

E.V. EVEREST

SEVEN CROWNS



BELLATON BOOK ONE

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Seven Crowns Sneak Preview

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Last Shift

A warm evening breeze drifted through the back door of the diner, lifting sweaty tendrils of hair from the nape of Ana's neck. She submerged her hands in the lukewarm water and retrieved a plate, rinsed it, and placed it on the drying rack.

The kitchen was quiet this time of night, except for the *tick, tick, tick* of the clock. Occasionally, a sound from the alley would crack the silence. A car engine. Some broken laughter. But mostly it was quiet.

A squeaky grocery cart rolled by in the distance, and Ana turned to see a young homeless man coming down the lane. She watched as he passed by and then returned to her work. Humming a tune, she fell into an easy rhythm—plate, rinse, rack, plate, rinse, rack. The flies hung in the air around her as though they, too, were captivated by the diner's late-night rhythm.

The homeless man circled back, and Ana realized that the smell of burgers and fries must be drawing him in. She wiped her wet hands on her apron and scooped some fries into a to-go box. He was waiting at the door now. She offered the box to him.

Though his hair was unkempt, his amber eyes had a sharp intelligence. He accepted the box, although he seemed far more interested in her. He opened his mouth to speak but only got out her name.

They were interrupted by her boss, Frank, who pushed through the metal doors. Frank was wearing his usual outfit—a pair of black trousers, a white button-down shirt, a long white apron, and a paper hat that read “Shirley’s Diner.” He looked like the proprietor of a 1950s soda shop or an old-fashioned milkman.

“Ana, I need you up front. Table eight is almost done with their meal.”

She nodded but hesitated at the door. How could this stranger know her name?

Frank, a retired police officer, gave the young man a crisp twenty-dollar bill and sent him back into the summer air. Ana watched as he retreated. In the dark alley, he looked back once. His eyes gleamed like a cat’s. Something she had never seen a human eye do.

Ana shook her head. *It must be a trick of the light*, she thought. She passed through the kitchen door, resigned to forget the whole thing. She had enough problems without inventing new ones.

The front of Shirley’s Diner was a monument to 1950s Americana and diner culture. There were large metal signs, an old-fashioned till, and a bold black, white, and teal color scheme. There were only two customers left in the diner. A man in a flannel work shirt and boots was demolishing an enormous burger, while his tall, lean wife looked on in distaste. She had ordered a chef’s salad.

Ana refilled their drinks and returned to her post at the counter.

Frank popped his head out of the kitchen. “I’m gonna settle the accounts,” he said. Although Frank had lived in the South for more than twenty years, his

accent had never left New York. Luckily, neither had his cooking.

“No problem,” she said, stifling a yawn.

“And Ana?”

“Yeah?”

“No more late nights this week. You’ve got school to worry about.”

School was the last thing Ana wanted to think about. She buffed her anxieties into the chrome countertop until she could see her reflection. Her once long hair hung in short locks around her face. She had shaved her head during her mom’s chemo. Her hair only passed her chin now. Her eyes were large, brown, and beautiful but sad.

Her phone chirped in her apron pocket. Frank hated devices in the diner. She checked the glowing screen under the countertop. She had a new text message from her trash bag of a foster mom, Deirdre.

“Where were u?!” the text read.

Oh crap, Ana thought. How could she have been so stupid? Tonight was Parent Teacher Conference Night. She was supposed to have been at school! Deirdre had been left alone.

Worse yet, Ana had neglected to tell her foster mom a few tiny details, like she wouldn’t be moving up to the next grade. Ana had missed too many days of school. There was also the matter of the graffitied prom banner. Honestly, that had been pretty funny. She had turned Melia Ragsdale, the would-be prom queen, into a she-demon with a pitchfork. Nothing she didn’t deserve.

The phone chirped again. “This wasn’t part of our deal.”

Ana tucked the phone back into her apron and held down the volume button to silence it. Deirdre was going to be furious. There was no getting around that. After all, having one of your foster kids miss so much school that

they failed the year didn't really reflect well on your parenting skills. Still, there was nothing to do about it now.

