

DIANA'S
RING

SUNIL BHATIA

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For Baby

R. Catcher stood outside the Ritz with a brown smudge on his cheek. He'd devoured chocolate almond cake to stay awake and had missed a spot when wiping his face. He was in a sour mood, dwelling on the infamous kiss off the coast of Corsica. The kiss that could've made him a half-mil. His mind rang with a rival's taunt. *A freaking tourist with an ice cream cone could've got it.*

He was less than 90 yards when his prize came out frolicking for a few seconds. He'd spent days and nights on her trail, blowing tons of cash following her from villa to restaurant and car to yacht, hoping for one shot. One shot that would tell the world something new and shocking about a woman they adored. One shot that would solve the many problems in his life and better his future. One shot and it had to be perfect. But he dozed off. He actually fell asleep right before she came out.

He desperately needed the payoff, nearly broke from gambling losses and a recent divorce. The only photographs he sold in the past year were TV personalities without makeup buying fruits in supermarkets and pushing strollers in parks. It was a rough year and he needed his luck to change on this breezy Paris night.

He heard a throng of media crowding the front entrance, while standing by his bike at the rear entrance. He fixed his bloodshot eyes on Frankie Blackwell. The man had a skull tattoo on his long neck and the nerve to look back, taunting Catcher by pretending to lick an ice cream cone. Catcher had enough, flipping him off and grabbing his crotch. Frankie cursed back and Catcher edged closer with his fist clenched, but commotion erupted among the other men. A black Mercedes pulled up. The driver's window slid down...*You won't catch us tonight.* The Mercedes raced off, as Catcher hurried back to his bike. Paparazzi in five cars, on three motorbikes, and two scooters stormed off.

On his Honda 650, Catcher squeezed between cars and recklessly drifted into the opposite lane. He chose to ride alone and never considered it a disadvantage. The others on bikes had riders so their hands were free to snap photos. Catcher didn't want to pay for a rider and didn't see the point of shooting from a bike since getting a great pic at high speeds were slim to none.

Horns honked. Tires screeched. The traffic deafened. Catcher swerved between cars, running a red light, nearly hitting a pedestrian. Frankie rolled left of the Mercedes, while Catcher sped and got right. *Luck is reckless and never hangs around the same fool.*

The Mercedes raised its speed at a dangerous level to flee the paparazzi. Frankie fell behind. Catcher wouldn't let up, right on the Mercedes tail. He could see eyes, *her eyes*, glaring at him through the rear window. Her gaze was intense, piercing his soul. He had to look away.

The Mercedes diverged into the Pont De L'Alma Tunnel. Catcher didn't let up, within striking distance of the Mercedes. Frankie was way back, out of the picture.

Facing Catcher's intense pressure, the Mercedes zigzagged through traffic, nearly slamming into another car. Catcher pulled back, speeding at a distance, seeing the Mercedes swerve uncontrollably. *What the hell?* He heard something explode, something go BOOM. His bike skidded.

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He was in a daze with a split-second glimpse of a white Fiat speeding off and the Mercedes smashing into the 13th concrete pillar, rolling over three times. The roof crumpled, hitting the wall. Glass shattered and flew.

Catcher hung on, stopping 20 yards ahead. His camera dangled off his chest. He removed his helmet, hurrying off. The horn blared and charcoal smoke filled the air. The burning engine reeked. The Mercedes resembled nothing more than a pack of warped metal.

Catcher braced himself. He came forward and did what felt natural. *Snap. Snap.* He knew taking the photos was wrong without first seeing if those in the smashed vehicle were okay. But there was little time before others came and had the same view. *Snap. Snap.* Besides, he felt this was the opportunity of a lifetime and these photos would generate millions. This would pay his debts and even save his life. *Snap. Snap.*

Catcher opened the rear door, jerking back at the foul smell. On the floor were scattered pearls and a gold watch with white stones. He saw the driver pinned to the steering wheel like a half-eaten pretzel. *Snap.* The bodyguard's nose and eyes went deep into his bloody face, resembling a Ping-Pong paddle. *Snap.* The lover mangled with his jeans torn and genitals exposed. *Snap. Snap.*

