’s taken for granted. Dragging

a gaze over me, he inspects the pink, glittery ballgown and the fake diamond necklace that matches Evie's, except that hers is real.

Finally fixing his attention on my face, he says, "With the make-up, it's impossible to tell you apart." Approval marks his tone. "The stylist did a good job."

Evie's stylist cuts my hair and does my make-up. She's a genius with a pair of scissors and a make-up brush. If you look carefully, you'll see that the green of my eyes is lighter than Evie's. My nose is thinner and my chin rounder, but no one will ever have to get that close. I'm just the decoy, Evie's stunt girl, so to speak.

Addressing me, Bell asks, "What are the three rules?"

I recite them off the top of my head. "Don't get caught. If caught, keep up the show."

"And?"

"Play the part and win time until help arrives."

"Good." He pats my cheek. "Stick to the rules, and I'll take care of you."

Repulsion ripples over my skin.

His double chins quiver as he nods at Evie. "Let's go. We don't want to make a bad impression by being late."

Evie takes the arm he offers, allowing him to escort her to the hallway while I follow a step behind. Her bodyguard waits in front of the elevator. She doesn't acknowledge him as he holds the door for her to get in. Since Bell shot Geoff, she keeps her distance, never being too friendly with the staff. We're not friends, but she does share more with me. It's inevitable, seeing how much time we spend together.

Evie's mom, Bella, is already in the foyer. Bell and the guard exit ahead of us. The housekeeper hands Evie and me our coats. It's seven and dark outside. Like most winter days on the Highveld, the day was sunny, but the cold descends quickly at night.

When I've pulled on the faux fur, the housekeeper gives us our clutch bags. Mine will contain a new burner phone. Bell always destroys them at the end of every outing.

Bella fiddles with Evie's collar. "You look beautiful, darling."

Pushing her mom's hands away, Evie turns to me. "Christina." She hesitates and bites her lip.

Bella ignores me as if Evie hasn't spoken my name. "We better go, Evie."

To Bella, I'm staff, and staff are invisible. We're supposed to stay on the outskirts in humble servitude. What a pair they make, Bell and Bella. Everyone jokes about their names behind their backs. Of course, Bell earned the nickname long before he married Bella.

Bella takes Evie's shoulders and steers her to the door. Stopping in the frame, Evie gives me an uncertain look from over her shoulder.

"Is something the matter?" I ask.

She shrugs and says, "Never mind," before walking outside.

They get into a limo with their chauffeur while another driver opens the door of a Mercedes for me. I settle in the back and take the new phone from my bag. I haven't spoken to my sister since she came home from school. It took the stylist the whole afternoon to prepare Evie and me. No matter where I am, I never let my sister go to bed before saying goodnight.

The driver starts the engine, switches on the two-way radio, and pulls off. A car with four bodyguards goes ahead of us and another car follows behind. Evie and her parents will leave fifteen minutes after the agreed time. For safety reasons, they'll take a different route. We'll travel on the most direct roads from Greenside to the Stone's mansion in Sandton where the party is taking place.

I'm tired and my feet already ache in the high heels. It's been a busy week. We attended dinners and parties every night. Usually, I go ahead and enter through the main entrance, posing as Evie. Then, if all is safe, I slip away and am smuggled out via a backdoor while Evie is brought inside from a different entrance. During the event, I stay on standby in the car to repeat the whole procedure for the return home.

As soon as the driver takes the offramp and we're on the dual carriageway, I call Eden. When my younger sister's bubbly laugh greets me, I forget about my exhaustion. My heart warms at the

sound. She's always happy. It lessens the guilt of not being home to cook dinner and help her with homework.

"Hey," I say, casting a glance at the driver in the rearview mirror. "What's so funny?"

Personal calls aren't permitted on the job, but the driver is one of the kinder ones who turns a blind eye.

"Something on TV," Eden says.

"Did you do your homework?"

"Yep." Paper crinkles in the background. "I just put the pizza in the oven."

"Don't burn yourself when you take it out. Will you manage?"

"I'm fifteen, not five," she says with a full mouth.

"What are you eating?"

"Jelly babies."

"Not before dinner, and close your mouth and swallow before you speak."

She huffs. "Yes, *Mom*."

"Don't stay up late. It's a school day, tomorrow."

"Kay." She smacks her lips. "Have fun."

I want to say I doubt I will, but she's already hung up.

Leaning my head against the backrest, I remind myself why I do this, why I live someone else's life. It's for Eden.

We turn onto Jan Smuts Avenue, my body pushing against the door as we take the bend a bit too fast. I glance at the speedometer. We're over the speed limit.

One of the guards' voices comes over the two-way radio. "We've got a tail."

