

Excerpt from A Shade of Myself

Phone calls at 3AM meant only one thing: someone was dead.

The caller was Tatiana, so clearly the dead person wasn't her, even though my boss was in her eighties. My adrenaline rush blunted my grogginess while I quickly sorted through which of my friends or loved ones had bit the dust. It made for an interesting cocktail of super wired and slow on the uptake, and by the time I'd understood that Tatiana was phoning about a quick job, I was halfway to my car, keys in hand, hospital bound.

Yawning and knocking on the wood and glass front door of the client's mansion on swanky Point Grey Road, I wished that I'd worn more than a light sweater over my pajamas. When no one answered, I double-checked the address, though with the electronica on full blast inside that sent vibrations up through my feet out here on the stoop, that was hardly surprising. I tentatively pushed the door open, following the music down a hallway past an Ansel Adams photograph on the wall. Unlike the identical one that I'd hung in my dorm room, this wasn't a mass reproduction.

"Hello?" I called out. "Tatiana sent me."

I'd been working for the elderly artist as her archivist and magic fixer minion for almost two months now, and it had its ups and downs. Tonight's job promised to be a quick in and done, though the last time I'd assumed the assignment would be simple, I'd ended up with a human heart on my passenger seat, vaulting me into one of the top spots as the murder suspect.

The slap of my shoes on the intricate mosaic tile made me suspicious that—yup, I was wearing slippers. They were green and fuzzy with a fake fur trim that clashed with my orange pajamas, although given how much the place stank of weed, our client, Davide Forino, probably wouldn't notice my lapse in professional attire. Tatiana had warned me he was a snowboarding celeb and rumored to be constantly stoned.

I put my hand over my mouth and nose to minimize the chances of getting a contact high. I had no problem with pot, especially not now that marijuana was legal, but I had to drive home. Unfortunately, that left only one hand free to plug my ears against the pounding bass and its sassy conga line in my back molars. With my right hand over my mouth and my left in my ear, I felt like I was playing a children's game.

I stopped on the threshold to the airy living room and bellowed out, “Could you please turn that down?”

A pause, and then the music was lowered to barely tolerable levels, but my ears still rung. “What?” a man drawled in a dazed voice.

I snorted.

He was sitting, back toward me, in a chair shaped like a scorpion spine that probably cost as much as a new car and resembled a Delia Deetz creation from *Beetlejuice*. Presumably the sitter was staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the gently rippling waves with crests of foamy white, which met the inky darkness of an endless night sky.

Oh, to have a view like that. Give me this guy’s decorating budget and I’d have installed long bookcases and comfortable seating in decadent fabrics, not this ridiculously shaped bullshit that no one could lounge on. Other than a pizza box tossed on the ground, the all-white room was spotless, which meant he had a cleaning service, because he sure as hell wasn’t applying that elbow grease.

I hated him a little more.

“I’m Miriam.” I stepped over the pizza box and entered the room. “You texted Tatiana Cassin about sensitive material that you needed magically disposed?”

“I did?” Davide spun the chair around, looking like Shaggy after a bender. Which, come to think of it, was what Shaggy always looked like. Except Davide was also scratched up. He took a drag off a joint, ashes dropping onto a ratty plaid bathrobe that fell almost to his knees. At least it was tied tightly, sparing me the sight of dark, thick chest hair covering his torso like a pelt. Or worse.

I took a very long, very slow breath. “Yes. You did.”

Davide darted a wary look behind his sofa at—I tried to follow his gaze—his laptop sitting on a bookshelf crowded with snowboarding trophies? Was there a file he wanted scrubbed? My hacker skills only went as far as emptying the trash.

“If it’s something electronic—” I said.

“It’s not.” He exhaled hard then stood up with a grim expression. With the joint clamped in the corner of his mouth, he scratched his scrawny belly, picking the bathrobe out of his ass with his other hand. Who said men couldn’t multitask? “Over here, dude.”