

It was raining. Not a nice rain either, but the stinging kind that might be snow if it were only a few degrees colder. Elodie kept her head down against the wind, stray hair falling into her eyes where it had escaped her updo. She watched the street lights flicker in the puddles beneath her long strides. She should have worn better shoes. These pumps pinched her toes. They were never meant for walking a mile in the rain. Heavy drops pounded on her umbrella and dripped off the sides, some splashing onto her bare legs. She shivered. She should have worn a heavier jacket too, but she hadn't planned on walking home. She shouldn't be walking home. A quick glance over her shoulder revealed nothing but shadows and rain. She should know better than to walk alone at night, especially in a city where she lacked valuable anonymity.

An uneven stone sent her stumbling. Her ankles would be sore tomorrow from all this walking. If Hidalgo hadn't been on the train she wouldn't have forgotten her purse, and she could have paid trolley fare. Elodie gritted her teeth. She shouldn't let him get to her. She caught a shadow of her reflection in a shop window beside her. The warped glass revealed a shape behind her. That in itself shouldn't have been a cause of alarm. He might be walking home late too, but Elodie knew better. Men just walking home didn't have their hands in their pockets fingering a gun.

Who was he? Elodie thought back to the train. Hidalgo sat two rows in front of her and she had been too distracted by the way he had his hair twisted into gold-tipped dreads now to pay attention to the other passengers. Now she kicked herself for her lack of awareness.

Another shady figure across the street. And another lurking in a doorway just ahead. Elodie mentally cursed. If only she had her purse. Then she'd at least have a handgun.

She didn't change her pace, or look around, or give any indication that she knew she would be ambushed. She would need to catch them off guard if she wanted to survive.

As she passed the doorway where the third man waited, she reached up casually to hit the clip that would collapse her umbrella, her only weapon.

Sure enough, the man in the doorway stepped out to follow her. The man on the other side of the street crossed over. She counted her breaths to calm herself. She would wait for them to instigate. Then it would be self-defense. That was legal.

One of the men whistled three notes- a signal of some kind- and Elodie didn't wait to see what it meant.

She closed her umbrella and hit the first man over the head. He stumbled back, stunned and bleeding from a cut on his forehead. Number two pulled out his gun, which Elodie batted out of his hand. He grabbed for her, but she spun away and kicked the first man in the stomach. Her sharp four-inch heel tore through his suit jacket and dug into his flesh with a sickening squelch.

Elodie tossed her now dripping hair out of her eyes and whirled around to block a punch from the third man. Number two dove for her feet to knock her off balance, but Elodie introduced his head to her knee. Pain in her feet forgotten, she kicked him as hard as she could. The crunch of cartilage and bone interrupted the otherwise peaceful ambiance.

Before Elodie could properly appreciate the power behind her kick, a thick hand closed around her throat and threw her into the brick facade of a flower shop. Her skull cracked against the wall and her back scraped as the hand lifted her from the ground. Elodie's lungs burned. Her hands couldn't find purchase on her rain-slick assailant. She wasn't much stronger than she looked and blood pounded in her ears. Huge drops of rain slid over her face, bringing the chill of death. She couldn't breathe.

Her white-knuckled grip on her umbrella kept her anchored to reality. She strained to shift her grip, vision going dark around the edges. Until - there! The button. A blade sprang out of the top of the umbrella.

In a desperate jab, Elodie forced the umbrella up under the man's rib cage. He released her with a scream. She clung to the wall to stay upright, vision fading in and out as she gasped for air. Her ankles wobbled in the ridiculous shoes. The rain ran red at her feet.

The man tried to pull the umbrella from his chest, but Elodie twisted it. Blood sputtered from his mouth.

"Who do you work for?" she demanded. He gasped incoherently and she shoved at the umbrella. "Who?"

"Varelo." He moaned, more dark blood spilling out of his mouth.

Elodie ducked her head in a part-laugh, part-gag. Varelo. He had been trying to claim the tracks for years. Elodie hadn't considered him a serious threat, and three of his men dead on the street would probably get the point across.

"Why is he trying to kill me? Last time we spoke he wanted to cut a deal with the Death Adder." Not that he had anything to offer her. She already owned the tracks. The man gurgled, choking in his own blood mixed with freezing rain, and didn't answer. "You know what? It doesn't matter." Elodie opened the umbrella inside the man's stomach, ripping skin and clothing and spilling puddles of blood amid the puddles of rain. He collapsed near the one who's nose she'd kicked in.

The first man reached for a dropped gun. Elodie stepped on his hand just before he reached it and bent slowly to pick it up, feeling the comfortable weight in her hand.

"If Varelo wants me," She aimed the gun at her last attacker's head. "He can come get me himself." The man whimpered, warm blood oozing around his hand on his stomach where she had stabbed him with her heel. Elodie pulled the trigger.

She stood there for a moment, out of breath, the echo of the gunshot pounding in her heartbeat. She stumbled back to lean against the wall. Her hands shook. Because of the cold, she told herself. Just the cold.