His eyes turned to where his hopes and fears rested. The world's most famous woman, so elegant, so graceful, so liked. *The People's Princess.* Here she was hunched on the floor, her head squeezed between the front seats, pupils in a daze. He couldn't believe his eyes. On the surface, she looked beautiful as ever. In spite of the gash on her head, she was unmarked, and miraculously breathing. But he'd never seen her this close before and the photographs he'd taken of her over the years came to mind. He was in awe of how well she held up. *Snap. Snap.* He couldn't resist, in spite of the guilt that told him no, begging him to stop. *Snap. Snap. Snap.*

The ring's sparkle caught his eye. A modest ring that looked more posh on the Princess's finger than it probably

would on anyone else. But why was the ring on her wedding finger? He thought of her dead lover and his ethnicity. The man was an Arab, a Muslim, and a definite outsider to British Royalty. Was she keeping her engagement a secret from the world? Was the engagement because rumors of her pregnancy were actually true? Would William and Harry have a half-brother who was heir to the throne?

These were questions, ludicrous questions even. Yet the answers to these questions slapped him where he felt his face tingle and knew he couldn't look back. That he held something of such secrecy, something that would rock the Monarchy and the world. He swallowed a lump. A circle of blood covered her hand, dripping to the ring on her finger.

A motorcycle screeched to the side. Frankie rushed toward the debris, shooting away. *Snap. Snap.*

Catcher sensed danger lurking, eyes fixed on the ring. Sirens grew louder. He reached down as if to feel her pulse, while his opposite hand gently took to her finger. "Just stay cool, help's coming," he said, hearing her moan.

Snap. Snap. Snap. Frankie jostled his way inside the vehicle.

"Get back, get the hell out," Catcher said. "Don't take any inside."

Frankie wouldn't stop. *Snap. Snap.* "You forget what I do?"

Catcher turned, blocking him from taking more pictures. "Have some decency, will you?" His eyes revealed guilt.

"What did you take? Her pearls? Mementos of the dead? What you should've done was swipe a hanky to wipe the brownie off your face."

"Half-a-million, huh Frankie? For that blurry photo of his hand on her ass."

Camera flashes popped like gunfire. Dozen or so paparazzi surrounded the vehicle. French police and emergency workers arrived, pushing the crowd back. Blocked cars honked. Onlookers screamed. The Mercedes horn blared.

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Frankie scrapped with an officer. Catcher quietly stepped away and went to his bike. Briefly, he sat with a partial view of Diana being stabilized and carried into an ambulance. He felt the inside of his pocket. He knew his actions were irreversible, feeling closeness to the Princess in the worst possible way: he had violated a dying woman in her most private moment for his own personal gain, yet without knowing that he was also tarnishing a legacy. A legacy that would be preserved at all costs.

2

Years later...

Nadia Newton told herself that if he ever beat her again, she'd do more than just leave him and file charges. She'd do something worse. Something that would destroy his world. She wasn't sure what that something was, but she had some ideas while lying on frigid tile with blood drizzling from her nose.

Her left eye was beat shut. The right eye glimpsed dark hairs at the bottom of the toilet and smelled piss, realizing it was her own from having been kicked in the midsection after being knocked out. She extended her arm and grabbed the shower curtain to come up, but not so hard as to crash the rod and tumble down.

She got on her knees, letting go of the curtain and holding the tub for support. Red patches formed around her rib cage, the pain was sharp. Her humiliation grew, aware of the new blue and white polka dot bra and panties she had on, having planned on a special night.

She rose to her feet, crouching in anguish, trying to balance, realizing she might've pulled a lower back muscle. Dazed, she sucked gobs of air and nearly fell atop the sink, hanging off. She got back up, facing the mirror. She knew

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what she saw couldn't be worse than how she felt. Smearing red lipstick across her cheek and smothered dark shadow channeled a freak show of cuts and bruises. After the initial shock, she clung to hope that it wasn't bad enough her face couldn't heal. Tears fell from her eyes as a mixture of rage and shame filled her face.

God, I should've known.

She clenched her fist and from her mouth came a roar she didn't think she could make. She spit dead skin off her lip and regained composure. She turned the faucet, washing blood off her face. She looked hard and beaten. Her mother would point that out if she were alive. She'd remind her too that she left that type of creep long ago. The creep was Nadia's father and Nadia hadn't seen him since childhood and didn't have any pleasant memories of him. To Nadia, he died before she was born and she'd like to keep it that way. In spite of her mother's complaints, her father wasn't a wife beater, but a womanizer. *Two entirely different jackasses, mum.*

The truth was in the mirror. The man who beat Nadia made her look thirty-five, even older if you got a peek from the side and saw the welts along the neck. When all she was, at least on paper, was a few years from thirty. She saw her future if she didn't leave. She knew what could've happened if her head landed first or neck twisted sideways or any freakish thing when punched and kicked by a 250-pound brute near a tub. The next time would be death.

