

Chapter One

Lydia cradled a glass of wine in her right hand, the crystal goblet resting comfortably as if it weighed no more than a feather. The simplicity of the gesture was an illusion; one Lydia had perfected over the course of a year. The twenty-nine-year-old was not at all comfortable in her simple, black dress. The snug garment, cut high in the front but perilously low in the back, itched her throat while wayward strands of deep brown hair tickled her shoulders. Even so, Lydia moved with ease and grace among the clusters of artists and celebrities as if she belonged. No one suspected that the young photographer struggled to hold her tongue. *Coward*, she chastised, her stomach churning mercilessly. Still, she felt compelled to manage the charade for another hour or so before it would be socially acceptable to make a gracious exit.

Lydia's comrades in the arts were engaged in various yes-sessions about socialist principles and partisan politics. Lydia hated their collectivist ideology and wished she had the resolve to speak up. But a debate in the cohesive atmosphere would surely end her career in a heartbeat. It would be careless to jeopardize her success, especially since no one at the gathering would bother to listen. They shut down dissenters immediately. Lydia had seen it before. Unpleasant and painful to witness, the community ostracized the offender with a finality that rivaled death. The young photographer shuddered as a prickly sensation traveled up her spine and crawled across her scalp. *Not today. Not now.*

Lydia brushed past a tall man wearing a bright blue shirt.

"How can anyone work in corporate America?" he asked his captive fans. "I can't imagine being one of those profit mongers. It's time we abandon this antiquated system called capitalism. It breeds competitiveness and inequality."

The man in blue, Sim Clemming, was a sculptor who took great pride in creating shock-value artwork, including pieces that defiled religious symbols and one distasteful number depicting a gun to a former president's head. Since his rise in popularity, the demand for Clemming's work encouraged prices nearly as obscene as the art itself. It came as no surprise to Lydia that the hypocrisy escaped him. She slipped away from his lecture before anyone noticed her presence.

Taking a sharp turn, Lydia almost ran into a movie director preaching about the necessity of gun control. The director's most recent film, filled with gratuitous violence and machine gun murders, broke box office records on the night it was released.

Why don't you examine what you put out in the universe before you annihilate the Second Amendment, Lydia wanted to say, yet the words lingered in her brain flirting with indifference. *Confront him. I dare you.* She remained silent and the din in her mind spawned an unbearable headache. The director saw Lydia, but he did not move aside to invite her into their little circle. This suited the young photographer perfectly. Nevertheless, out of habit she smiled and nodded mutely before jostling through the crowd, searching for the buffet. The cuisine would provide a welcome reprieve from the hideous conversations.

Breaking free from the cozy little groups of like-minded artists, Lydia stopped to take a deep breath and look around. The elegant banquet room pulsed with the warmth of human interaction and the enticing smells of food and wine. An array of large windows offered a spectacular panoramic view of the Beverly Hills Hotel grounds. The silver gray of twilight might have enchanted the party participants but merriment and loud voices drowned its call. Lydia, alone, stood gazing into the night. A calm washed over her and she indulged in a generous sip of wine. As the alcohol dulled her senses, the photographer yearned for her camera and access to the rooftop. A sharp laugh from the corner of the room unnerved Lydia. All of a sudden, she felt claustrophobic in the stuffy room, and she remembered her original mission – to find the food.

The sumptuous buffet took Lydia's breath away. A variety of dishes, designed to make the mouth water upon sight, lined an entire wall. The elaborate display mocked the celebrity community's empathy for the poor and hungry. In favor of wine consumption, much of the feast would go uneaten. Lydia found it particularly irritating that her colleagues insisted the braised Alaskan halibut and the Treviso salad be no less than exquisite, yet these same people took for granted the fishermen who caught their main course, the farmers who grew their side dish, and the truck drivers who hauled various goods across the country so they would be available to Beverly Hills' finest chefs. In fact, many of the artists loathed fishermen, farmers and truckers and deemed such commoners beneath their superior intellectual standing. Ironically, their elitism conflicted with a professed concern for *the people* – a vague group of nonentities

assumed to have no individuality and no personal desires or goals. The incongruity of the ideology eluded her colleagues but Lydia lacked the backbone to challenge them.