The woman in the corner booth sighed. Her salad was gone, and it was obvious she was ready to go. Her husband licked the ketchup off his fingers. His gaudy ring gleamed in the harsh diner light, a ruby red stone encased in silver.

Ana stifled a smile. It was one of the ugliest pieces of jewelry she had ever seen. It was obviously fake. Who wore ten-carat rubies?

He fiddled with the ring, trying to remove a spot of ketchup.

She looked down at the countertop to stop herself from laughing.

Then the strangest thing happened. Her hair began to stand on end. Her tired feet felt almost weightless. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the forks and spoons on the table float in midair.

Ana looked up just in time to see them hit the tabletop with a loud clang. Her eyes widened. It couldn't be.

"Whoopsie," declared the man. "Near 'bout dropped my fork."

Ana rubbed her eyes. She really did need to get more sleep.

The man took one last swig of Coke, and the couple walked up to the cash register.

"Hi," Ana said in the chipper tone she reserved for paying customers. "How was your meal?"

"The salad had too much dressing," the woman said haughtily.

The man rolled his eyes at his wife. "Mine was just fine, darlin'," he said, handing Ana the ticket. There was something off about his accent. It sounded more like the TV caricature of a Texas oil man than the authentic Southern accents she was used to hearing.

Ana punched the numbers into the cash register. “How about a slice of pie to go? On the house,” she added, her voice as sweet as the dessert itself.

The man smiled. The lady scowled.

Ana retrieved an enormous slice of coconut cream pie from the glass case. As the unhappy couple walked away, Ana counted the tip under the counter. Forty dollars! That was more than the meal itself. Maybe the ruby had been real.

The forty dollars would bring her total up to \$225.32. Still not enough. She would need more for an airline ticket. She sighed. That meant a lot more diner shifts.

Crossing the black-and-white-checkered floor, she reached the empty corner booth and began to pile discarded napkins and dirty silverware onto the plates. Ana had once been a good student. All As and Bs. Even some honors classes. But after her mom got sick, her grades began to drop. After she died, they plummeted. Her friends were now looking at colleges and shopping for prom dresses. Meanwhile, Ana was worried about failing the year and picking up enough shifts to make ends meet. It was crazy to think how much things could change in one year.

The bell on the front door clanged as someone entered the diner.

“We’re closed—” Ana started to say. She stopped short when she looked up and saw a familiar face. It was her brother Ryker.

Ana had three older brothers: Fletcher, Ryker, and Hugh. Fletcher was the youngest. He had just turned eighteen, aged out of the foster system, and taken a job as a mechanic. Ryker was the middle brother and a twenty-year-old college student. Something he felt immensely guilty about. Although Ana and Fletcher insisted he was being stupid, he felt guilty staying in college while they struggled in the foster system and working world. He had been extended

a scholarship after their mom's death that would allow him to complete his degree. Finally, her oldest brother was Hugh, a twenty-six-year-old doctor and the black sheep of the family.

She didn't expect to see her brothers tonight. But there was Ryker, standing in the doorway. He wasn't very tall, but his square jaw and broad shoulders made him look strong. His eyes were a warm chocolate brown, just like hers.

She pushed through the waist high door, raced across the floor, and threw herself into his arms.

"Hey sis," he said with a chuckle. "Miss me?"

"So much," she murmured, breathing in his familiar smell.

"Me too." He picked her up and twirled her around like he had since they were little kids. He set her back down with a breath of effort. "Happy birthday!"

She beamed. "You didn't need to come all the way out here. It's not even a weekend."

"Yeah, I did. Campus is only an hour away. No big deal."

"It is in your clunker," she said, elbowing him in the ribs.

"It's a damn sight better than Fletcher's!" he said, projecting his voice.

"Hey!" came an indignant shout from the kitchen. Out came her brother Fletcher. "Happy sixteen," he greeted. He shared Ana and Ryker's dark hair, but his frame was wiry compared to Ryker's boxier build.

"Two brothers in one day. Where's number three?" Ana asked.

Fletcher and Ryker exchanged a glance.

She knew it well. "Not coming, huh?"

"Hugh said he had a rotation in gastroenterology that he couldn't get out of," Ryker explained.