But first she had to make him pay.

She stood under the showerhead, hot water softening the muscles in her back. Half-hour later, she wrapped a towel around her body and wiped the steam off the mirror. With one eye, she saw her shoulders darken and fingernail scratches on her neck. She hobbled into a small living area, her damp toes feeling a brisk of cold air. She went into the kitchen and got a peas package from the freezer. In the cupboard, she grabbed Aleve and took six pills with water.

In the living area, she was too tired to wear pajamas and let her towel drop, leaning onto the sofa bed, getting under

the blankets. Her body stung, knowing the pain would worsen by morning. She wasn't sure how seriously she'd been hurt, but there was no way she'd go to the ER or a doctor. She didn't want to reveal any medical history. She didn't want to answer questions of why, who, and how. She particularly didn't want to risk alerting the authorities that would conduct their own investigation and get her deeper in trouble with the man who beat her.

That man was Jerkin Albert. He married Nadia a little over three years ago. Two of which he spent behind bars at Brixton for stealing 200k in jewelry at an upscale home. Jerkin did the job well, but greed did him one better, she felt. If he'd only given his partner a fair share, he wouldn't have been tipped off to Scotland Yard and they'd be 100k richer. They'd also be roaming free in America, preferably on the West Coast. Her mother was born in Seattle and lived there until she went to London as a study abroad student and got pregnant. Nadia had always wanted to visit Seattle since her mother spoke fondly of where she grew up. But she knew Jerkin didn't want to live where the weather was as gloomy as London.

Nadia knew he was a thief when she fell for him. He told her and that didn't matter to her as long as he'd quit once he got enough for them to live well. She loved his honesty, his ambition, and more so, his appetite for her. No matter that she was lonely and depressed when they first met at the bus stop across the Ritz after her shift. No matter that no man had shown interest in her for years. At least no man that looked as naughty and seductive as Clive Owen, as well as being a charmer with pockets of cash.

She was tired of being poor, of barely getting by. When Jerkin entered her life, she looked past his corrupt ways, fits of temper, and violent tendencies. As pathetic as this made her feel, she didn't want to live alone. Even if she envied the idea of being an independent woman, she dreaded a future without male companionship. So she waited two years while he did his time, living in a studio flat in a London ghetto,

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hoping he'd change. Hoping too that when he got out he'd give her a better life, some affection, and take away her loneliness.

That is what threw him into a tizzy, she thought. She wanted in on his next job to eliminate any possibility of double-crossing, but she also needed for them to be closer. He took it as a judgment on him, that he was untrustworthy and selfish. And worse, incapable of doing a job she knew nothing about. She realized she should've made love to him first. Kiss him, go down on him, stroke his ego, do his favorite positions, make him dizzy, make him remember what he missed. When he was dazed and grateful to be a free man, perhaps he'd likely be more willing to agree to her requests. This was his first night free from male cellmates. He had to be horny. But she also wanted to know how her life, *their life*, would change for the better. That was always priority number one.

With the peas over the left eye, Nadia stared with the right at the ceiling cracks. There seemed to be more squiggly breaks than before. *Leave. Screw revenge. Get a new life and go from there.* But he'd find her. She saw enough stories on the news to know better. He'd find her in that new life, and when things started to get good for her, he'd strike her and turn everything bad. That was her fate. So think of something else, something fast, her mind raced. But nothing came and she fell asleep to the possibility that Jerkin may come back and finish what he started.

A few hours later, the door squeaked and her eyes opened. She felt warm, sweaty even. She heard the rain echo. Another squeak. Her heart raced. She lifted the covers over her head and pretended to sleep, hoping he'd leave her alone and sleep it off. The door made a different sound, tricking her mind. The room went silent. She heard a sound. *Is he?* She recalled leaving open the bathroom window, hearing the wind. *Idiot.*

Nadia sighed, saw daylight, and figured she better get up. If she could. She felt pain from her back shooting down her

leg. A nudge would be brutal. She lay there for a few minutes, wondering about Jerkin. Where could he have gone? Before prison, he burned his friends, double-crossing them or cutting them off. If he had somebody she didn't know about, likely that somebody was in jail. He could've got some, she thought. But he couldn't afford a hooker, either. Though some drunken ho-bag would do him if she saw him for the first time and didn't know he'd pummeled his wife.

