

Protecting the Prince

Title Page

Protecting the Prince

A Wyn Security Novel

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Dedication

To my family, for their unwavering support

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CHAPTER ONE

“Wipe that damn smile off your face,” Franklin Black’s voice rasped.

Eliam Prince raised his eyebrows and stared at his stepfather’s beady eyes, tailored pinstriped suit, and indignant stance. *This was never your company, old man.*

“I’ll have your things boxed up and sent to you.” Eliam unbuttoned the last button on his steel-gray suit jacket and sat in the oversized sherry-colored leather chair—the president’s seat. *His* rightful seat. “Louis will show you out.” He nodded to Prince Industries’ head of security.

Franklin slammed his thick whiskey glass against the credenza lined with a fully stocked bar in crystal containers of all shapes and sizes. “This isn’t the end.” His scowl cut across the expanse of the office and satisfaction settled into Eliam’s chest.

Oh yes, it was. It was the end of bad times and the first day of a turnaround that would make a positive legacy for his family—he was going to make the company what it once had been. Great. Franklin had never been welcome, not by Eliam. And vice versa. The only thing they’d ever had in common was his mother, and now she was gone. The pain that tightened his chest after a month remained fresh and rampant.

“My mother’s shares are now mine, not yours, and the board agrees it’s time for ownership to be restored to blood.” Eliam’s words were clipped, but that wasn’t nearly as rude as leaping from his seat to strangle the man who had already taken so much from him would be.

Easy, man, you won’t get it all back in a day.

Eliam nearly had to pinch his wrist, inconspicuously of course, to see if this was just another dream. Eight years of putting up with his stepfather lording it over what his mother and real father did wrong—never right—all while profits tanked under Franklin’s watch. Those long years had felt like a lifetime, and now the nightmare was finally over.

Louis corralled Franklin and led him out of Eliam’s office to the elevator. Eliam tuned out Franklin’s echoing angry words: *you won’t make it, you have no idea what you’re doing.* He’d never have to hear that asshole’s voice again—and that would still be too soon.

Eliam looked up from his laptop to see Louis Jackson filling half of the doorway. He could’ve seen only Louis’s outline and would’ve known it was him by the edges of his pressed, short-sleeved shirt, Dockers, and flattop haircut.

“That went as well as expected.” Louis grabbed a beer from behind the credenza and sat on the black leather couch in the middle of the office. “There’s a screw loose with that one. I think we have a problem.”

“Problem?” It was over—he’d been voted out, unanimously.

“I think we need to get you personal security for a while.”

“Not necessary. He’s harmless.” Eliam leaned back in his chair and peered out the wall of windows at the downtown Seattle lights shining from tall buildings and stacked dwellings. From his vantage point, the waterfront was peaceful on the cool, September night.

“Desperate men do desperate things.” Louis shook his head and drank from his beer.

There’d always been an edge to Franklin, a ruthlessness that seemed a little too close to the surface for Eliam’s comfort. But surely Louis was going overboard painting him as a minion from the dark side—there had to be some good for such a kind, gentle, selfless woman like Eliam’s mother to love him. In tomorrow’s light of day, everyone would settle the hell down and business would go back to normal. Greed, incompetence, recklessness, and pride were not pleasant family dinner topics, but they weren’t criminal either.

“He’ll get over it.” Why in the hell were they talking about Franklin? He didn’t matter anymore. “He has no recourse.”

I’ve won.

Franklin was lucky there was nothing Eliam could do to take the money his mother had left the old man. If Eliam contested the will, her decision to give him her ownership would be questioned as well, and leaving Franklin destitute wasn’t worth the risk. Same went for Franklin—both men were at an impasse where her will was concerned.

“A man like that always thinks he has options. And they aren’t usually *nice* ones.” Louis’s dark skin personified his darkening eyes. Louis had been a part of the company since Eliam’s dad, Amit Prince, had started it. And although he’d been in and out due to his military service, only Louis knew the company as well as Franklin and Eliam.

“He should crawl back under the rock he came from, with my family’s money by the way.” Eliam opened his email and clicked on a recent one from Ann, his assistant. He was done with this conversation.

They should be toasting his promotion from vice president to president. Lord knew he didn’t have anyone else to go cheers with. His ears started to ring, and he swallowed to shoo away the mourning he hadn’t yet allowed himself for his mother. He didn’t know how to believe she was gone, that he was alone. He’d make his mom proud—he’d honor both of his parents by turning the company around. That would keep him going and them close to his heart.

“Do you trust my judgment?” Louis asked.

Eliam raised a brow and folded his hands in his lap. “Of course.”

“Call this number.” Louis pulled a card from his wallet. “Hire them.” He walked across the room with purpose—always with purpose anywhere he went—and practically shoved the card into Eliam’s hand.

“Wyn Security?” A bright red card with the company name, phone number, and the tagline “24/7 We Surround You” balanced between his thumb and index finger. “Aren’t *you* supposed to be my security?”

“They provide a different level of protection.” Louis glanced at the card and then back at Eliam.

There was a hint of warning in Louis’s steady gaze. A pit of caution sank in Eliam’s gut.

“We have tons of people around here for security.”

“You need them. Make the call.” Louis took two steps toward the door then turned around. “If nothing else, do it so I can sleep at night. I’m getting old.” Then he disappeared.

