

FIVE OF DIAMONDS

-Chapter One-

NATASHA

MONTE CARLO, MONACO

The man was such an easy target that Natasha almost felt bad.

It was the Friday night before the Monaco Grand Prix, and the casino was packed with drivers, investors, and spectating celebrities alike, all of them either drowning their nerves in alcohol or throwing cash at croupiers in obscene displays of wealth. The impending race and its consequent flock of affluent motorsport enthusiasts meant that security was tighter than usual.

It should have made her more cautious, but it didn't perturb her in the slightest. It was a mistake she would consider only in retrospect.

The gold bracelets on her wrists slid delicately down her arm as she brushed a thumb over her full lower lip, mouth open just a fraction as she gazed doe-eyed at the man in front of her.

He was vaguely familiar—an actor, maybe, or a low-level politician. She didn't know, and she didn't care. What *was* important was that Nat had him right where she wanted him. The conditions couldn't have been more perfect: he'd just won three rounds of craps in a row, and he felt like the biggest man in the room. He was king of the world, riding the high of expensive booze and providential victory, and right now he felt as though he could have anything—and more importantly, *anyone*—he wanted. Natasha could read it all in his eyes,

already glazed and sex-addled as he watched her step closer, gaze tracing down the length of her crimson dress.

She tipped her head sideways, looked up at him through coated lashes. His nostrils flared ever so slightly, and she knew he was smelling her perfume: sweet and cloying and edged with the promise of something fun. Something dangerous.

“I have a room at the hotel across the street,” he said, a hitch in his voice as he struggled to retain coherence.

Nat smiled. “And I have a room just upstairs. But we can use yours, if you’d prefer.” She hooked her finger in the collar of his shirt and winked.

His Adam's apple bobbed. “No, let’s go to yours. It’s closer.”

Somewhere behind them, a gambler got lucky, his joyous shouts mingling with the music melting from the overhead speakers, half-buried beneath the wild *dings* of the slot machines.

“Forgetting something?” Nat asked. The man just grinned stupidly at her. *There really isn’t a lot going on up there.* “I require payment upfront,” she prompted.

“Oh. Right. Of course.” He fumbled for his wallet. “How much did you say for the night?”

She fixed him with a dazzling smile and held up a hand, wagging five fingers.

He handed her a roll of bills. She didn’t bother looking through the money to check it was the correct sum. Her fingertips flicked through them quick as lightning, not unlike how a dealer might shuffle a deck of cards. Satisfied, she tucked the roll into the top of her dress, slipping it in the fold of her bra.

Nat inclined her head towards the exit. “Shall we?”

They were almost to the lobby when a burly bald man stepped into their path, preventing them from moving past. He wore a black uniform that marked him clearly as casino security.

“Excuse me sir,” the guard said in heavily accented English, holding out a hand to stop them. “I’m afraid I cannot permit this.”

The man scowled, clearly irritated by the interruption. “Is there a problem?”

The security guard crossed his massive arms over his chest and jerked his chin in Nat’s direction. She simply smiled, wiggling the tips of her fingers in a playful little wave.

Catching on, the man shook his head. “You’re mistaken. This—” he gestured between himself and Natasha “—is legal in Monaco. I Googled it.” He said it with such conviction, as though Google’s confirmation was indisputable proof.

“It may be legal, sir, but this girl is underage.”

He whipped around to stare at Natasha, roving eyes seeing her in a new light. “No way. How old are you?”

She shrugged. “Seventeen.” A bold-faced lie. It had been her twenty-third birthday only a few months ago, but she had a full, round face and could pass as younger when necessary. It was extraordinarily convenient in her line of work.

“Louisa,” the guard chastised, fixing her with a stern look. “Your father made it clear to you that you are not allowed on the casino floor.”

“My father says a lot of things,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

“Doesn’t mean I listen to a word of it.”

“Your father...?” the man echoed.

Nat grinned, showing off perfect orthodontia. This was her favourite part. “My daddy owns this hotel,” she told him, taking great pleasure in watching the colour drain from his face.

The guard's brows hugged low over his eyelids. "Louisa, give this man his money back and go up to your suite at once."

"You never let me have any fun." Pouting, she reached into the top of her dress and removed the wad of cash, handing it back to the man. Lowering her voice, she whispered "Too bad. I could have shown you my new party trick."