She nudged to her right, cringing. She slid off the bed, hitting the floor. *Get up, God let me get up.* She bent her knees and used the bed for support. She wobbled upward, holding still, hands trembling in air. Shivering, she limped naked to the dresser. She grabbed underwear, raising each leg gently through and the simple act was torture. She strapped her bra. A sharp pain flew up her back. She gritted her teeth, slipping on jeans and a sweatshirt.

She sat on the bed to catch her breath. She put on her shoes, the pain increasing up her spine. She somehow made it into the bathroom and pinned her hair back, eyeing the mirror. *What a mess.* Her sight improved with the opening of her left eye. Still, she'd need a ton of powder to whiten her blue cheeks and a baseball cap to avoid judgment from co-workers and people on the bus.

She brushed her teeth. At least her breath wouldn't stink, she thought.

3

Her morning bus ride took approximately 39 minutes with two transfers. She sat at the bottom of a double-decker, nibbling on toast. She kept her head low, the cap shielding much of her face. A young man looked at her from the side, as were two women sitting across. They held judgment or took pity. She didn't blame them. She'd look too at any woman whose husband beat her bad enough for the world to see. But she'd also want to see if the beaten woman looked as if she was going to give up or fight back.

She got off on Piccadilly to heavy wind, hobbling through the crowd, turning left alongside a vast building. Shipping trucks were parked ahead. She inserted her ID through the gate's reader, greeted by a security guard. He looked at her with concern.

"Rough night?"

"I'm okay," she said, passing him before going up a long hallway. She knew he didn't believe her, but she didn't want to stick around answering obvious questions. *Did he beat you? YES. Are you going to leave him? YES. Problem solved? No, not exactly.*

Inside the locker room, Nadia put on her uniform. Jackie entered, carrying her lunch in a grocery bag. She was middle-aged with thick black hair and wrinkles.

Nadia could tell by Jackie's eyes she was going to discuss Jerkin, initiating a different conversation. "How'd it go yesterday?"

"Uh, it was crap," Jackie said, distracted by the dark spots on Nadia's stomach and arms. "I didn't get any on four rooms. Bunch of cheapskates."

"That bad?"

"One American broad even had her money out, a few hundreds, traveler checks, her passport too. No tip, of course. I should've robbed her blind. Giftwrapped a juicy one on her pillows. Cheapskate."

"Passport, huh?"

"Right in front for the taking. But what bloody good would that do? She was ugly, had pit bull eyes, fat mole on her jaw, whiskers. I couldn't pull that off even if I tried."

"What if you did?"

"I'd need a cat suit. Grey whiskers, c'mon girl."

"I'm just saying maybe not her..."

"Where would I go? Chuck has his flaws, but it's been months since he's used his belt on us. You know I can't run with my boy. I can't put him through that."

"Better luck today, anyway."

"Looking at you, hell yeah," Jackie said, taking her uniform out of her locker. "What happened? We figured he found Jesus in that cell and knock you up, not knock you out. Talk to me, girl."

Nadia shut her locker, shrugging. "It is what it is." She walked out not looking at Jackie.

Rolling a cart on the 12th floor, Nadia considered the difficulties of stealing a passport. First, most guests if they traveled with a passport kept it with other valuables in the safe, not in the open for maids to see and possibly take. What happened to Jackie was the combination of good luck and a careless guest. Nadia knew how to open a locked safe,

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as did other maids, but there was the risk of losing her job. Even a false accusation could cost one their job, so maids like Jackie whose families were dependent on their weekly paychecks and tips never took the risk.

Second, if able to get her hands on a passport and establish a new identity, the owner would likely report it missing to their embassy, stopping future travel with the stolen passport and she'd be arrested. She'd have to leave the country before the guest realized their passport was missing, then change identities again when she got there. How many hours would she need? She wasn't sure, guesswork at best.

