

Chapter 9 9

Analia burst out of the side exit of the Apex building into the alleyway .
She was shaking

She checked her pockets. Phone. Wallet . Keys.

Shit.

Her visitor badge. The one that said Analia Graves .

She didn't have it.

She slapped her hip. Gone. It must have fallen off in the studio. Or the hallway .

If Clive found it...

She hesitated. Go back? It was suicide .

But if he found that badge in the studio, the game was over before it started .

She took a deep breath. She had to risk it.

She circled back to the main lobby. She would say she dropped her ID.

She walked in. The lobby was even more crowded now.

She scanned the floor near the elevators . Nothing

"Looking for this?"

A voice came from behind her. Smooth. Amused.

She spun around.

Kole Hall was standing there, holding her badge between two fingers.

Analia felt the blood drain from her face .

Kole looked at the badge, then at her. He smirked.

"Analia Graves," he read. "Visitor. Destination: Studio B."

He looked into her eyes, ignoring the sunglasses.

"You're Starfall ," he stated . It wasn't a question.

Analia opened her mouth to deny it, but Kole raised a hand.

"Don't insult my intelligence, Ana. I was listening to the live feed from my office. I know your voice. I've heard you holding back tears at enough dinner parties to recognize the cadence, even when you drop it an octave."

"Are you going to tell him?" Analia asked, her voice steady.

Kole looked over his shoulder. The elevator doors opened. Clive was stepping out, looking furious. He had clearly lost the argument with Gaylon.

Clive spotted them. He saw Kole talking to a woman in a hat.

He stormed over.

"Kole! We're not done."

Then he looked at the woman. He recognized the coat this time.

"Analia?" Clive asked, incredulous.

Analia took off her sunglasses. There was no point hiding now.

"Hello, Clive," she said. She pitched her voice up, softening the hard edges, slipping back into the breathy, gentle register of the trophy wife he expected. It was a perfect performance.

Clive looked from her to Kole. Then his eyes fell on the badge in Kole's hand. Kole quickly slipped it into his pocket, hiding the name.

"What are you doing here?" Clive demanded, grabbing Analia's arm. "Are you stalking me? Did you follow me here to make a scene?"

"I didn't know you were here, Clive," she said, pulling her arm away. "I was... meeting a friend."

"A friend?" Clive scoffed. "You don't have friends at Apex. You're here to beg Kole for money, aren't you? Since I cut your cards?"

He turned to Kole. "Don't give her a dime. She needs to learn a lesson."

Analia laughed. It was a genuine amused sound.

"You are so vain, Clive," she said. "I'm not here for your money. And I'm certainly not here for you."

She looked at Kole. "Mr. Hall, can I have my... item back?"

Kole smiled, a glint of mischief in his eyes. He handed her the badge, face down.

"Pleasure seeing you, Analia. Good luck with your... project."

"Thank you," she said.

She turned to Clive. "Goodbye, husband. Try not to trip on your ego."

She walked out the revolving doors.

Clive stared after her, fuming. "What was she doing here, Kole?"

Kole clapped a hand on Clive's shoulder. "Honest to God, Clive? I think she's out of your league."

"She's my wife," Clive spat. "She's not out of anyone's league."

Kole just smiled and walked away. He loved a good show. And this was

going to be the best show in town.



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