The driver curses under his breath. "I see it."

I tense. Turning in my seat, I try to get a glimpse from the back window, but I'm blinded by the headlights of the car behind us.

"Fuck," someone else says. "We have one up ahead. They're blocking the road."

The driver cuts a look at the GPS screen on the dashboard. I follow his gaze and see what he sees. There are no sideroads between us and the car blocking the road. My mouth goes dry.

“Get down,” he says, his voice tight.

Before I can duck, an explosion rocks the car in front of us. Metal flies into the air and flames leap into the night. The driver swerves to the right. The phone drops from my hand and falls somewhere on the floor as my body is flung against the door. A sharp pain cuts into my ribs where the handle hits me. My head bounces off the window, more pain exploding in my temple. The car skids over the road and hits the concrete barrier on the side. We go into a spin, the world a merry-go-round of flames and lights as the tires lose traction and the rubber burns on the tarmac.

The nose of the car dives. I brace my face with my arms, my elbows hitting the backrest in front of me. The shock slams my head forward. My stomach climbs up in my throat as the seat momentarily disappears from under me, and then my teeth clack together as the momentum abruptly stops.

I shake my head to clear the dizziness. A copper taste fills my mouth. My tongue aches where I’ve bitten it. It takes a moment to orientate myself. We hit a ditch. The car’s nose is pointing down. We haven’t rolled.

Adrenaline fuels my body as fear runs cold then hot through my veins. The driver is slumped over the steering wheel. I lean over and shake his shoulder hard. He doesn’t move. Panic threatens to paralyze me, but I take a deep breath and try to shut off my emotions, try to think. I must focus on what I’ve been trained, because this isn’t a fire drill in Bell Warren’s basement. This is real.

Gunfire sounds from close by. I strain my neck to look over my shoulder, but from the ditch I can’t see the road. Only the flames licking the sky are visible.

Laying two fingers over the pulse in the driver’s neck, I pray that he’s alive.

Nothing.

Shit.

I unbuckle my safety belt and reach with a shaky hand between the front seats for his holster. It’s on his right side, against his door, too far to reach. More gunfire pops, closer now.

Don't get caught.

There's no time to get the weapon. I pull the door handle on my side and push. The door opens a crack before getting stuck. In the yellow light falling from the lampposts, I notice the mud and polls of grass under the door. I pull off my shoes and kick with both feet, ramming my heels against the door until the gap is wide enough for me to squeeze through.

The thick coat gets in the way. It's stripped from my arms as I force myself through the narrow space. Metal scrapes my side. Something sharp hooks into my dress, tearing fabric and skin. The pain burns hot, but I don't think about it.

Don't get caught.

Finally free, I stumble and fall on my knees in the dirt. I catch myself on my palms, but I don't slow down to straighten. I make it through the ditch on my hands and knees before I climb up the other side. Pebbles and thorns cut the soles of my bare feet as I sprint across the grassy shoulder of a quiet road. Not daring to look back, I take stock of the surroundings in front of me while my heart beats like a beast in my chest.

Don't get caught.

There's a strip mall up ahead. The shops are closed and dark, but it's the nearest cluster building in sight. Pumping my arms, I run with all my might. My only hope of hiding sits a few hundred meters away. The gunfire has stopped. The night is eerily quiet. I push myself harder. Another hundred meters, and I slip into a narrow alley between two buildings. I dash around an industrial garbage bin and turn the corner into another alley.

Stopping for a moment, I press my back against the wall to catch my breath. Greedily, I drag oxygen into my lungs. The smog from winter fires is thick in the air. The smoke and soot burn my nostrils. My chest heaves as I battle to fill my lungs. I have a stitch in my side from running. I lay a hand over my waist where it's aching. It's wet. I pull away. My fingers are coated with wetness that looks black in the streetlight.

White puffs form in front of my mouth. The July nights in

Johannesburg drop below zero, but I don't feel the cold. I only feel fear. Then I hear it. A footstep crunches on the gravel. Sucking in a breath, I hold it, too afraid to exhale for fear of making a sound. If I stay here, I'll be discovered. The only option is to keep on moving.

Don't get caught.

Peeling myself off the wall, I tiptoe on shaky legs to the end of the alley and peer around the corner. The black framework of a factory looms behind the strip mall. A barbwire fence surrounds the property. Double gates are locked together with a chain, but there's a gap between the gates. I glance back at the top of the alley, and then my heart slams to a standstill. From behind the wall, a shadow falls on the ground. It's tall and distorted like a monster from my childhood nightmares. It's the shadow of a man, and he's advancing swiftly.

I don't think.

I run.