Third, she'd have to resemble the woman whose passport she stole. She'd have to be a white brunette, brown eyes, 5'6" and slender, between 25 and 35, American too. That was her preference since the accent was easy. She saw enough American movies, heard enough American tourists, and had an American mother. The bruises worked to her favor, increasing the likelihood the guard wouldn't see a distinction between her face and the photo. But finding someone who resembled her at the Ritz? Long shot, when most of the clientele she encountered were elderly couples.

Fourth, even if she stole a passport, would a new identity really keep her safe from Jerkin? He could still find her, she thought. He'd pay somebody to find her or do a job in return for somebody to find her since he was broke. She knew he'd stop at nothing to find her. If she left a messy trail or made one mistake in planning her escape, the consequences would be deadly.

"Housekeeping," she said, knocking twice on 12104. She kept her ear at the door to make sure no one was inside. She entered the room and left the cart blocking the doorway. The blue, peach, and yellow bothered her more now than it did when she became a maid four years ago after quitting her waitress job at a run-down Indian restaurant. She hated the tips, hated the dirt bags that came for the drinks and not the food, and hated the owner for berating her in Hindi that she didn't smile when working because she wasn't married.

Now she grew tired of being a maid and its tedious daily tasks. She found the rooms to be tacky and hideous and wondered why rich tourists had bad taste. She preferred colors and furniture that reflected the present or looked into the future. Not something that would clutter your mind and enslave you to the past.

Nadia pulled the sheets to the floor, appearing to make the bed. She glanced at the bedside table, desk, dresser, and above the fireplace. She opened the closet doors, seeing red silk fabric, a black blouse, and a man's navy blazer hanging. A safe was located on the floor. She considered the possibilities, but not the risks. She'd get a new identity, a new home, and a chance at real freedom.

She looked over her shoulder, then got on her knees and took a deep breath. Only she couldn't remember how to break open the safe. For some reason, her memory had failed her. A few times, guests had forgotten the code they'd set and asked her to call security to open the safe. She'd hang around, pretending to dust, when a security guy would reset the safe by typing in a group of numbers. Maids would joke about "two in five" and never having to scrub shit stains again.

Two in five. Two squares in five seconds.

That was it, she thought, remembering that's what it took. *Two in five.*

She pressed 1 2 3 6 9 * 0 # 7 4 1 4 7 # 0 * 9 6 3 2 1 and lifted the handle to red blinking lights. The handle went no further. She sighed, heard the cart in the hallway. She jumped to her feet, hurrying to the door. A father pulled his curious son from the miniature shampoo bottles on the cart, gesturing to say sorry. She checked the hallway and went back to the safe.

Two squares in five seconds. Quicker.

She practiced punching the numbers, counting to five in her head, improving her accuracy and speed each time. After three tries, she lifted her finger 12369*0#74147#0*9632. The lights blinked green as she swung the door open, getting

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a rush, seeing traveler's checks, gold bracelets, airline tickets, and two Canadian passports. She hoped for U.S. but Canada would do, she thought. Montreal seemed romantic from BBC travel segments, but Vancouver would be better, closer to Seattle.

She looked inside the first passport, the photo of a balding white guy with a thick mustache. She fumbled over the second, turning the pages. "Aw, bloody hell." The photo was of an Indian woman with thick glasses and a dot on her forehead. Nadia flung the passports in the safe, shutting the door. She insured the safe was locked, even though the code now wouldn't work. No worries, she'd tell the guests if they complained. *Must've jammed when you set your code. I'll call security. They'll be right up.*

She proceeded to make the bed, jerking the sheets off and flinging the pillows. She fumed she didn't check who stayed in the room before going through the trouble of breaking into the safe. *Stupid.*

Throughout the day, she'd scanned six different floors but didn't see any white females around her age roaming the hallways or entering and exiting rooms. Not one. She punched her time card and changed out of her uniform. Other maids, including Jackie, looked her way, but kept quiet. Nadia swallowed six pills with water to ease her back pain. She rose from the bench, grabbing her bag. Walking out, she sensed the eyes of fellow maids on her as one shouted, "Kick his ass, girl." She felt better hearing this, even if the raspy voice was Jackie.

She got on the bus and felt queasy. What if Jerkin was at the flat waiting for her? She knew if he wanted to hurt her again he could. She had no way of stopping him. She wasn't a fighter and she didn't have a gun. She sunk in her seat, wanting to puke.