I don’t need babysitters. He was a responsible adult with a grown-up job who could protect himself. Nothing was going to get in his way of doing what he needed to do to make Prince Industries the top shipping company in the world—not Franklin, not bodyguards, not anything.

He pocketed the red card then busied himself with email and the stack of paperwork on his desk. When he grabbed the fifth folder in his pile, a picture slipped out and onto his keyboard. The smiling faces of his mom and dad stared back at him. He leaned back in his chair and flipped the picture over out of habit—his mom always wrote on the back to document the people, date, and location. The other man in the photo was their first client—Alan Bean.

I’ll make it right. This company will be great again and then you’ll always be remembered.

Winter Wyn sped through the highway traffic on I-5 heading north into Seattle. “Get out of the way, you fool,” she shouted in her empty black Durango at a car that merged into her lane and almost into her.

Her dickhead of a client hadn’t bothered to tell her or her team he had an after-party to attend at the downtown Westin. There’d been no security checks conducted and nothing coordinated with the hotel. Unpreparedness was not a motto she lived by—it was something she actively avoided. *Assholes—they want my help, but then they don’t want to listen.* Some of them most certainly deserved what she usually saved them from. And then they didn’t even pay on time, either.

“Boss.” Felix Ibarra’s voice boomed from her cell phone between her thighs. The handy tap-to-talk function made it easy for her team to stay linked constantly. They only called when they didn’t want the conversation to be overheard.

“Yeah.” She checked her rearview mirror—Felix, her second-in-command, was close behind. They’d left Eddie Dever with the client, and the other two members of her team, Amelia Roe and Mieko Noor, were in California escorting a client until tomorrow night.

“I just got off the phone with the event coordinator. A couple of the other guests have had security check in. Nothing out of the ordinary. I actually know one of the teams.”

“Good...” Her phone beeped, but she didn’t recognize the incoming number. “Hold on, I have another call.” She clicked over and held the phone to her ear. “This is Winter.”

“Hel-lo, Winter.”

The unmistakable voice of an old friend warmed her heart—Louis would always have a place there.

“Hey there, buddy, ol’ pal. Finally in the mood for that cup of coffee I owe you?” She delivered their standard coffee banter and swerved around a car in time to take the downtown exit.

“Yes, it’s been too long.” There was a hesitation in his voice, one she knew all too well from years of his being her commanding officer.

“Okay, tell me why you really called.” She braced herself, tightening her grip on the steering wheel. Louis was an excellent man, heroic even, but small talk wasn’t his strong suit.

“Eliam Prince at Prince Industries needs your services.”

Does he now? Louis had never recommended her company before.

But he had mentioned in the downtimes during their tour in Afghanistan and Iraq what he did back in Seattle. “Didn’t think you liked the guy in charge.”

He hefted a chuckle. “Good memory, but this isn’t the same guy. This is the guy who should’ve been in charge all along. Franklin was ousted today, and I think he’s looking for revenge.”

If Louis was calling for help, something was wrong, something he couldn’t take care of on his own. Which would be...what? Louis knew how to solve everything.

“How real of a threat are we talking?” She made sure to use her blinker in the thick downtown traffic, even though Felix knew where they were going.

“Franklin is trouble. I know it in my gut.”

The man’s gut had never been wrong.

“Franklin?”

“Stepfather. Nasty man.”

The Prince Industries' change of power, since the passing of its matriarch, had been all the rage in the news today and, by all accounts, conflict free. Prince Industries was one of three major players in the worldwide shipping arena, so the transfer had been covered well.

"And I assume he has the means to be nasty, as you say?" Winter tried picturing the type of man Louis would see as a threat: slippery, powerful, and deviant.

"Unlimited and will steer clear of being implicated. Eliam isn't taking this seriously at all, and he's headstrong. Use your classic Wyn charm on him."

"You want me to break his finger?" She grinned.

"The other kind of charm. I know you have it in you...deep down." There was a smile in his voice. "He'll listen to you."

She nodded in the darkness and braked for a light. "They always do. Eventually."

"Hopefully it's not too late when he comes around." Louis paused and she knew the dark place his mind had detoured.

She was picturing it, too. Louis had taught her damn near everything she knew in the army—well, the good anyway; the bad had been instilled in her long before she'd met her former commanding officer. Louis's wasn't the only command she'd been under during her ten years of service, but his was where she started to become the person she was now.

It had been two years since her honorable discharge. The pain still hit in waves out of nowhere, as did the bright flashes of fire and piercing sound of gunfire.

Their protection tactics had been flawed—flaws she didn't allow in her own company.

"There's only one problem," Louis finally continued.

She held the receiver away from her head to clear her throat. "Only one?"

"He doesn't want your services."

"Oh, cool. Yeah, no problem, I love protecting people who don't want it."

Headstrong men and women hated listening to someone telling them what to do, even if it was to keep them alive, but they did like knowing they were safe. Her hard-ass reputation preceded her, ironically landing her the high-profile clients. Clients had been attacked on her watch but never killed, and she didn't plan to start a precedent now.

On the other side of the phone she heard keys jingle. "I'll work on him. I want you to make some calls on your end to be up to speed on what or who specifically we're dealing with."

The type of calls Louis was talking about weren't numbers in the phone book, online, or even a black book.

"If there really is a problem." *He thinks Eliam has a hit out on him?*

"Better safe than sorry."

Contracts on people's lives were very serious, not run-of-the-mill assignments, and not something just anyone was able to coordinate.