“Bullshit,” muttered Fletcher.

Ana was disappointed but not surprised. They didn’t see Hugh much these days. Ryker said it was because he felt too guilty to face them. Fletcher said it was because he was a loser. Ana thought they were both right, in part. If it weren’t for Hugh, Ana and Fletcher never would have gone into the foster system. Luckily for Fletcher, he had aged out after a few months. Ana still had two years left.

Ana hugged her youngest brother. “How did you get off work?”

“Told a coworker I’d do a double if he took second tonight.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

He shrugged.

Frank appeared from the kitchen with a cake in his hands. The frosting was light pink, and roses and pearls had been piped alongside her name.

“Happy birthday, kiddo,” he said. “Did we surprise you?”

She grinned from ear to ear. “Big-time.”

Fletcher rubbed his hands together. “Let’s light this bad boy. I’m starving.”

Ana rolled her eyes. You could always count on teenage boys to be hungry.

Moments later, all sixteen candles were lit. Ryker dimmed the lights, and the candles glowed in the darkness. Ana could hardly believe she was sixteen. She felt much older. This was her first birthday without her mom. Every holiday was bittersweet now.

Frank and her brothers broke into an awkward chorus of “Happy Birthday.” Ryker and Fletcher shouted as though it were a hearty drinking song. Frank, who had once been in a barbershop quartet, tried his best to harmonize the cacophony.

For a moment, as she looked at their smiling faces washed in candlelight, she felt warm, cozy, and loved.

“Make a wish,” Frank said.

Ana leaned to blow out her candles, but the door swung open. A breeze ripped through the diner and snuffed out the tiny flames. In stepped Ana’s worst nightmare, Deirdre.

An Unhappy Birthday

She crossed the room in an instant. Her nostrils flared with anger as well as physical exertion. Deirdre was as thin as the cigarette dangling from her long red fingernails and lazy to her core. She hadn't worked a day in six years. No, she was a "full-time momma" to "these sweet young'uns," or so she told Child Services whenever they visited.

In truth, she spent most of her days on her front porch chain-smoking while the kids played in the yard. For dinner, she opened cans. Ones she usually didn't bother to heat. To her credit, Deirdre didn't hit. She mostly just ignored.

She and Ana usually got along fine. They had an agreement. Deirdre collected her check, and Ana lived with a roommate near the local community college. Deirdre and Ana only met on days when a caseworker visited. Today, Ana had broken that agreement. She had stood Deirdre up. Ana had a sinking feeling that this wasn't going to end well.

Ana hurried forward to intercept her foster mom, hoping to control the fallout. "Oh, hi, Deirdre," she said with a half-hearted smile. "Why don't we, uh,

talk outside?”

Deirdre reached out and grabbed Ana’s forearm. Her fingernails dug into Ana’s flesh. She pulled Ana to the door with zero regard for their audience. Outside, she rasped, “You little brat. How dare you keep me waitin’? Do you know how hard it was to cover for you? How bad *I* looked!”

As she spoke, Deirdre waved her free arm in the air. Ana could tell she was working up to a real tirade.

“I’m sorry. I forgot,” she mumbled.

“And you’re failin’? What idiot can’t graduate high school?”

Ana felt inclined to point out that Deirdre’s boyfriend, Dwayne, had failed his GED test just last month. Instead, she said, “I’ll make it up. I swear. Extra credit and summer school if I have to.”

“I have a mind to send you back to Social Services. Get a kid that ain’t so much trouble. I went out of my way to make you happy. You wanted to live on your own. I let you!” She gripped Ana’s forearm so tightly that Ana was sure it would leave a bruise. Deirdre leaned in, and Ana could smell the Marlboro cigarettes on her breath. “There was always conditions, you knew that. And this shit ain’t a part of our deal.”

Ana started to defend herself, to beg Deirdre for a second chance. But then, she heard a throat clear behind her.

Standing in the diner’s doorway was Ryker. How long had he been there? His eyes were filled with an anger Ana had never seen before, and she knew he had heard every word.

“You,” he spat at Deirdre. “You need to leave. Now.”