Nadia walked up cement steps with graffiti painted on cracked walls, thirsty from the pills dehydrating her body. She heard babies crying over thumping bass. Three boys hung in the hallway, eyeing her. She passed them with her head down, hearing sexual jokes directed at her. *Piss off. I know your mums and I know they still soap your teeny balls.*

At her door, she sighed, inserted the key into the lock, expecting the worst. The door squeaked. She hit the lights and nothing had changed since morning. He hadn't been here, and she figured, he wasn't coming back. *Not tonight, anyway.* She felt at ease, changing into sweats that were in her laundry basket. For dinner, she ate lentil soup with buttered toast. Afterwards, she sipped on tea and sat in silence.

She considered doing laundry, but she was tired and sore so she went to bed. For an hour, she tossed and turned. She left on the bathroom light for safety, but this kept her awake. She was tense, too. She looked at those squiggly breaks in the ceiling. She heard the door squeak and knew the bathroom window wasn't open. This time her mind wasn't playing tricks. A terrible feeling swept through her. The door shut. She heard footsteps. *Jesus.* She pulled the bed sheet to her mouth and turned to the side, pretending to sleep, even

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snore. The sound of keys hitting the table, shoes being kicked off, a belt being unbuckled. She felt his body loom, smelling of booze and smoke. She heard him breathe.

God help. Please.

The bed sunk and Jerkin was against her. Her back tickled from his beating heart. She let out a snore, hoping to push him away. Instead, she got her chin bumped, feeling his thick arm around her neck. *He's going to strangle me.*

"Forgive me, love."

She opened her eyes, her heart pounding.

"I can't contain it," he said. "Being locked up with all those men got me crazy. I got so much rage inside, sometimes I don't know what to do with it all. I got to change. I know."

She heard his voice crack.

"Tomorrow, you come with me," he said. "I should've trusted you in the beginning."

If only she believed his words.

"You'll be on the lookout, to warn me of trouble," he said.

Maybe he was on a path to change, she thought. *Maybe he feels bad.*

"What's the job?" She felt his body ease back.

"I thought you were asleep."

"You didn't think by talking you'd wake me up?"

"Practice," he said. "I was practicing for morning. I read in prison if you say something important out loud to someone when they're sleeping, and say it again when they're awake, it has more of an impact."

She was too pissed, too much in pain to chuckle at his stupidity, keeping silent. Plus, his arm still hung around her neck.

"Look love, I'm not trying to mind fuck you here."

"What's the job?"

"Diana's ring."

"Diana?"

Jerkin paused, making her feel awkward.

“The Princess of Wales? You can’t be serious,” she said.

He didn’t say anything. She took his silence to mean anger.

“You are serious.”

“You think I’m gonna lie to you after trying to make it better?”

She kept still, knowing he was right. He always told her the truth when it came to the details of any job. But something about this job she wasn’t buying and she could feel how warm his body was getting.

“You ought to know I don’t lie about jobs,” he said, his voice louder. “You ought to know.”

“Okay, sorry,” she said, easing into his chest, hoping to calm him. “Sounds risky. I don’t want you to go back.”

“I’ll slit my bloody throat before I go back,” he said, lowering his lips to her ear, hugging her tight. “I got this, love.”

“Which ring?”

“The one given by her lover before she died.”

“You trust this?”

“He pulled strings to get me out and we both got something to gain.”

“What ring is at Harrods then?”

“The father knew the ring was gone, so he got another one like it to prove there was a marriage coming and start trouble. But the jeweler that sold it said it wasn’t the right one.”

“Really?”

“It’s his shop. He can do what he wants. Like you, nobody knows the real story so they believe him when they see the ring on display.”

“How do you know you’re getting the real story?”

“My guy’s on the inside. He’s worked for the Royals, he’s worked for the Yard. He knows.”

“Why now?”

“He got a tip the ring was swiped by another paparazzo.”

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“What’s to prevent them from throwing you back in jail after you complete the job? What’s to say this guy’s not setting you up for his own benefit?”

“That’s not how shit works with these people. You don’t know.”

Nadia knew little about Diana, being just a teenager when she died. She grieved because the whole world did, but she didn’t truly understand the significance of her death. Even years later Jackie and the other maids talked about Diana like she was a heroic figure wronged by her husband and in-laws. Her death had affected them and Nadia didn’t understand why it hadn’t impacted her. Maybe she didn’t care, she thought. She really didn’t care about William and Kate’s wedding, which only made the memories of Diana stronger for Jackie and the other maids.