By the sound of it, she was gaining a high-maintenance client—she'd be sure to charge him up front. She'd taken on a lot of debt with the security company, and she refused to pay her team, who were all veterans, a subpar wage. People who served in the military shouldn't worry about living in poverty after service to their country.

*

Eliam fired up his silver metallic Dodge Challenger, and symphony music lulled in his speakers. He pressed the button on his steering wheel to increase the sound of "Scheherazade." What an impeccable day—everything had gone according to plan, and he was now in the perfect

position to make his dreams come true. He whipped through the dark streets he'd know with his eyes closed, letting the day sink in.

The brisk night air brought peace and excitement. His first full presidential day was in front of him, and he couldn't wait—his head was full of so many ideas for his company's future. *His* future. A genuine sense of satisfaction fell over him and relaxed his entire body further into the leather seat.

The bright glare of headlights in his rearview mirror caught his eye. They approached too quickly. He glanced around at the two-lane road, which was completely open. *Ridiculous drivers.*

"Go around me," he growled to the no-name driver who threatened fender-to-bumper contact any second. All he'd wanted to do was enjoy a nice drive home, and this jackoff was ruining it.

Just as he glanced, for the umpteenth time, in his rearview mirror, he heard a *thud* and his car leapt forward. Both hands grasped the steering wheel as he fought to stay on his side of the yellow line. He glanced ahead—no cars—then behind, but there wasn't a car there now, either.

What the...

Crunch. The asshole was on the left side, ramming his car, about the size of Eliam's, right into the driver's side. Metal colliding and the sound of his side mirror being torn off wore loudly in his ears. The Challenger was forced right, and he swerved left hard to correct the path without flipping his car or going off the road into a building, fence, or any number of hard objects by the road.

Is this really happening?

Thunk. Another metal-to-metal hit, and it made his entire body cringe. Adrenaline filled his ears and sank into his gut, tightening every muscle and tendon. This time Eliam missed a sturdy streetlight by mere inches. *Game on.* He turned his steering wheel left sharply, nailing the bastard on the passenger side. *Hard.* The black car overcorrected, and screeching noises pierced through his car. He turned in his seat in time to see the bastard's car not stop, but accelerate to catch up to him in no time.

They were neck and neck, and he didn't know his next move. How did car chases and assaults usually end in the movies? Cars flipping over, people dying. *Hell no.* He was not dying tonight. Just as the car was even with him, he lightly braked and rammed his no-longer-cherry car into the other. The slam wasn't as hard as he would've liked, barely knocking the other car off its route. He couldn't keep this up much longer—his nerves and his car weren't in great shape.

Trying to keep one eye on the street and one on the asshole trying to drive him off of it, Eliam snuck a look at his speed. They were going sixty miles an hour on a road with a limit of thirty. Eliam slammed on his brakes—there was a curve just ahead that wouldn't fair well for either one of them at this speed, and since he clearly wasn't the experienced driver in this situation, his chances weren't ideal.

The gun in his nightstand drawer would look pretty good right now. How far was this going? He was just about to push the Call button on the dashboard screen for 911 when the black car's taillights disappeared around the corner. Eliam came to a full stop, barely breathing. Were there more of them? He swiveled his neck in every direction. No one was around. Should he wait here and call the cops? Nope. He was getting the hell out of the area.

He checked the streets around him and turned right, not a direct route to his building but it would do. He wasn't going to chance the mysterious car waiting for him up ahead. Continuously checking his rearview mirror, not using his blinker, and driving thirty over the limit, the otherwise ten-minute drive took only four, but it still felt like an eternity.

When he pulled up to the Breeland Building, Jordan, his favorite valet, raised his pierced brow.

“Call the body shop. It’s going to need some work,” Eliam said in his best authoritative voice, an attempt to get ahold of himself in the familiar surroundings.

“Yes, sir.” Jordan shook his teenaged head, and wispy brown hair fell into his eyes. “You okay?”

Dark green eyes met his and he looked down at his hands holding out the keys. To his absolute horror, he was trembling—not a good look on a man of his build and position.

“Yes. Just a little issue on the road tonight.” He dropped the keys into Jordan’s outstretched hand. He started to say he needed the police to be called, then snapped his mouth shut. He barely had a description of the car to give them. He needed a company that would protect him. He needed a bodyguard.

CHAPTER TWO

“This is Winter,” she answered her phone on the first ring.

“Is this Wyn Security?” a smooth male voice asked.

“Yep.” Two years of owning a business and she still forgot to answer it with the business name. “How may I help you?” She kicked off her black cargo boots in the entryway to her charming fixer-upper in the Queen Anne District, which sat on the outskirts north of downtown.

“I was given your card by my head of security, Louis. He thinks I temporarily need extra personal security.”

She checked her watch. Calls for her services came at all hours. The distinctly male voice on the other end of her phone had no trace of anxiety, yet suspicion made her pause on her wood flooring and lean against her newly painted light blue-gray wall. Something had made a man who reportedly didn’t want to talk to her call at a late hour.

“And what do you think?” she asked.

“About?” His irritation was palpable.

“Security? I prefer to provide my services to people who want them.” Yes. She was testing his patience, baiting him, if you will. But what the hell? It was after midnight; he could’ve woken her up for all he knew.

“If you count being attacked on my way home tonight *want*, then yes. I’m in want.”

