

Chapter One

Grady

“A stranger is a friend you haven’t met yet.” That’s what my mother used to say. Of course, that was before my father did a number on her and she killed herself.

Anyway, she was wrong. Not just about my father, otherwise she would never have married the good doctor, but about *everything*. A stranger isn’t a *friend I haven’t met yet*. A stranger is a *puzzle I haven’t solved yet*.

That’s what I see when I look at you. Your face is one of those sliding puzzles – move the pieces in the right configuration and I get the picture I want: a smile, a laugh, tears, anger ... rage. You are nothing more than a puzzle. A simple one. What makes you work? What will make you offer to carry my bag, protect me from danger or push you over the edge? What will turn you into my ace in the hole, waiting to take on Gold for me, if I need you to?

I'm not *broken*, my father was clear about that. No, I'm *better* than you. If you weren't so easy to solve, I wouldn't be able to get you to do what I want. It's your own fault.

Click, shush, click, shush. I don't need to look up to know that Bella just shimmied into the break room, her short skirt brushing toned, tanned skin, her high heels tapping against tile. I don't need to look up, but I do. I can appreciate art, although I've always been more of a Cubist person. I'm sure that Picasso saw people the same way as I do. In pieces.

She's striking a pose against the door frame. Even the smallest gesture of hers is calculated according to its aesthetic. She won't move until I show some appreciation. Today her lustrous black hair is curling down her back, pinned at the front to pull it away from her high cheekbones and cat-like black eyes.

Knowing it's what she needs, I give her a smile and let appreciation shine in my eyes. With a purr of satisfaction, she sashays into the room.

"Grady." Her voice is mellow and smooth. She has an Italian accent and in her mouth the *ay* in my name is emphasized, the *ee* sound falling away. "Aren't you meant to be working, *caro*?" She carefully

shifts a few degrees, so her ass is facing me, bends down to open the fridge and removes a mineral water. She turns her head to look at me over her shoulder. “Those charts won’t analyze themselves.”

I allow a hitch into my breath as I reply. “I’ve run all the numbers. Just taking a break before I write up my findings.”

“You’re almost done?” She twists off the top then tips her head back to drink, allowing me to watch the bobbing column of her throat.

“Y-yes.” The stutter is deliberate. She smiles around the bottle.

“So, perhaps, Grady, you could take a look at mine? You’re so much faster than I am.” She touches a finger to her mouth, wiping a bead of water away with her fingertip.

I wonder for a moment how hard I should make her work for it. She has given me a show and it would be no skin off my nose. Numbers are easy, if boring. Let her think she has me, that I’m curled round her little finger. It’ll be all the more effective when I take it back.

“Sure, Bella.” I let myself sound pathetic. I know what she sees when she looks at me – an amusing

conspiracy theorist carrying a layer of fat round my waist that no amount of exercise can shift, a rumpled suit, glasses that I've recently adopted. "Did you know that the CIA operates an illegal drug cartel?" I add enthusiastically.

Bella laughs. "Meet me at my desk and I'll show you the work you can help with, Grady."

I'm harmless. I'm the guy next door. I'm the one no one would ever believe could hurt them.

And yet...

As Bella glides out, she glances back, her expression momentarily speculative. This place looks like an office, but it isn't. It's a shark tank. And Bella has to be wondering, am I really that much of a minnow?

"You shouldn't let her do that to you." Aany had been standing behind the cupboard the whole time. Bella hadn't even noticed him. He spends as much time in here as he can, away from the rest of the predators.

I arrange my mouth into the shape of a smile. "I don't mind."

"I shouldn't care, but..." He blushes. "You're better than that."

I shrug, push my empty coffee mug to one side,

and stand. “If I don’t do her work, she might lose her place on the programme and then what would we have to look at?”

“You really think she’d lose her place on the programme?” Aanay looks up, hope shining in his eyes. I don’t think it had occurred to him that he could get himself kicked off the grad scheme by being a poor employee. It’s all I’ve been thinking about. I just haven’t worked out the best way of failing, without the kind of retribution that would surely follow.

“Honestly?” I sigh. “No, I don’t. Gold wants the work done, so does it matter how it happens? She’s effective at getting her quotas met. This isn’t about how good we are at the job – it’s about showing we can run a company. The people who work for Bella Russo will be *very happy and extremely productive.*”

Aanay blushes again, the colour creeping up his collar and over his cheeks. I fight the instinct to apologise. He’s so quiet, so still, sometimes I want to do something to make him yell swear words.

He doesn’t want to be here any more than I do. I tilt my head and watch his flush deepen. How did he even *get* on to Gold’s graduate programme?

I can't see him doing what I did. I can't see him committing murder. But ... maybe *he's* a great white shark in disguise as a minnow. Maybe he's the best actor in here.

One day I'll find out.