Deirdre swiveled to face Ryker, a defiant hand resting on her hip. “I’m not goin’ anywhere,” she said, pursing her lips. She returned her attention to Ana. “At least not until Ana and I come to an understanding.”

Ryker took a step forward.

The bells on the glass door clanged as Frank joined them. Frank wasn't a large man, but he had been a New York City police officer long before moving to the South. He was the kind of man who didn't take any crap. He stared at Deirdre and saw her for everything she was—a lazy coward. The type of person that would take advantage of a kid. His lip curled, and he barked, "Get off my curb, or I'll call the cops."

Deirdre licked her lip. "Listen, old man. I was goin' anyway." She shot another look at Ana. "This ain't over. I'll see *you* tomorrow."

The three of them watched Deirdre get into her Camaro and speed away.

Ryker turned his steely gaze on Ana. "Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said shakily. An awkward silence spread between them, and Ana shivered in the warm night air.

"Why don't we all go inside?" Frank prodded.

Back inside the diner, no one said anything for a moment.

Ryker stared at Ana as if he didn't know who she was anymore. Finally, he exploded, "God, Ana, the lies! I don't even know where to begin. You're living on your own? You're failing school? Your foster mom—" He paused as though he wasn't sure he could handle the answer. "Does she hit you?"

Ana clutched Ryker's arm desperately. "No, Ryker. It's not like that."

"Oh, I've seen her type," Fletcher muttered.

"Then what is it like?" Ryker demanded.

"I don't live alone. I have a roommate." Ana struggled to explain herself. "Foster care is...not good. None of the homes are good. I didn't want to burden you. I'm fine on my own. Really."

Ryker ran his hands through his hair. "I just... I need some time to think. To decide what our next step should be. You can't go back to that apartment."

“What?! You can’t be serious.”

Frank nodded, a solemn expression in his face. “He’s right, Ana. You’re only sixteen. You need to live with an adult, someone who can take care of you.”

“I can take care of myself!” she shouted.

She had worked months to get her apartment. She had wheedled Deirdre into trusting her. She had been on constant page for Social Services check-ins. She had worked extra shifts to make her half of the rent. She had decorated, damn it. A single tear began to leak down her face. She wiped it away angrily.

Ryker was stone-faced. “It isn’t safe, Ana. What would mom say?”

“Mom isn’t here!” she screamed.

Fletcher winced, and Ryker took a step back.

“Ana—” Frank started.

She felt like a cornered animal. She had to get out of here. She turned her back on them and slipped through the kitchen doors. She looked frantically around for her bag. She found it on the floor near the freezer.

Ryker followed her, pushing through the kitchen doors. “Ana, you can’t go back there.”

She glared at him. “You’re being ridiculous. All my stuff is there. Where am I going to go? Back to your dorm in the middle of the night?”

He wavered. “Fine. Go home and pack. Tomorrow...tomorrow something changes.”

She didn’t say a word. She pulled her canvas tote over her shoulder and stormed out the door. She let it slam behind her.

In fact, she was so mad that she didn’t even notice she was being followed.

Ms. Kandinsky

The bus stop was in a state of decay. The shelter's roof, once clear and sturdy glass, was now blackened with rotten leaves and grime. Under Ana's feet, the asphalt rose and fell like little mountains. Sprouts of grass pushed obstinately up into the warm evening air.

Ana sat on the corroding metal bench and picked at a peeling peace sign. The residual goop from the sticker forced its way under her stubby nail. She gave up the attempt and waited in stillness for the bus to arrive.

The only sound was the squeal of an old grocery cart. Across the street, she spotted the homeless man from the diner. He pushed his grocery cart into an empty doorway to rest. She tried to get a look at his eyes, but his head was turned. They had something in common, she and this stranger. They both knew what it was like to be without a home. Ana knew now that a home wasn't just a roof and four walls. A home was more. And it was something she hadn't had in almost a year.

It would be easy to blame Hugh. It was obviously his fault. At twenty-six, he was the eldest of the Hall siblings; it was his job to take care of them.