“Attacked?” Okay, now she was on high alert, standing straight up and looking around for her blasted boots in the mess that was her entryway. *What the hell, Louis?* He hadn’t said Eliam was under a rapid threat. *Didn’t all this crap go down just today?* Coordinated attacks usually took longer to plan than a couple of hours. “Are you injured?”

“No. I was on my way home and a car tried to run me off the road. Multiple times.” And that’s when the smoothness of his voice gave way to pure frustration. People who called for her services, especially for themselves, usually had clear emotion in their voice—anger, fear, and sometimes she could even hear sweat through the phone. Eliam was, indeed, a client.

“Did you get a look at the driver or any other description?”

“No, it was dark and I was focused on staying alive.”

“Where do you live?” She braced her cell phone between her shoulder and cheek and hopped on one foot while slipping on her mid-calf lace-up boots that she had styled to slip on and off quickly.

“Excuse me?”

She grabbed her black leather jacket from the green antique coatrack by her front door. “You don’t want security now?”

“I thought...”

“Nope. Around the clock.” *And on the hook to Louis.* She couldn’t let anything happen to this guy now; she’d never be able to bear letting Louis down.

“We can set up a time tomorrow.” The Prince’s tone was back in place.

Macho men. She rolled her eyes. They were the worst. He’d decided to call but wanted to show he didn’t need immediate attention because he, no doubt, could “handle” it.

“Let me ask you this, do you value your life?”

“Of course.”

“Well, someone out there doesn’t. We can meet now or wait until tomorrow and hope they need sleep tonight.”

A quick pocket of air, like he was breathing right into her ear, told her she’d won.

“Where do you live?” She grabbed her bag and an extra clip from the drawer in the rustic table in her entryway, caught a quick glimpse of herself in the circle mirror that hung above the table, fluffed her short, messy, springy black curls, and then was back out the door she’d come in only moments ago. So much for a good night’s sleep. It was convenient her skin was dark enough to cover the circles she was sure were forming under her eyes.

“Breeland Building. Penthouse. I’ll phone downstairs and let them know to let you up.”

“Be there in fifteen. Don’t let anyone else in until I get there.”

It was a good thing she kept a bag with overnight supplies and more things than she could remember in the back of her Durango. One of these days she should really clean out and catalog the gear, clothes, and miscellaneous items in her rolling office. There were no office hours for her line of work and no set necessities, therefore she needed everything. Some days she wondered why she bothered to own a big house. She certainly didn’t have the time to fully appreciate it.

Her phone rang, and the screen read UNKNOWN.

“Wyn Security.” Yes, that was how she needed to answer her phone, even if it was still too early for the ass crack of dawn.

“Winter Wyn.”

Icy prickles stabbed at the hand holding her cell phone and she gripped it tightly. She took a deep, quiet breath. There was a small chance he had a *decent* reason for calling.

“Holland. Long time no talk.” *Or see. Thank God.*

“I have a proposition for you.”

And the verdict: indecent. She’d been way too optimistic to think Holland had called just to say hi to an acquaintance from long ago. Maybe it was fortuitous; she was going to have to call him tomorrow anyway, according to Louis.

“This should be good.” She bit into her lower lip.

Holland, only known by his first name, had been a contact whom Louis’s team, Company A, used overseas when they needed information only someone who dealt in intel and secrets could acquire. While he’d proved to be useful, that didn’t make up for his ample slime factor.

“Oh, it is. I have a fresh order that needs to be filled within thirty-six hours.”

Her night was just filling up with talk of conspiracies to kill people. Wariness silenced her, and Holland took the cue to keep going.

“New CEO. Should be an easy target.”

New? She licked her lips and rubbed them together. She happened to be driving to a new CEO’s home at the moment. She closed her eyes briefly and felt paranoia suck the air out of her SUV.

“Doesn’t have to look like an accident; the boss doesn’t care.”

Boss, heh. Holland really meant the person who’d ordered the hit. Holland was an intermediary, and one without a conscience.

“What type of CEO are we talking?” She mentally crossed her fingers for any answer but “shipping.”

“He moves goods.”

“Why would you think I’d be interested?” Seriously, did she honestly seem like the cold-blooded killer type? Maybe this guy didn’t have as good a read on people as she’d originally assessed.

“You have a new business. How’s that going, by the way?” The smile in his voice was clear. And she knew from experience his was a nice, perfectly straight, and white smile. Shady people didn’t always look like the bad guys—a fact that both impressed her and terrified her.

“Good. We keep busy.”

“And you have a big business bank loan, I see.”

She gritted her teeth. Of course he’d checked up on her before he’d called. Holland didn’t leave anything to chance.

“Our type of equipment isn’t cheap.” She entered downtown and headed to the waterfront.

“Exactly. This is top-dollar. You could take care of all of your loan problems and then some.”

Okay, so he wasn’t totally off in his assessment—the money would be nice—but she protected people, not killed them. He’d have to do a lot better to entice her into killing someone in cold blood. Her early army days were behind her; she wasn’t that person anymore—the one who only took orders and used her rifle to enforce the goal of her commanding officer. Master Sergeant Rob Buckley’s orders were long behind her.

She could always call in an anonymous tip to the Seattle Police Department to satisfy her conscience if it wasn’t Eliam.

She let out an exaggerated sigh so as to seem like she wasn’t anxious to hear the name. Holland was perceptive as hell.

“I don’t have loan *problems*. But, yeah, this doesn’t sound like a tough job. I could probably squeeze it in.”