"Louisa. Upstairs, now."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm going. Keep your hair on."

Natasha stepped back, watching as the security guard escorted her would-be companion out of the casino, his firm order for the man not to return to the property fading as they disappeared into the flock of drunken gamblers.

Nat wandered over to lean against the bar, ordering sparkling water with lemon as she waited. The security guard came back a few minutes later. Neither one of them said a word as she reached back into the top of her dress, fingers slipping into the left side of her bra, from which she produced another roll of bills, identical in size and weight to the counterfeit cash she'd given her unsuspecting victim. The fifth of the night, to be more specific.

Licking the tip of her finger, she counted out his thirty percent, pressing it into the guard's waiting palm, the transaction disguised as a friendly handshake to any prying eyes.

"Good hustle tonight, Pedro," she said brightly.

Pedro merely grunted, slipping his earnings into his jacket.

"Next time less chit-chat though. Time is money, my friend."

Another grunt. "We done for the night?"

"One more. I'm on a roll now."

Pedro sighed but didn't argue before moving off, leaving her alone at the bar, surveying the room for her next mark. Briefly, she considered a haughty blond man seated at the billiards table, but one look at the cheap fabric of his suit told a tale of limited funds.

Electric blue eyes sweeping the space again, she found what she was looking for in the form of a handsome young man—not much older than Natasha herself—sitting alone further down the bar. Looking him up and down, she drank in every available detail, cataloguing him from head to toe. Impeccable posture, clothes tailored to perfection, leather shoes buffed to a gleam. Rich brown hair, styled in neat waves that indicated he took pride in his appearance.

Her eyes flicked to his hands. Long, slender fingers, not a hint of a callous in sight, with nails almost as well-manicured as Natasha's. He tapped an idle finger against the side of a glass full to the brim of some frothy amber drink, the movement drawing her attention to the watch fastened to his wrist. Not a Rolex or even a Patek Phillippe, but a Piaget Emperador. She recognised the model immediately as being worth over a hundred grand. Everything about this man screamed of generational wealth.

Typically, Natasha preferred the affectation of new money, but she was feeling particularly assured tonight, buoyed by the night's fervent ambience and her own success. It was an easy decision.

She checked her hair before making her way over, ensuring no flaxen strands peeked out from beneath the dark wig.

The man glanced up at her without much interest as she slid onto the stool beside him.

“Hi there,” she purred. “Waiting for somebody?”

He didn't answer, just looked at her sideways over his drink.

Unperturbed, she pushed on. Sliding her fingertips over the pale skin of her throat, she lifted one shoulder in an elegant shrug. “You looked lonely sitting here all by yourself. Thought you might like some company.”

Still, he said nothing.

“Are you here for the race? A sponsor, maybe?” The sleeves of his spread collar shirt were rolled up to his elbow. Slowly, she removed her hand from her throat, trailing her fingertips over his forearm. Inching closer to the watch. “A driver?”

If he was a driver, that just made her job that much easier. He might be looking for a release before the race, an outlet for the nerves. And if he wasn't, well...you could never go wrong playing to a man's ego. A little bit of flattery went a long way.

He looked at her fully then, meeting her gaze for the first time. His eyes were a startling grey—the colour of the clouds before they released their wrath in the form of wicked storms. Natasha was momentarily distracted by their intensity.

“Just in town on business,” he said. Like many denizens in Monaco, he had an accent, though his was faint and hard to place.

Nat traced her fingernail over the underside of his wrist. “What kind of business?”

“Recruitment.”

“That's so interesting.” It was the furthest thing from interesting, but rule number one when conning male marks was to make them feel important. Of course, the tactic didn't work on women, who were typically much more discerning and thus not so easily deceived. But when it came to the male of the species, Natasha knew from years of experience that often, the attention of a beautiful woman was the key to a loose wallet, and so she pressed on.

“What sort of recruitment?”

“Well,” he said softly. “I was hoping you, Natasha Federova.”

Natasha froze, the thrill of the hunt shattering like a broken mirror. Every nerve in her body ground to a screeching halt at the sound of her long-discarded name. She recoiled as though his skin had burned her.

He was watching her closely, assessing her reaction.