He holds out his hand for my empty cup and when I give it to him, he starts to wash it up.

“You cleaning for us now, Bukhari?” The clones move in a school and now they're here, all six of them: Aamon, Bram, Damien, Jason, Dawson and Bates. They're the same as far as I can tell. All white males, all dressed in matching two-piece suits, all dead-eyed.



Before I'd been forced to work in Gold's London office, there'd been the island. We'd thought it would be three days of fun with a huge cash prize at the end. We hadn't known it was Gold's recruitment ground; that he was looking for psychopaths to employ in his corporation. He wanted ruthless business leaders to take over his various companies, and he wanted videos of them doing terrible things, so they would never go against his orders. We hadn't realized that

the cash prize would come with a price: a job offer, and that turning it down was not an option.

I won the game on the island. I earned the cash prize, the job offer ... and a lifetime of servitude under Marcus Gold.

I'd say I sold my soul, but I don't believe I ever had one.

There'd been another boy on Aikenhead, Reece Armstrong. He'd been the one to start the violence: he cut off Carmen's hand. He'd have fitted in very well with the clones.

Carmen killed him in the end. And I killed Carmen. I look at my hands. The brutality of it all came as a bit of a shock, but in the end it wasn't so bad. Still, after killing Carmen I decided it would be the last time. If killing needs to be done, I'll manipulate others into doing it for me.

When Gold insisted that I exterminate Lizzie and Ben, I decided not to. Why should I bow to anyone?

I let Lizzie live in order to keep Ben onside, and I kept Ben alive in case I needed a trump card. We were lucky that Gold wanted only his own people to see the bodies. He offered to pay for the funerals of all those killed on the island, as long

as they were cremated right away. Ben and Lizzie woke in the morgue, swapped their toe tags with corpses, and ran. I don't know or care whose ashes their families cry over.



“You’re a great little servant, Bukhari,” Jason drawls. “Let’s hear you say, ‘what can I do for you today, sir?’”

I wonder for a moment whether to get involved or stand back. There are six of them and one of me. I can’t say there are two of us because Aanay won’t stand up for himself. Soon I’ll find out why he’s so determined to be such a doormat.

Ben wouldn’t have hesitated; he’d have already been yelling at Jason. Lizzie would have simply launched herself at Dawson, and Will would have joined in, just because he loved to hurt people. If Ben had been here, no one would have dared touch Aanay.

I’m not Ben.

I know how this will play out. They’ll humiliate Aanay, he’ll take it. They probably won’t hurt him. I can walk away.

But ... they think Aanay is my friend. If I walk away, they'll see me as weak. This is a shark tank. The weak get eaten.

On the *other* hand, I don't get my hands dirty. "Hey!" I call. "Bella, can you step in here a minute?"

The boys had been moving to surround Aanay and myself, but now they freeze.

"You—" Bram starts.

Click, swish, click, swish.

Bella steps into the room and assesses the situation. "Buongiorno, boys. What is the problem, Grady?" An eyebrow rises.

"Just wanted to let you know it might be a little while before I can get to your spreadsheets." I allow a little tremble into my voice, a slight stutter.

Bella's eyes narrow. "That won't do, Grady." She looks at Dawson. He's watching her, his fingers tapping almost unconsciously against the notebook he keeps in his trouser pocket. I make a mental note to get a look inside that thing.

"We're just havin' a bit of fun, Bella," he says, his cockney accent the one thing that makes him stand out among the clones. "It's our break, innit?"

"Grady's break is over." Bella steps forwards and

touches a finger to the button of Dawson's navy suit jacket. She plays with it gently, then gives it a sudden twist. "He's already agreed to help me."

"*Grady* can go," Jason snaps, his eyes tight on Aanay.

Bella looks at me and I shrug, as if helpless. She sighs. "*And* Aanay. I'm certain that he has work of his own to be doing." She leans in as if to whisper in Dawson's ear. "Christopher Gold is coming to inspect the floor. I think we should *all* have work to show him, don't you?"

Dawson swallows. "Gold's son?"

Bella steps back from him. "He texted me." She holds up her phone with a slight smile.

"Why would he..." Jason leans to snatch the phone from her, but Dawson slaps his hand away.

"Don't touch her."

Jason curls a lip, shakes his hand and leans back again.

"You *know* why he would text me." Bella's smile is sultry.

Dawson's eyes flick to her lips, then back to her eyes. His own are cloudy with disappointment. "Yes, Bella."

She straightens his tie and speaks to me without looking away from Dawson. “Grady, go!”

Jason and Bates watch with narrowed eyes as I reach back, grab Aanay and scuttle from the room, dragging him with me. At least now they know I’ll put up a fight, in my own way. They’ll be looking for payback, but what’s new?

This office is filled with psychopaths. I can’t be any more alert to danger than I already am.