Unfortunately, Hugh had failed, and that responsibility now fell to Ryker. At least that's how Ryker saw it. Ana knew what he was going to do next. It wasn't the first time they had talked about it. Ryker was going to drop out of college, get a job, and petition the court for custody. He was going to throw his life away, and he was going to do it for her.

She wouldn't let him.

Ana heaved a sigh and lay down on the cold metal bench to look up at the stars. She let her hands drag across the rough cement. The infinite blackness of space made her problems feel smaller. She traced the constellations, searching for the North Star—the star by which travelers had navigated for thousands of years. Polaris, its scientific name, was playing hide and seek tonight, but she knew she would win.

Ana had lain on the dewy grass outside the family home on many nights like this. She and her father looking up at the summer sky. He had explained, “Don't look for Polaris. It's not the brightest star in the sky. Look for the Big Dipper. Once you find it, Polaris won't be far behind.” It had taken years, but he had taught her how to identify all the constellations and planets.

Ana asked him why it was so important.

He said, “You never know. One day you might be up there with them.”

Ana had laughed, and they had gone back to picking out their favorites in the summer sky. Things were simpler then. In the “before.” Before her dad had left them. Before her mom had died.

One day, they were the perfect family. The next, her father was gone. No note. No phone call. Nothing. He never even returned for his things. It had been seven years.

Her life was filled with ghosts now. Every sight, every smell was a memory. She dreamed of a place where she would no longer be haunted by them.

Somewhere so far away that even they could not reach her. She thought of the cash in her pocket.

How far could she get?

The bus still hadn't come. She had been waiting a long time now. Her hands brushing the concrete were beginning to go numb from lying in this position. She reached one of them into her canvas tote and retrieved her crappy phone—one she was embarrassed to be seen with at school. It glowed, displaying the time. Late.

She tried to stay vigilant, but she fell deeper into her thoughts. Forever lost to the world around her. Down the rabbit hole and out for tea. Seconds turned to minutes and minutes to—well, who knows? The sheer gravity of her problems flattened her to the metal bench.

Bright headlights ripped through the darkness. A speeding SUV careened toward the bus stop. Its wheels left the road behind and hopped the curb. Ana screamed and clutched her chest, but there was no time to move. The vehicle slammed into the corner of the structure. The sound of colliding metal was deafening.

The SUV began to reverse and come forward again. What were they doing? Were they crazy? For one terrifying moment, Ana thought they would drive straight into the bench she was lying on. Far away in the distance, bus lights filled the darkened street. The SUV relented and drove away into the night.

The metal of the shelter gave a low groan and began to sway. Ana scrambled up from the bench, but she wasn't fast enough. The structure wasn't stable. The glass roof was cracking and falling like deadly icicles.

Ana threw her hands over her head and braced for impact. A few steps away, the homeless man abandoned his cart and dove forward. He knocked her sideways and landed on top of her, his arms shielding her face. Glass shards

rained down on their feet and legs, but they were safe from the worst of the fallout.

The man rolled quickly off of her and stuck out a hand, offering to help her up. "Are you okay?" he asked. His amber eyes flashed in that inhuman catlike way and then locked on her with intensity.

She accepted his hand. "Yeah. Yeah, I think so," she replied shakily. "What are you doing here? What are those, contacts?"

"Yeah, sure. Contacts. You should really be inside. It's not safe out here."

Ana looked back at the bus shelter, now a heap of crumpled metal and shattered dirty glass. Even though there was no chill in the summer air, she shivered. She had almost been trapped under that. She looked herself over. Nothing appeared to be out of sorts. She didn't see any blood or bones sticking out. She was lucky.

No, she was more than lucky. This man had saved her life. Who cared if he had weird eyes?

"Thank you," she said. She began to really look him over. Up close, she could tell he was not as old as she had thought. He might be in his early twenties.

The approaching bus seemed to make him uncomfortable. He brushed glass off his ratty pant legs and started to walk away. "Pay attention next time," he yelled.

Pay attention next time, she thought indignantly. Maybe they weren't so alike after all. "I would have been fine!" she shouted back. She knew it wasn't true.

He didn't respond. The shopping cart squeaked as he walked away.

* * *

The bus thundered past the wreckage and came to a stop right in front of Ana. The doors slid open, and the bus driver peered out. "Ooh wee!" she exclaimed. "What happened here?"