“I think you've mistaken me for somebody else. My name is-”

“Sylvia Davis, Bethany Goldman, Flora Renwick? Don’t bother. I’m familiar with all your aliases, Natasha darling.”

Her mouth snapped shut. If this stranger knew her name, no doubt he already knew who she was. Who she *really* was. What she had done.

There was no point in playing dumb, and she was too blindsided to think her way out of this. She had no choice but to drop the act.

“It’s Nat, actually. And you are...?”

“Luca D’Angelo,” he supplied. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I’ve been looking forward to this day for quite some time.”

So. He *had* been waiting for somebody. He’d been waiting for *her*. He hadn’t even needed to approach her. Like a fool, she’d come right to him. She was a fly who had willingly flown straight into a spider’s web.

The corner of Luca’s mouth quirked upwards, as though witnessing her discomfort was a source of great personal amusement.

She lifted her chin in an attempt to regain her composure. It did nothing to dispel the fear bunching beneath her skin. “Well, here I am. What can I do for you?” Her voice was tight, but she took pride in the fact that it did not waver.

Luca cast a pointed look across the casino floor. “That man you were speaking to earlier. Is he a friend of yours?”

She tracked his gaze to where Pedro stood against the far wall, conversing with another uniform-clad security guard—a legit one. Natasha looked back at Luca. “An acquaintance.”

“Interesting.” He ran a finger around the rim of his glass. “Acquaintance or accomplice?”

His insouciance was more than a little aggravating. She could feel her temper flaring, nerve endings quivering in anticipation of a fight. But it overpowered the fear, and so she welcomed it.

“Cut the bullshit,” she snapped. “Who are you, really?”

“I’ve already told you who I am.”

“Are you with the police? Interpol?”

Luca raised a single brow. “Do I look like a cop to you?” The way he said it made her think that saying yes would be the utmost insult. It was true that he didn’t *seem* like law enforcement. But there was no way to know for sure.

“Don’t know, don’t care. What I’m interested in is why you’re here.” She scanned her surroundings, half-expecting Interpol officers to materialize from behind the slot machines, guns drawn, shouting for her to put her hands up. At least, that’s how things usually went down in the movies. She’d never been caught before and so she couldn’t speak from personal experience.

“Trust me, Miss Federova. I have no intention of putting you behind bars.”

“No?”

He gave a slight shake of his head. “Incarcerated, you’re no use to me.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it. Although I *do* look fabulous in orange.” She hesitated, lips twisting to the side. “So if you’re not here to arrest me, then what is it that you want, handsome?”

“I’m commissioning your services.”

“I’m not for hire.”

“I’m not hiring.”

“Right,” she scoffed. “You’re ‘recruiting’. Either way, I’m not interested. I work for myself, by myself.”

Luca's gaze cut over to Pedro again. "The fake security guard. He's *not* your associate?"

Her scowl deepened. Her dislike for this arrogant man grew stronger with each passing second. "He works *for* me, not with me. There's a difference."

"If you say so."

Deciding that she was done with this conversation, she pushed away from the bar, glancing towards the exit. "I wish I could say it was nice talking to you, but that'd be a lie. Now, I'm needed elsewhere, so if you'll excuse me..."

Luca caught hold of her arm before she could slip away. "Something tells me you might want to hear me out, Natasha." There was an unnerving gleam in those slate eyes. That, more than anything else, truly frightened her.

"No, thank you." She wrenched her arm away.

"I wasn't asking."

The sheer audacity.

"Didn't your mother teach you that when a lady tells you 'no', it means *fuck no*?"

He tutted. "That's not language befitting a lady, so I suppose we both have something to answer for." He produced an envelope then, seemingly out of thin air. He set it down on the bar. "An invitation. Optional, of course, but I think you'll find its contents rather...tempting."

Natasha eyed it distrustfully. Her name was written in neat, curling script across the front. Turning it over in her hands, she saw that the flap was sealed with wax, kissed by something that might have been a signet or a decorative stamp: five interlocking rings knotted together to form a single chain.

"What is—?" she began to ask, but when she looked back up, Luca was nowhere to be found. He'd vanished. Scanning the crowd, she saw no trace of him anywhere in the casino.

Bewildered—and intrigued, despite herself—she tore open the envelope. There were two items inside. The first was a parchment card, two lines written in that same prim penmanship: a date and an address.

The second item was a plane ticket to New York City.