“As heartless as ever.”

Like you know me. “Yup. What’s this guy’s name?”

She was actually torn. If it was Eliam, she had a serious problem on her hands. Holland wouldn’t be happy with a double-cross and that put her in danger, as well.

“Prince. Eliam Prince.”

Her hands went cold, her stomach twisted, and her jaw clamped down. Eliam was the worst name he could’ve said after all.

“Am I the first person you called?” The timeline of tonight’s events weren’t adding up. Hadn’t Eliam said he’d already been attacked?

“No. But you’re the first one available. My other contacts were otherwise engaged.”

“Text me the details.” She had to get off of the phone with him before he caught on to her panic. “If the price is right, we have a deal.” Money was a mere detail—she was taking the contract to buy her new client more time—but if she didn’t ask for the specifics, he might get suspicious.

“Will do. You have thirty-six hours for the full commission. Then I start sending in others every twelve till the job is done. It would be a shame if you lost out on all of this money.”

It will be a shame if I end up on your hit list myself. Stone-cold fear rattled around in her head and zigzagged its way down to the very tips of her lavender-painted toes. *What in the fuck did I just do?*

She was trained to assess situations for the best outcome, the safest solution for all involved, and to carry out the plan. Was that what just happened? Did her subconscious have a strategy she wasn’t privy to yet? Holy shit, she sure hoped so, because if not, she’d just signed two death warrants with one phone call.

CHAPTER THREE

Winter pulled her SUV into the underground parking at Eliam's building. A lanky kid in a red vest stepped out from an office of windows by a bank of elevators.

"Good evening." He bobbed his head and his brown hair swayed by way of greeting.

"I'm here for Mr. Prince." She gave him her valet key.

"Are you his new driver?" He looked at her tinted windows, then lingered on her black cargo boots. "His car got pretty banged up tonight."

"Is it still here?" The damage could indicate what she was dealing with—either it was serious or Eliam had blown it out of proportion. Either way it would be nice to see where Eliam was coming from when she met with him upstairs.

And since when was she someone's driver in this getup? Next thing this kid would be calling her ma'am and then she'd have to give him a pistol-whipping demonstration.

"Yeah." He pointed behind her to a Dodge Challenger.

Eliam wasn't kidding. Someone had been trying to do some significant damage—there were dents and paint-peeling scratches running the length of his sporty car.

After she made her way up to the lobby of Eliam's building, she showed her ID to the night watchman, who handed her a special card to access the top floor from the left elevator. The building was decorated in rich greens and shades of black and, more importantly, was secure. Eliam wasn't her first client in the Breeland Building, although he was her first on the top floor.

Shiny doors opened into a small foyer with cream French doors adorned with glass designs. There was a doorbell to the right of the grand entrance. If someone could get up here without the special key, did he then think a doorbell was some last barrier of protection? Probably had a puppy standing guard, too. Before she could reach for the round light, the doors swung open.

A man in dark jeans, black socks, and a black pullover with a zipper that ran five inches down his chest leaned against the door frame and crossed his arms. "Ms. Wyn. Welcome."

He didn't look like the man she'd seen in the news stories. They hadn't been great pictures, but the man standing in front of her was handsome, of Israeli descent, and at least six foot three. He welcomed her in and closed the doors behind her. She fell in step beside him as he led her to the wide expanse of his living room.

"You're not going to ask for ID? How did you know who I was?" She set down her black bag of randomness in a nook between the entry and hallway.

"You said fifteen minutes. You're right on time."

"Mr. Prince." Always better to start out formal. Even though she'd been a little shit on the phone earlier, he was still a client. "You need to be more careful."

"Eliam, please. But I don't remember telling you my name on the phone."

"I'm good at my job. Let's talk a bit more about why I'm here."

His home was stunning with its dark wood floors that complemented the pure white couch, red chair, and pops of color from the abstract expressionism artwork on the wall—very expensive, very original-looking artwork. The wall of windows provided a 180-degree view of Puget Sound and parts of downtown on either side of the living room.

He carried himself with his head high over to the bar set up on the left side of the apartment, produced two short glasses, palmed a bottle of whiskey, and poured.

"One minute I'm driving home, the next I'm nearly run off the road by a black car. That's all I know."

His wide strides brought him back to her side in a blink of an eye, and he handed her a glass with liquor and ice in the shape of spheres. She sipped as he invited her to sit across from him—she on the oversized, red armchair and he on the couch.

She sat close to the edge, so as to not sink completely into the luscious fabric. “Do you have any idea who the assailants might be?”

“No. Too dark to see anything. They handled themselves well. I rammed them back a couple of times and they kept control.”

“You rammed them back?” She couldn’t keep the surprise out of her voice, off her face, nor stop a smile from forming. *Ballsy. I like it.*

“I had no other choice.”

The calm and collected demeanor he maintained flagged her internal alarms. Or maybe she was sensitive only because she’d already spoken to Louis and knew about the stepfather. After a life-or-death altercation, people could have numerous reactions. The fact that Eliam appeared to be just getting back from a dinner with friends was something she’d keep in mind while on his detail.

“Technically, you had many choices. You just chose the one that said you weren’t going to sit there and take it.”

He stared over his glass at her with light brown eyes. Hard eyes. Eyes that didn’t mess around with things that were beneath him, like people trying to kill him. Louis may have been off on his estimation of Eliam’s attitude—he was taking this seriously. And personally.