Ana, still in shock, managed to respond, "Some drunk slammed into the pole. It just happened."

"You were under it?" the bus driver asked, her eyes widening.

Ana nodded.

"Girl, you lucky to be alive! You report it?"

Ana shook her head. "I'm sure they're long gone now."

"Mmm, mmm, mmm," the bus driver said disapprovingly. "Not on my streets." She pulled her radio up and called in the incident while Ana headed to the back row of the bus.

The ride was short. There was only one stop between the diner and Ana's apartment. As they pulled up to the familiar rise of brick and fading vinyl, she wondered if it would be the last time. The stoop of her apartment was dark. She turned the key in the lock and opened the door. As expected, the place was empty. She thrust her hand around, searching for the light switch. The lights flickered on.

It should have been a relief to be home, but instead she found herself longing for the harsh fluorescent lighting of the bus and the chatter of the friendly bus driver. She locked the door behind her. Then she turned back and double-checked the dead bolt.

Ana tossed her canvas tote on the nearest couch and turned on the TV. Its soothing white noise filled the apartment with the buzz of another small-time

TV anchor joyfully lamenting the latest homicide. She walked into her bedroom and glanced at the wall of photographs and clippings—exotic beaches, unreachable mountains, and cityscapes. Which one of them should she pick?

Her mind churned, and she flopped down on the bed. A pitiful meow came from the pile of dirty laundry next to her. Ana rolled quickly to the side, and a large black and white cat emerged from the pile, looking at her disapprovingly.

“Sorry, Petrie,” she mumbled. “Who’s a good cat?”

Petrie circled the laundry pile a few times, his tail in the air, before finally deciding to forgive her. He pushed his little pink nose into her outstretched hand like a golden retriever affectionately snouting its master. Then he collapsed into a large purring ball at her side. She stroked his fur lightly, and it wasn’t long before they were both was asleep.

Sleep came easily, but it wasn’t gentle. Her dreams were filled with visions of breaking glass. But unlike in real life, she wasn’t saved. She was crushed alive, screaming for help that never came. Or cut into a million pieces. Her blood bright and thick on the sparkling glass.

The screeching wheels of the shopping cart didn’t come to save her. The kind-faced homeless man became hardened. His eyes black and soulless. A fire erupted from his hands. She could smell the sulfur.

Before the burning hands could reach her, Ana was shaken from her nightmare. She blinked a few times. Looming over her was an old woman. Her floral muumuu dragged the ground, and an apron had been tossed haphazardly over it. Her gray hair was pulled back, but wild curls escaped. Ana recognized her as the woman next door. She thought her name was Ms. Kandinsky.

“Get up! Get up, you stupid girl!” shouted the old woman.

* * *

Ana tried to sit up, but the room began to spin. She took a deep breath to steady herself and crinkled her nose. The smell from her dream. It was real. *What is that?* she thought. Somewhere by her feet, Petrie meowed weakly. *Gas?* she wondered.

Ms. Kandinsky wrenched her from the bed with a strength she didn't expect from a plump old woman. Ana's head pounded, and she felt like she might throw up. Ms. Kandinsky dragged her forward, tugging hard at her arm.

"Wait," Ana rasped.

She scooped up Petrie and allowed herself to be towed out the front door and into the fresh night air. It felt good in her lungs. She took a deep breath. And then another.

"That's good. Breathe it in," Ms. Kandinsky said distractedly. "Carbon monoxide poisoning can be very nasty." She wasn't looking at Ana. Her eyes were busy scanning nearby windows. It made Ana nervous. Was someone watching them?

They were two doors down when Ms. Kandinsky released her death grip on Ana to open the door. The smell of mothballs wafted out. "Well, don't just stand around," she ordered. "Go on in."

The room was filled with furniture. Every nook and cranny had a table or chair. Most were draped with large doilies and covered in tchotchkes. Ms. Kandinsky strode through the living room and headed to the kitchen. Ana lingered just inside the doorway. She was in a state of shock. Her head pounded from oxygen deprivation. She found it hard to think or do much of anything.

