

CATARACTS

“Who invited them?” I ask Andrew.

He bends an ear, a little tipsy. “Who’s that, love?”

We’re standing under a white canopy tent, tall as the Rockies, drinks in hand.

“Over there. Those shady types.”

“Shady... oh, you mean the Deloits?”

“No.” I beckon my neck. “Don’t make me point.”

Turning, Andrew bumps Bethany’s arm. “Oops.”

“Watch it,” she sparks.

“Sorry. Meredith here thinks we’re being invaded by marauding caterers.”

“Not funny, Andrew.” I’m irked. The sight is unsettling.

“What about the caterers?” Bethany wipes her lips with a cloth napkin.

“Now where’d they go? They were just ...”

“Or is it Atila and the Hungry?” Andrew again.

“Pfft! Enough. I’m going to sort this.”

Bethany lifts her fork. “Be sure to tell them the crab cakes are soggy.”

As I weave among attendees the dark silhouettes appear by the cash bar. Seeing them gives me chills.

“Meredith!”

Above the milling heads a hand flags me. Lindsay Halsted. I recognize the spangly bracelets.

“You look in hot pursuit.” She fingers my sleeve. “Chiffon?”

“Annealed bamboo.”

“Hmm, of course. And how’s Kiley.”

“*Kay* lee.”

“We must catch up.” She waves. “Ah, there’s Grant.”

“Lindsay, do me a favor. Look over my shoulder and tell me what you see by the cash bar.”

“What is it dear?”

Grant joins in. Pasty face. “Well, well, it’s our stalwart organizer.”

“No, no,” I correct. “Angela arranged this one. Country clubs are not my venue.”

“Well, Angela picked a brilliant, sunny day to throw money at our candidate.”

“And where is the man of the hour?” Lindsay glances about.

“An hour late.” Grant says.

“Everyone’s getting restless waiting. How do they auction: ‘Play Date with the Candidate’ when he’s a no show?”

“Wheeler will come,” Grant assures. “Any minute he’ll be descending by helicopter.”

“Lyndsay...” I tug at her wrist. “Did you look?”

“Who’s that you say?”

“The intruders. By the cash bar.”

“Meredith, you’re making me nervous.”

“Oh, forget it. I’m going to find security.”

Moving on, the intruders re-appear. They look like— “Oh, my God!” I raid my bag for my phone.

“Angela, it’s Meredith. Where are you? Call me right away. There’s a problem.”

I brush past cliques of donors and collide into Miles Munson and Kurt Young.

“Have either of you seen Angela?”

“You mean the butterfly who flits about the fundraiser like it’s her private meadow?”

“That’s her.”

“Meredith, you seem distressed.”

“Both of you, Look over there. Do you see ... oh where’d they go?”

“Who’s that?” Kurt says.

“The refugees, a pack of them.”

“Here?”

“Well, they must be chic refugees to be at this soiree,” Miles says.

“No, they’re filthy.”

“Could be a talking point in Wheeler’s campaign speech.”

“I need to find security.”

“Armando.” Kurt strains his neck. “Just saw him.”

“The manly man.”

“Yeah, have him check their invitations.”

“But invites can be faked,” Miles notes.

“True that, you can forge anything today. Take Miles, here. I’ve been hesitant to point out the graphic flicker in his profile.”

“I’m actually the valet.”

“Is everyone here a comedian?” I want to rip the snicker off Miles’ face. “Doesn’t it bother you there are gate crashers?”

“Not since the coup at the capital.”

“Well, I’m going to see that this element is weeded out.”

My phone chirps. “Angela! Listen, I wouldn’t bother you but we have a pack of dirty infiltrators in our midst.”

“Oh? First I’ve heard.” Her tone dips with mistrust. “And where ... exactly?”

“Oh, where’d they go? I turn my head and they sneak away, the grubby, disgusting...”

“Grubby? Meredith, as you know donors come in all accents and styles. Everything from Italian threads to tattered combat shorts. Grunge money is still money.”

“Well, I’m fairly certain refugees do not belong here.”

“Did you say *refugees*?”

“I may be slightly buzzed, Angela, but I’m not hallucinating.”

“Alright, alright, I’ll call Armando.”

It’s insulting. I’m about to save the woman’s reputation and she treats me like a nuisance. Our work has never been competitive. We simply offer different locales when it comes these affairs. Her big top sites are festooned with red, white, and blue banners and balloons. Rousing patriotic songs. Mine are plush and intimate. Gated luxury homes. Places such alien types couldn’t come within a mile. Angela’s probably thinking I’m out to spoil her event. If anything’s out to do spoil it, it’s those cockroaches.

As I wait on hold, a clutch of them emerge by the tent entrance. Before I can holler at them, my phone chirps.

“Meredith, it’s Angela. Armando says you’ll find him by the stage. Got to go, I hear the chopper. Finally! I’m thinking we’ll start the auction bidding at ten grand.”

I recognize the barrel-chested man standing in front of flag bunting.

“Armando, I’m Meredith.”

“Yes, Angela tells me you saw ...?”

“Refugees. A swarm of them. We need them escorted out quietly, without making a scene. They were near the tent entrance. There! See them?”

He squints. “Are you sure you’re seeing what you’re seeing?”

“My god man, are you blind?”

“I will check.”

“Yes. You do that.”

I wait at the stage. A couple techs are busy at the mic doing sound checks. The whop-whop of helicopter rotors builds to a roar. I lose sight of Armando as people flock out of the tent. Spun around in a rush of bodies I stagger, lose my footing, and drop to my knees on the turf. A blur of legs tramp past. I swat at them. “Watch it god dammit!”

Bleary-eyed, I notice my phone light up. I swipe the screen with a dirty finger.

“WHAT!”

“It’s Angela. Thought you’d like to know, Armando made the rounds. As far as he can see we’re all guests here.”

“What’s that? I can’t hear you!”

“WE’RE ALL GUESTS HERE!”

“Good. We chased the scum away. You’re welcome.”