“I approve, by the way,” she continued because he clearly had nothing more to say on the subject of his reaction.

He sat back easily on the couch, his ankle over a knee, holding his glass in one big hand while his other long, muscled arm stretched along the back of the couch. His broad shoulders made his tall frame even more impressive. His dark, thick hair spiked a couple inches and his short, black beard had a clean line below his cheekbone. His olive skin tone rounded out the picture to one sturdy, manly man.

“Tell me about your services, Ms. Wyn. What exactly will this entail?”

“Around-the-clock protection. I have a team. I’ll bring them in bright and early tomorrow morning and we’ll sweep your place, your office... I’d say your car, but I’m assuming that’ll be in the body shop for a while.” *And accept a contract to kill you, for research purposes, of course.*

He nodded and his dark stare searched her. With his thick black eyebrows and eyelashes, his brown eyes were captivating.

Where was she? Oh, explaining protection detail. “We’ll escort you where you need to go. That’s better anyway.” Her phone vibrated in her coat pocket—it was probably details and payday arrangements on killing the man sitting in front of her. Damn, she’d stepped in it this time. “I’ll need your schedule to check other places before you arrive.”

He drained his glass and focused on the carpet full of rich reds, oranges, and blues. She understood. It was hard to go from being independent and doing whatever you wanted to having people constantly looking over your shoulder and second-guessing your every move.

Maybe lightening the mood while Eliam processed his new immediate future would help.

“You’re about to pay a lot of money so an old man can sleep at night?” she asked. Louis had a few standard guilt trip lines, and she hedged her bets on which one he’d used on Eliam.

His head shot up and she caught the lights and darks this time in his brown eyes—eyes that gaped before quickly returning to neutral. A minute passed between them in silence. Maybe catching him off guard with that type of personal information wasn’t a good move.

She could practically see his mind, his now very suspicious mind, at work.

“Either you’re quite impressive at your job or you already know Louis.” He paused and smiled, revealing perfect, white teeth on top with a couple of crooked ones on the bottom. “Although I truly hope it’s both.”

The man had charm. In spades. Especially when he added that quick and easy smile.

“Louis and I go way back.”

“I see.” She spotted the relief even though he tried to hide it by very brazenly checking her out from head to toe. “You’re too young to have that long of a history with him.”

“Age isn’t measured only in years.” *Age-ist*. “He knows I’m good at what I do.”

“I’m sure you are. Here’s the deal. I don’t actually want bodyguards.”

“No shit.” She wasn’t so sure she wanted to be his bodyguard.

“*But* clearly I need some sort of protection.” His jaw muscles flexed. Otherwise, he was completely still, not a major tell in sight. He was way too calm; something wasn’t right with his attitude.

“Tell me about Franklin.” She had Louis’s opinion, now she wanted Eliam’s—and to watch his reaction.

“Franklin?” His thumb stroked his glass, annoyance heavy in his voice.

“Yes. Louis thought you might be in danger, and tonight’s car chase confirms his suspicions.” Clients were usually forthcoming about any and all people who could be up for wronging them, yet she was having to pull it out of Eliam. The quiet clients were the scariest.

“He’s my stepfather. *Ex*-stepfather now.” A quick scowl crossed his face. “I just took over as president, a position he’s held for the last four years.”

“Louis said he was very angry when he left the office today. We need to consider you in constant danger.”

“Constant danger?”

“Yes. Unless you think tonight was routine road rage?” She kept her face neutral so as not to give him a hint of how to answer. He wasn’t giving her much as it was, and she didn’t want him placating her to boot.

“I...maybe. You know, it could be. Unprovoked, of course. Perhaps I jumped the gun calling tonight.” He moved his hand to his lap and onto his glass, twisting it back and forth. “Louis had given me your card, and I didn’t have anything to tell the police.”

He’d obviously called her out of panic and was now settling down about the situation. Only, tonight’s events and Holland’s call were very real and not something to simply brush off.

“You could file a report. You still should, actually.”

“I could.” He nodded once. “Or I could hire you to find out who it was and deal with them.”

“I don’t provide bounty hunter services. I don’t find people, and I certainly don’t *deal* with them.” If she didn’t already know the threat was real, she would’ve considered her late-night ride into downtown a complete waste of time. But she couldn’t leave. Not now. She’d loop Louis in, but he wasn’t equipped to deal with this. Winter and her team, however, were. Resentment over being at Eliam’s and not in her soft bed started to seep into her neck. “My team and I provide personal security.”

“I can’t believe Franklin would actually follow through,” Eliam mumbled more to his glass of whiskey than to her.

“He probably hired someone.” *She said as she pretended not to be that person*. Resisting the urge to roll her eyes at herself, she met his gaze to reassure him it wasn’t her. “We always want

to believe the best in people; most of the time it's unjust placement." His trust in her wouldn't be wrong, though—for him to stay alive he had to believe she had only the best intentions.

"I have seen my fair share of the human spirit. But, yes, somehow I'm still surprised."

Yeah, it would suck to find out someone wanted you dead and was actually trying to make that a reality.

"Shipping company captain not all rosy?" She sat a little farther back in the chair and crossed her legs, trying to find a balance between being comfortable and being able to stand quickly—it was a damn big chair.

"There's a dark side." His words brought a dimness to his face, shadowing his cheeks even more than his manicured beard. "To everything in life."