“I hate politics,” a husky voice whispered playfully.

Lydia turned with a start. She opened her mouth, but no words emerged.

The tall, caramel-skinned man chuckled. Gesturing to the windows, he remarked, “I wish they would shut up and enjoy the scenery. . . or share an opinion about a book. I don’t know.” He shrugged. “Maybe contemplate the awe-inspiring vastness of the universe. *Anything* that’s actually worth discussing.”

“I . . . uh,” Lydia stammered. Her throat tightened. She loved politics. She merely didn’t care for *their* politics. Would she cower in the presence of this good-natured, attractive man like she had with the others? A thousand thoughts rushed through her mind as a surge of manic energy swept away her inhibitions. She spoke before she realized what she was saying. “Oh, I love politics. But these groupthink socialists annoy the hell out of me.” She jerked her head in the direction of the jovial crowd.

The man’s eyebrows shot up in curiosity, but he said nothing. Lydia’s heart rate accelerated and a feeling of dismay engulfed her. *I’m done. Might as well sell the camera.* In an effort to dig herself out of the hole, or perhaps deeper in, Lydia stammered on. “The indispensable benevolence of big government. Not everyone agrees with that.” *Dig, Lydia, dig. And grab a tombstone while you’re at it.*

Suddenly, an impish grin crossed the man’s face and his eyes twinkled. “Ah, an anarchist in our midst.”

Relieved, Lydia replied, “More of a free-enterprise individualist.”

“Shh.” The man peered over his shoulder in fake paranoia. “We must get you out of here safely before they suspect that an independent thinker lurks among them.” He whimsically placed a hand on her back and attempted to usher her to the door.

Lydia laughed loudly. The satisfaction of finally expressing her thoughts blended with the smooth merlot to produce a mild euphoria. Furthermore, the man’s touch, a warm hand on her bare skin, aroused her senses. It caught her unaware and for a second she faltered. *Play it safe*, she cautioned. Revisiting her lengthy list of reasons to shun male attention, she hoped to ground herself, but something about the freedom of the moment made the list seem petty. After a brief hesitation, Lydia realized it was a losing battle. She accepted the man’s invitation.

"I'm Lydia, by the way."

"Lydia the libertarian."

"You're not entirely unfamiliar with the vocabulary of politics, I see," she teased as she absentmindedly placed her glass next to a scrumptious dish of baklava.

"Just playing along." He pressed her back urgently and Lydia allowed him to escort her.

"And your name is?"

"Antonio." He picked up speed as they approached an exit.

"Antonio," she repeated, a coy smile on her lips. "Antonio the incorrigible."

"Moi? Never. The name means 'beyond praise.'"

"Really? Isn't that modest? Then it won't be necessary for me to dream up compliments for your daring rescue."

"None required. Glad to be of service." He opened the door and swished one arm gallantly toward the newly carpeted hallway, indicating that Lydia ought to lead the way.

"Shouldn't we say goodbye to the others?" She glanced at the crowd.

"They're all preoccupied with their egos. No one will notice your absence."

"That's very flattering. Thank you."

Antonio smirked.

"But they'll notice yours?"

"I doubt it." Again, the man motioned for her to leave.

Lydia beamed as she complied with his request. Stepping into the hallway, she pivoted to face her new friend. "Good. I wouldn't want to be the sole outcast."

Antonio let the door slip shut with an ominous clack. "I would presume, as an individualist, you would take pride in being the sole outcast."

His words cut deeply. Lydia gazed steadily at the man for a second before responding. "Interesting point." Shaking her shoulders subtly, she changed the subject. "Where to now?"

Antonio looked into her eyes. His blithe disposition momentarily slid into intensity and back again. "Care for a *real* drink?"