

Chapter 1

Bastian

It looked like an ancient Egyptian temple.

I walked across the stage. The show was coming together well. The massive columns rising toward the ceiling looked like real stone, but I knew they were merely foam, expertly painted by the stage crew.

Lights clicked on, showcasing a large statue of the Ancient Egyptian god, Anubis, the jackal-headed god of funerary rites. I knew the special-effects team was still working out some kinks, but I could easily imagine the cast on stage, in their Egyptian costumes, telling the story of the god, Osiris, and his goddess wife, Isis.

It was a gripping tale of love, betrayal, and rebirth.

Yes, the Avernus Casino had a hit on its hands. The tourists would flock to see it.

My lips curved. *Perfect*. I enjoyed the challenge of running my casino. I also enjoyed making lots of money.

“We need to beef up security around the VIP seats,” a deep voice said beside me.

I flicked a glance at my friend and security consultant, Nash Oakley. He was studying the

auditorium seating, his arms crossed and a frown on his face.

“Agreed. We have a Saudi prince coming on opening night, along with several New York heiresses on a bachelorette party. Not to mention lots of local Las Vegas personalities.”

Nash grunted. I knew he was working through the security plan in his head. “I’ll coordinate with Theo.”

Theo was head of security for the Avernus. The older former military man always got the job done.

“Excellent.”

I saw Forrest, our eccentric costume designer, push a rack of clothes onto the stage. Several actors trotted along behind him, most of them already in costume.

“Come on, come on.” The goateed man waved at them. “I need to see if everything works under the lights. There’ll be adjustments that I need to make. Hurry up, now.”

I saw the muscular Osiris—clad in a white skirt, a collar of gold and lapis lazuli draped over his chest and shoulders. His large headdress was the white crown of Upper Egypt, adorned with a golden cobra. He was followed by the willowy Isis, wearing a gauzy, white dress, and a vulture headdress in brilliant gold.

It was a gripping story—the god Osiris killed by his jealous brother Set, who throws his body into the Nile. Osiris’ wife, Isis, searches for him and brings him back to life with her magic, and they conceive their son, Horus. But Osiris’ time on Earth is over, and he becomes the King of the Underworld.

I watched Forrest hover, tugging on hemlines, and fussing over crowns and headdresses. It was the perfect show for the Avernus. I felt a special affinity to the underworld.

As a former assassin, it felt right.

That's why I'd called my casino the Avernus, after a volcanic crater and lake in Italy that was rumored to be an entrance to the underworld in Roman mythology.

Nash was another former assassin. In fact, quite a few retired assassins called the Avernus home these days. My lips quirked. I seemed to have a knack for collecting battered souls.

I liked that the casino kept me busy. It was what I needed to stop from overthinking. I knew that the past was best left in the past, but sometimes, things best left in the dark liked to rear their heads. Still, I'd learned that regrets never helped, never changed the outcome.

I'd come from nothing, then been recruited into the CIA. I'd become the best assassin they'd ever created. Then, I'd faked my own death and started a new life.

Now, it was my choices, my way.

"By the way, I sent that report you requested to your email," Nash said. "On the Red Ribbon Killer."

I was careful not to stiffen. "Thank you."

"You going to tell me why you're interested in a notorious serial killer who's never been caught?"

"No."

Nash sighed. "Fine. So, do you have a plan for dealing with Lark?"

My muscles tensed at the change of subject. "I said I'd deal with her."

"Bastian, she's tried to kill you four times. You can't just ignore her."

My mouth flattened.

Nash sighed. "Look, I get it. You're connected through Ed. She was practically his daughter, and he treated you like a son."

Ed Galloway.

A gallon of conflicting emotions surged up inside me. Once, I'd believed he was the greatest man I'd ever known. A top CIA agent. A patriot. He'd been the one to recruit a cocky, homeless teenager. He was the one person who'd seen potential in me.

I'd been an abandoned baby, then a foster kid, then a runaway surviving on the street when Ed had changed my life.

And a few years later, he'd taken in a grieving, orphaned girl whose family had been massacred. He'd raised Lark as his own.

Nash was right. I'd considered Ed a father figure, like Lark did. Not that I'd ever felt anything brotherly toward her. My feelings for Lark were as complex as my ones for Ed.

But then everything had changed when I'd learned that the man I'd known all my life was a lie.

I blew out a breath. "I said I'll deal with her. When you've made the security adjustments for opening night, let me know." I swiveled and strode out of the auditorium.