There was more to his statement she'd have to find out—she didn't like surprises, but she could wait with her twenty questions until the morning. The man had already experienced enough for the night.

"Said like a true jaded adult." She sipped on her drink again, careful to take itsy-bitsy tastes instead of downing it in one gulp like she wanted. She was on the clock and facing a very real threat against her client. She was his only line of defense right now—and, technically, one of the people on the threat list. This night had become one for the record books in a hurry.

"Please. You're one to talk." There was that easy smile again. Right on cue. Eliam was a good deflector of topics he didn't care to pursue. Good thing she wasn't dating him—getting to know him would bring its own set of challenges.

"And you would know this how?" She arched a brow. "Maybe I see the world in laughter and bubbles filled with candy canes." Some days she wished she did; she wished she hadn't seen half the shit she had in her thirty years on this crazy-ass earth.

"I've seen and experienced things, yes. And, by the looks of it, so have you," he conceded and judged all at once.

She didn't squirm in her seat, but her crossed legs pushed together a little harder. This wasn't about her. "I have, but I've never been the target of a killer before," she lied through the teeth she'd worn braces on for two years as a teenager. Her past, or present, had nothing to do with their conversation.

"I'll be crossing that item off my to-do list in the morning. If I make it that long." He winked and the act felt out of place.

Everything he was saying and doing was to gloss over the fact that his life was in danger. Of course, he didn't really know how much danger, and she had the sneaky suspicion she didn't, either. It would be fairly easy to put a bullet in his head, he wasn't a hard target to track, and collect the hefty sum—if she were a cold-blooded killer. Which she wasn't. Her entire adult life had been dedicated to protecting the innocent, first with the army and now with Wyn Security. Eliam didn't deserve to die because someone had the money to make it happen.

"So this protection service you provide, you're good at what you do?" he asked as he set his glass down on the end table next to him.

"You're about to find out."

"Me, I save the hunt for more pleasurable pursuits."

His eyes locked on to hers and her breath caught. When the man's full attention was on something, it was a laser beam—a stream of hunky, mysterious energy that, if he weren't a client, would draw her to him in one tittering heartbeat.

"I don't believe in coincidences," he said.

“Me, either.” She took a deep breath. Now they were getting somewhere. “Finally, something we have in common...besides wanting to keep you alive.”

“Alive is good. Alive is preferable.” He nodded once, the playfulness gone.

Judging from his stern look, he could take care of himself in any boardroom in the world. And get his way. He was well built, imposing, and dark in all the right ways. There was definitely something simmering below his clean-cut exterior, and she hoped she’d find out what. In a totally professional manner, of course.

What are you hiding? A man like him, in the position he held and with his family, had seen things. He’d made decisions. She wondered how far he’d had to go in his line of work—the shipping industry was usually ripe with mischief.

Are you good mischief, or the bad kind, Mr. Prince?

*

Eliam kept his eyes glued to Winter. *This is who Louis was adamant I call?* It was absurd to think he needed a bodyguard and that this woman sitting across from him was going to provide those services. He should’ve waited, he should’ve calmed down and thought through the events before he’d taken Louis’s advice. Now he was stuck with a stranger in his house who worked for Franklin for all he knew. He glanced at his bedroom door—he should’ve grabbed his gun and stuck it in his jeans.

Right, like he was some kind of gangster.

She gracefully stood and stretched her legs. “Have you noticed anything out of the ordinary since you’ve returned home?” She didn’t physically touch anything, but it was clear she was cataloging all of his possessions.

“No. But I haven’t looked, either. I showered and called you.”

He’d taken a very hot shower to counteract the cold sweats the driver in the black car had given him. He was damn lucky to not have had a heart attack.

“Mind looking around with me?”

He did as she asked and they started near the wet bar. He shared his attention equally between the accoutrements his designer had decided he needed and Winter. She had a curvy shape that also managed to be lean, toned—her breasts were a handful, her waist smaller, her ass luscious in her tight, black pants, and her legs long for her estimated five-foot-seven frame. She was a darker-skinned beauty who, offhand, didn’t look to meet the bodyguard criteria—which probably made her that much more deadly.

“Look for any detail that might be out of place or new. Even if you’re not sure, show me.” She inspected the shelving that lined the two walls flanking the bank of windows.

“Okay, but honestly the only things I picked out in here were the couches, the art, and my bed.”

If it were left up to him, he wouldn’t have any of it, but entertaining was necessary and he couldn’t very well look like he dwelled in temporary housing.

Ah, his bed. Damn, he could feel all of his muscles, and a headache was forming. The shower had done little to relieve the pinch that still cramped his every move. Sleep might help, but he’d be damned if he was going to get any tonight.

“Should I text you when I’m going in to the office tomorrow?” he asked, resisting the urge to rub his temples at the sweet chance they might stop throbbing.

“Why would you do that?”

“So you’ll know when to meet me there.” He just wanted to be alone now and go to bed. Everything would sort itself out in the light of day.

She picked up a set of three white vases to check in and under them, but her intense, dark blue gaze had already made an imprint on him. Her almond-shaped eyes were like magnets to his groin. Her silky brown skin, mixed with alluring Spanish features—oval face, dark lashes—replaced the images of a car ramming him off the road.

“I’ll know because I’ll be with you.”

“You’ll be what?”

“I’m taking the first shift. You’ll meet the rest of my team at your office tomorrow and then we’ll all take turns.”