“Why did the paparazzo keep the ring all these years and not cash out?”

“We’d be jail honeys if he cashed out. He stole the ring off a Princess trying to hang on to her dear life. The authorities couldn’t prove he swiped it because no one really knew if there was even a ring. Not that he didn’t make out from the whole thing, he made millions off her.”

Nadia sighed, wary.

“I got no sympathy for the scumbag, but he was in a tricky spot,” he said. “He could only sell the ring to somebody who wouldn’t tell the world they got it. Can you imagine if he did? That’d be one hell of a manhunt. For all these years, he couldn’t find or trust that person so the ring ended up being nothing more than a souvenir.”

“This new guy. He’s planning on selling it?”

“My guess is he was at the scene and knew about it from the beginning. How he got it, not sure. The fool’s gonna realize it’s harder than selling a photograph.”

“There’s a buyer once we get it?”

“We deal with my guy. My guy deals with the buyer.”

“How much?”

“More than we got right now.”

“How much exactly?”

“Six million American dollars. Our cut’s half.”

Nadia swallowed a lump. She felt her heart stop. *Three million*. She’d have to work a hundred years as a maid and not spend a dime to make that kind of money. Her eyes widened, salivating over the millions and imagining the kind of life she’d have. Jerkin wasn’t in the picture.

“You cool with this?”

She sighed, feeling Jerkin’s hand under her sweats. He caressed her ass, sliding his hand to her front. She didn’t moan. She didn’t make a sound.

“You know how long I waited for this, love,” he said, lowering her sweats.

She wouldn’t turn to face him, his arm still under her neck. She couldn’t feel what he wanted her to either. Instead, she thought of betraying him while he did what he wanted from behind.

She woke up ripped, burning in the shower. There was no buildup and Jerkin went too fast, getting carried away with a second and third time. She might as well have been dead, she thought, and he must’ve wondered why she didn’t turn around when he let go of his arm. Or maybe he didn’t care, finally being with a woman.

She got ready for work, drying her hair. Her back hurt like hell, but she noticed her face healing. The swelling in the eye and the bruises on the cheeks weren’t as visible as the day before. She came out of the bathroom and noticed something on the bedside table. She set the towel on the bed’s edge, walking over. She saw a thin stack of \$100 bills, a phone number with the name “POINDEXTER,” and an airline ticket. She opened the ticket folder, seeing destination Las Vegas and departing Heathrow at 7AM. Her face got hard, eyes shooting darts.

“Jerkin, get up.”

He mumbled, working to keep his eyes open. She turned on the lamp. He groaned.

DIANA'S RING

"When were you planning to tell me you were going to the States?"

"Yeah, yeah, love," he said. "I was going to give you details later."

"Later when?"

"Text you at work."

She watched him rub his eyes. "I don't even know when I'm supposed to be back."

"Be here at six," he said.

Nadia was off at five. She felt that gave her enough time if she took the bus home. "Then what?"

"We'll do some pre-work, get to the estate at nine," he said. "You'll get instructions then. You're not doing anything, just watching. Watching if anyone's there, anyone that'll put us in jeopardy. Remember that. At midnight, I'll drop you off and hit the airport."

"The buyer's in Vegas and you're not taking me."

"You're coming when the deal's done, but to a different city. I don't know which one yet."

"Why?"

"These are dangerous people. Play it normal after tonight. Work your shifts, buy groceries, get the mail, take the bus. We can't afford any suspicion if I'm on temporary release."

"If you leave a trail, they'll come after me."

"I never leave a trail," he said, eyes narrowing.

Nadia knew something was up. He talked safety, then suspicion. He wasn't consistent in his reasoning and he was evasive. He wasn't evasive before. Worse, he was headed to the airport seven hours before the flight took off. Why so early? She looked at him in the light. He saw her face for the first time since he smashed it. She couldn't tell if he didn't like what he did or like what he saw. Or maybe he didn't like that she was all up in his business.

"You wanted in from the beginning. I'm letting you in, so trust me," he said, his hand at her hips, trying to pull her in. "Trust me all the way."

SUNIL BHATIA

She gave a weak nod.

“All the way, love.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said, pulling his hand away. She grabbed her jacket off the chair.

“Don’t be late.”

She walked out.