She wiped her prints off the gun with the edge of her skirt and dropped it in the middle of the mess. A double-check that nothing here could be traced to her, and she ran through the rain, shaking the blood off her umbrella and tossing it into some alley. Wet hair plastered itself to her face. The rain stung like little needles on her bare skin, and the streetlamps cast odd shadows on everything. For the sake of speed, she stepped out of her shoes and carried them, dodging rocks on the road as best she could in the dark.

She paused outside of her apartment building out of breath from running and soaked to the skin like a drowned sewer rat. She cursed out loud because she didn't have her keys. Her purse was still on the train. Because of Hidalgo.

She wrapped numb fingers around the iron bars of the fire escape. It wasn't the first time she'd broken into her own apartment, and it wouldn't be the last.

The rain made finagling her window open from the outside all but impossible and she was shivering convulsively by the time she forced it wide enough to crawl through. Inside, she couldn't keep her feet long enough to close the window. Her legs gave out and she collapsed in a dripping heap on the floor. She threw her shoes as far as she could into the modest living room. They landed two feet away.

Elodie closed her eyes, cheek pressed into the carpet. Exhaustion weighed her down until she caught her breath. Then the cold and the dirt and the blood became more important. She heaved herself to

her feet and closed the window. Pain she had been numb to before shot through her feet and she dove into the clawfoot bathtub. An examination of the bottoms of her feet told her that running through the rain barefoot might have been foolish. She cranked the tap to warm and didn't bother to undress. She scrubbed mud off her feet and legs, and blood off her arms and face. No hope remained for her dress.

The bathroom door opened and Elodie instinctively grabbed for the closest thing she could use as a weapon. In this case, a straight razor resting innocently in a partially open drawer.

"Are you okay?"

Elodie dropped the razor and groaned, sinking further into the water. Wesley *would* wait up for her. He tended to be "considerate" and "a gentleman" like that.

"You're hurt, aren't you?" The blond man hovering in the doorway looked from the window in the other room to Elodie in the bathtub. "There were bloody footprints. I was worried."

"I'm fine." Elodie's thoughts ran in circles around Hidalgo. Did he know she would be ambushed? Did he set it all up?

Wesley appraised her. "If you say so." He knelt next to the tub to look at her feet. "Did you run barefoot through a briar patch?"

"I left my purse on the train." She sat up to conceal her feet in the already murky water. "And I need a new umbrella." She looked at Wesley with weary eyes.

"Ah." He sat back on his heels. "So you killed someone."

"Three." A hoarse whisper. Because of the cold. She must have caught a cold from being out in the freezing rain.

"Are you alright?" Wesley asked again. He didn't know about Hidalgo. Elodie never told him. He wouldn't understand.

"Yeah." She couldn't tell him. He would blame her like she blamed herself. Not outwardly of course, but that made it worse.

She looked down at her hands, which still trembled. The water seemed redder than before, incriminating her. She took a deep breath. "Cancel all my meetings before noon tomorrow. I need to figure out what Varelo wants and why he would attack me."

Wesley made a face. "You're meeting Senator Morley at 10:30-"

"Reschedule." Elodie put a hand to her head, which ached where she'd hit it on the wall.

She could see Wesley consider telling her that it would be difficult to reschedule a meeting with the senator, but like the good, obedient lapdog he was, he nodded. "Of course." He watched her shift to let the red water out of the bath. "Do you need anything else?"

Elodie stood on shaky legs. "No, not tonight."

He helped her out of the tub and handed her a towel. She dried her face and scrunched at her hair. He turned away for modesty as she tried to tug down the zip of her dress. As if he hadn't seen her before. As if he had anything to be shy about. She couldn't quite reach the zipper. "Wesley?"

She turned and lifted her hair out of the way, still working on it with the towel. His hands burned against her skin as he slid the zipper down. She shivered and he stopped.

"You're bleeding."

Elodie turned to look in the mirror. The metal zipper on her dress had dug into the skin on her back and left some nasty scrapes. And suddenly, because she knew they were there, they stung. She pulled the zipper the rest of the way down. The cuts only ran from the base of her neck to between her shoulder blades.

"I don't have bandages the right size," Wesley apologized.

“It’s fine.” Elodie let the waterlogged, bloodstained dress fall off her shoulders and wrapped the towel around herself. “I don’t sleep on my back anyway.” She picked up the dress and handed it to him. “Can you do something with this?”

He nodded. His warm hands lingered on hers.

“Thank you, Wesley. Goodnight.” She couldn’t hide from the concern in his eyes. Not as she dripped down the hall to her bedroom. And not as she fell onto her pale green comforter still trembling from cold and... No. Just the cold. But she didn’t see Wesley when she closed her eyes. She saw Hidalgo. With his new gold-tipped dreads and his snarling lips and his burning eyes. And Hidalgo’s voice, not Wesley’s, echoed in her ears.

“You’re playing with fire, ‘Lodie.”