I run until I'm close to collapsing, forcing my body through the narrow space between the gates before dashing across the illuminated yard. The chain on the gate rattles. Footsteps fall with powerful thuds behind me, closing the distance too fast. I fling myself around the corner of a corrugated iron warehouse and head blindly down a passageway between two smaller buildings. A naked bulb burns above a metal door, casting a circle of dust-ridden light over the ground. In the grainy picture of that light, a wall rises three meters into the air in front of me. Metal spikes sit like ragged teeth on top. The exit is blocked.

Shit.

Knowing it's futile, I grab the door handle and yank. The door doesn't budge. I'm about to back out of the dead end when the figure of a man appears at the top of the passageway. He's tall and broad, so broad that he blocks out the light behind him. Effectively, he cuts off my only way out.

I'm frozen in shock. My body refuses to cooperate as he advances slowly with his arms standing wide from his body. The outline of a gun in his hand is clearly drawn in the shadow that moves along the wall as he nears.

The sight of the weapon jerks me back into action. Not taking my gaze off the danger, I retreat until my back hits the wall. He stops with one boot in the circle of light. The chalky tint of the bulb washes diagonally over his face and body, highlighting brown hair with a copper tint that's slightly too long and a beard shaved close to his skin. His features are angular and sharp, the cut of his nose straight and the line of his jaw strong. His eyes are the color of dark bourbon, a stunning rare russet. The weak illumination catches them in a peculiar way, making them shine like a vampire's from within, but it's not the play of light that frightens me most. It's the calculated look in those pools.

Widening his stance, he says in a deep voice, "Evie."

With that single word, he confirms my worst suspicion. This is a premeditated attack. He's after Evie specifically. His objective can only be ransom or revenge. Bell Warren has a lot of money, and he has even more enemies.

Violent shaking sets in as the truth registers. I still don't feel cold, but my teeth chatters.

"Evie," he says again.

How can his tone be so threatening and gentle at the same time?

"You have two choices," he continues. "You can come with me without making a fuss, and you won't risk hurting yourself more."

The fact that he doesn't state the second option isn't lost on me. He takes another step toward me, putting his body fully in the light. He wears a rollneck sweater and a leather jacket that stretches over the wide expanse of his shoulders. Dark jeans mold to his powerful legs. He looks fit and in shape, like he works out often. I don't stand a chance in fighting him.

He lifts his free hand, offering me his palm. I home in on how large that hand is and on the veins that run up his wrist and disappear under the sleeve of his jacket. He can crush my neck with a squeeze of his fingers, but I won't give up without a fight. I won't surrender willingly and just let him take me.

With his arm stretched out toward me, he takes another step. Instinctively, I flatten my body against the wall.

He drops his eyes to my chest and then lower. Following his gaze, I notice the tear in the dress on the side that exposes my hip and my underwear.

“You’re bleeding,” he says. “Let me take a look at that.”

Breathing in and out through my nose, I somewhat calm my shivering and adopt a slack pose.

He gives an approving nod. “Good girl.”

When he closes the last step and reaches for me, I bring my knee up hard. Before my kneecap connects with its target between his legs, he strikes out, inhumanly fast, and catches my leg. I nearly topple over. My arms flail as I battle to maintain my balance. I haven’t yet found my footing when my back hits the wall so hard the air leaves my lungs. He grabs my uninjured hip and presses me against the bricks with one hand while pushing a forearm over my throat. The gun is so close to my face I swear I can smell the gun oil. He doesn’t apply pressure on my windpipe, but the threat is indubitable. He won’t even need the gun to kill me.

“Evie.” A disapproving smile curves his lips. “I really hoped you weren’t going to choose option two.”

My heart slams between my ribs. Pinned to the wall, I’m as good as defenseless. The only weapons I have are my hands. I don’t hesitate to use them. I ball my right hand into a fist and punch him in the stomach with everything I’ve got. At the same time, I scratch his face with my left hand, leaving four red lines in the wake of my nails. His eyes flare with surprise, but he doesn’t even grunt. When he releases my hip to take something from his pocket, I fight with all my might, twisting and kicking. The pressure of his forearm increases, cutting off my airflow. I grab his arm instead, trying to pull him off me so that I can breathe. My screams are muffled, useless sounds.

“Shh, Evie,” he says with a regretful tone, a tone reserved for delivering bad news or condolences.

It only makes me fight harder.

When he finally lets my throat go, it’s to cover my mouth and nose with a moist cloth. I don’t want to inhale, but my lungs do it

automatically. They drag in the pungent smell of chemicals with too little air.

I resist. I don't give up, but my vision blurs and my body turns heavy. It's like when I had my wisdom teeth removed and the anesthetist told me to count backward from ten. I don't get to four before my world blacks out.