“Make yourself at home, doll,” Ms. Kandinsky called. “We’ve got a lot to do and not a lot of time to do it. I’m going to put some coffee on. Calms the nerves.”

Ana’s legs propelled her toward the dingy floral couch, where they seemed to give out on her almost at once. Petrie yowled and leaped onto the back of the couch. Ana sunk into its ancient cushions.

From the kitchen, the kettle whistled. Ms. Kandinsky bustled over, taking it off the stovetop and pouring the coffee into two chipped cups. “Hope you don’t mind instant.”

Ana shook her head. Ms. Kandinsky placed the cup in Ana’s hands. Ana sipped and felt a little better. “Who are you?” she managed. She still wasn’t sure she had the woman’s name right.

“Ms. Kandinsky. A friend of your mother,” the woman added. “I’ve been watching over you.”

Ana’s brain still felt sluggish. She took a sip of her coffee. “How did you know about the gas leak?”

Ms. Kandinsky sat down in the armchair next to Ana, took a long draft from her cup, and said, “You ask the wrong questions. You should be asking why someone is trying to kill you.” She paused for another sip. “This isn’t the first time tonight.”

“The bus stop,” Ana gasped.

“Of course. Do you think bus stops just get mowed down every day of the week?”

Ana knew she was right. Not only did the SUV hit the bus stop. It seemed like it was going to try again before the bus showed up.

“Samuel and I suspected someone was closing in. The signs were there. He was *supposed* to collect you, but he had his own ideas. And...here we are.” She

sighed.

“Samuel?”

“Dark hair, bearded, beautiful eyes,” she said, waggling her eyebrows.

“You don’t mean—the homeless guy?”

Ms. Kandinsky laughed so explosively that coffee shot out of her mouth and sprayed Ana. When she regained her composure, she said, “Yeah. The homeless guy,” while making air quotes. She slammed her cup down on the nearest doily. “Well, that’s enough small talk. We’ve got to get you out of here.”

Small talk! Ana thought. *This was small talk to this woman?* A stream of questions poured out. “Out of where? Where are we going? Shouldn’t we call the police?”

“The people who are after you will not be stopped by ordinary policemen. You must run far, and you must run fast.” Ms. K got out of her chair with a groan. “Now, do you want to talk, or do you want to live?”

“Can’t I do both?”

Ms. K grunted and shuffled toward the kitchen with the mugs.

Ana tried one more question. “Who’s after me?”

“I haven’t the foggiest. I don’t have enough fingers and toes to count the number of people who want you dead.”

“Why would anyone want to kill me?” Ana sputtered.

“There’s more to you than meets the eye, doll. More to your mother too.” Ms. Kandinsky dropped the mugs into the sink and let the water run for a minute.

Ana considered her options. She could return to her apartment and call the police who would, in turn, call her caseworker. Not a good option. She could call the super to repair the gas leak and hope it was all some terrible coincidence. That could work.

No, that wouldn't work either. Ryker and Frank would never allow her to live here without an adult. She'd just be delaying the inevitable. And taking Ryker down with her. She wouldn't let him drop out of college. He deserved a future.

If she was leaving, it might as well be tonight.

Ms. Kandinsky was opening the back door. "Well, don't just sit there," she called.

"You would make an old woman break her back while you sit around?"

Ana scrambled up from the couch and followed Ms. Kandinsky outside. A large white freezer sat on her back patio. Ms. Kandinsky opened the lid and began tossing bags of frozen vegetables at Ana. She caught them. Her arms filled with peas, carrots, and everything in between. Just when she thought she could hold no more, Ms. Kandinsky's entire torso leaned into the freezer to fish something out. With a grunt of effort, Ms. Kandinsky emerged with...an arm. It draped over the side of the freezer, cold and crisp and deathly pale.

Ana dropped the vegetables and screamed.

Ms. Kandinsky cut her eyes over. "Oh, don't be so theatrical," she huffed. "Help me lift her."

Ana started backing away. This woman was mad. She was probably the one who started the gas leak. But as more of the body emerged, she stopped. A pale face with round eyes, frozen open. She knew that face. It was hers.

* * *

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