Suddenly he wasn’t so tired anymore.

“Have we not been having the same conversation this entire time?” she asked. “My team and I provide around-the-clock personal protection.”

He blew out a loud sigh. This woman was pushing the boundaries of his patience. Maybe she’d mentioned it, but all he’d been able to think about was his heart-pounding night, Franklin’s creepy stare, and his first day as president. His attitude toward Winter was unfair—yes, he’d called her—but it was late and he didn’t really think anything else could possibly happen tonight. But, then again, he hadn’t thought some psycho, hired by another psycho, would try to run him off the road, either.

The ends of his lips twitched upward as he channeled his presidential self—the calm, cool, and collected part. “I have a spare room. You can use that.” He pointed to the hallway past the bar. Three doors capped off the long passage—one room for his office, another for guests, and a bathroom in between.

Hell, he’d be at the office most of the week anyway. She’d just be standing at his door the entire time.

“We won’t be sleeping.”

A steamy picture flashed of her naked in his bed while they *didn’t sleep*.

“My team and I, while we’re here. We will use it for our gear, though. Thank you,” she said while inspecting a blue glass sculpture that always reminded him of lightning even though it looked nothing like a bolt.

If this was what he had to do to make Louis feel better, and possibly himself, then it was a small sacrifice. It might even be a bit of fun.

*

“Make yourself at home.” Eliam collected their glasses and returned them to the bar. “I’m calling it a night.”

Winter grabbed her bag from the entryway floor. “Good night.”

For a second it seemed he had more to say, but instead he disappeared behind a closed door off the kitchen on the opposite side of the guest room.

She pulled her phone out from her jacket pocket, checked the time hoping maybe it wouldn’t be too late, which it was, and called Felix.

“Oh man, this better be dire,” Felix’s deep voice rasped.

“I think it fits the bill.” She glanced behind her at Eliam’s closed door and headed to the guest bedroom just to be sure she wouldn’t be overheard. “We have a new client with at least one hit on his head through Holland, and it’s a time-sensitive issue.”

“Do I want to know how you know this exact information?” Felix had been in the field with her and knew Holland’s SOP. To say Felix wasn’t a fan was a gross understatement.

“Holland called when I was on the way to the client’s.” She flipped on the light switch—a knitted navy quilt adorned the guest bed and looked to be more fitting for a cottage down by the ocean instead of a sleek penthouse.

“Shit,” he breathed. “You didn’t.” Felix sounded more awake and definitely not pleased with anything she was telling him. The man’s face was in a perpetual state of pissed, so she could picture his grumpy stare easily.

“I had to. This is where Louis works now. Prince Industries. Eliam Prince is our client.” There was a long vanity with a mirror and some trinkets along the far wall. She opened the drawers, but they only contained extra bedding and sheets.

“Do you know who hired,” he paused, “well, you?”

Her face scrunched and she rubbed her lips together—it sounded worse out loud than it had in her head. “Not concretely, which is why I need you and Eddie on this, but our best lead so far is Franklin Black. He’s the stepfather and former president of the company.”

“That’s good. This shouldn’t be too bad, then. And, if we get Holland in the process, it’s a win-win.” She could tell Felix was busting out one of his rare smiles at the thought. Win-win indeed. “I can’t believe he’s on the military’s payroll.”

“I don’t think he’s in that racket anymore. I heard he got out about a year ago and is stateside making less-than-savory deals. Obviously.” She propped up pillows, sank in to the queen-sized bed, and closed her eyes.

“That bastard is scum.”

“Oh”—her eyes quickly opened—“wait, that’s not all.” She’d almost forgotten a crucial tidbit. *You can make it six hours, and then sleep will be all yours.*

“Usually that sentence is followed by prizes. Why do I not think you have prizes?”

“Because I really just have more bad news. Someone tried to run him off the road earlier and it wasn’t Holland. There’s at least one other player in the game, and I don’t know who that could be yet. Eliam isn’t exactly forthcoming with information.”

Neither of them had to voice their concerns over a client hiding information—they both knew from experience it was dangerous. Three of their former teammates had paid the ultimate price for their lesson.

“I’ll wake up Eddie and dig into this.” Felix’s voice scrambled the picture of the bloody aftermath her mind had drifted back to. “He’s going to want a jelly donut.”

“Tell him the first chance I get.” Eddie Dever and his jelly donuts. The man was fit, extremely good with computers, and had a weakness like none other for freaking jelly donuts.

She disconnected and closed her eyes one more time. *Just a few seconds.* There’d be time enough to sleep tomorrow when Eliam was safely in Felix’s and Eddie’s hands. She took a deep breath, promised herself a jelly donut, and swung her legs over the bed. There were cameras to hide.

Her bag was exactly where she’d left it on the couch. She stretched her back and hefted the bag to the bar. In order to put the cameras up, she first had to find them. Sticking her hand in blindly, she rooted around for a while, and when that didn’t work she started unloading the bag. *I know they’re in here.* She paused for a moment to recall the last time she’d used them.

She froze at small clicking from the entryway. There it was again.

Is someone breaking in, or have they been hiding in the hall closet this entire time?

More clicking, like the sound of a notched door opening. Eliam's bedroom door caught her eye and she quickly held up a hand for him to stop, then stole a glance to warn him to be quiet. He nodded slightly and stepped back into the door frame. Shit was getting real and Eliam wasn't going to be happy about her new plan.

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