Back on the main floor of the casino, the jaunty songs of the slot machines and the familiar hubbub of gamblers at the tables filled my ears. The casino decor was black and bronze. The black carpet was shot through with geometric bronze designs. The servers and dealers all wore uniforms consisting of black pants and shirts, topped with bronze vests.

"I'm *not* going to let you ignore this," Nash said.

I spun to face him.

"You're my friend," he said. "You've saved my ass plenty of times. Had my back. I'm not keen to see her put a bullet in your brain."

"She won't."

He made an annoyed sound. "You sound so sure of that."

“She’d slit my throat, not shoot me.”

His mouth flattened. “Bastian—”

That’s when I felt it. The familiar prickle on the back of my neck. My finely-tuned senses detected someone watching me. I had really good instincts from growing up on the streets, but the CIA had sharpened them to a honed blade.

Lark was here.

I glanced up, not doing anything to give away that I knew she was present. I just lazily scanned the casino like I was going about my normal business.

There was no sign of the pint-sized assassin. I wasn’t surprised. She was a master of disguise, and could blend in anywhere.

She’d attacked me right here on the casino floor last week. I resisted the urge to reach up and rub the healing stab wound on my shoulder.

“Bastian?”

I met Nash’s gaze. “I’ll deal with her.”

My friend nodded. Then his rugged face looked over my shoulder and changed. His lips moved into a smile.

I knew exactly what I’d see when I looked behind me. Or rather, who.

I turned. Yes, Georgie Linden—the newest member of the Avernus Events team—was walking toward us. She’d put on a little weight since she’d hooked up with Nash. Her gentle curves filled out her smart gray pantsuit and her blonde hair was up in a stylish twist.

She was the little sister of Nash’s best friend from his childhood, and the love of his life.

She’d come to Las Vegas to save her sister from a predator. She’d failed, but with Nash’s help, she’d gotten revenge and taken down the man who’d murdered her sister.

“Hello.” Georgie smiled at Nash.

The man pulled her in close and kissed her. “Hi.”

Georgie’s blue eyes flicked my way. “Bastian, everything is coming together so well for the Isis and Osiris show. Ticket sales have gone through the roof since we launched the advertising campaign.”

Excitement glowed off her.

“That’s what I like to hear.”

Nash snaked his arm around his woman. “Are you on your lunch break?”

“I am.”

Like he had to ask. I knew the man had her timetable memorized.

“Good. Lunch is on me. Bye, Bastian.” He herded her away.

She waved at me as they left.

I stood there, alone in the sea of people. For the first time, I felt a flash of envy watching them. I never lacked for female company when I wanted it, but I’d never had that...connection. Never had a woman look at me the way Georgie looked at Nash. Usually, they looked at me and saw a hard body or dollar signs.

I caught a flash of green out of the corner of my eye and turned my head.

It wasn’t Lark. I felt a strange sense of disappointment.

A willowy blonde sauntered my way. She was putting a good deal of effort into the enticing sway of her hips.

“Hello.” She shot me a slow smile. “You look lonely.” She cocked her head. “I have a friend, Samantha. She’s played with you before.” The blonde lifted a hand and one red-tipped nail fiddled with a button on my shirt. “She said you rocked her world.” The woman’s voice turned

breathy.

I leaned in and pulled in a breath of her musky perfume. She was my type, but for some reason I fought the urge to wrinkle my nose.

“Want to rock mine?” she asked.

I shot her my practiced smile. “Darling, I appreciate the offer, but I can’t right now.” The truth was, I only had the vaguest blip of attraction. My attention was elsewhere. I brushed her cheek with my fingers. “Rain check?”

Her plump lips curled. “Okay. I won’t forget. Until next time.”

She walked away with more of that swing in her hips. She was exactly the type that I partied with. I liked them tall, leggy, and simple. Women were just another pleasant diversion. I never let things get too complicated.

I had one rule. No repeats.

I walked toward the elevator that would lead to my office and penthouse. I couldn’t sense Lark anymore and I bit back my frustration.

Where are you, little bird?

Then suddenly I stopped. A scent tickled my senses and I breathed deep, pulling in a lungful. It smelled of fresh rain and thunderstorms.

Lark.

She always smelled like a rainstorm.

She’d been here.

I turned in a slow circle, giving the floor one last scan. But I already knew she was long gone.

I needed to find her and do what I’d promised Nash that I would—deal with her.

Soon.