

ZARA

By JADE KERRION

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CHAPTER ONE

No one ever expected to die in the happiest place on Earth, which, to Zara Itani, made Disneyland, California, the perfect place for a kill.

Her seat near the window gave her a clear view of the street. At the first hint of dusk, ornate street lamps flickered on. Storefront windows bathed their wares with light to lure in the crowd bustling through New Orleans Square. Parents pushed strollers occupied by sleeping toddlers and dragged along their tired children. Couples, sometimes hand-in-hand, though more often not, paused in front of the French Quarter-style buildings to stare at their maps, often oblivious to potted bougainvillea sitting on the ornate ironwork balconies above their heads.

At the end of a long day, even the magic of Disneyland could fade, but within Club 33, all was still well with the world.

The complex tangle of music from the saxophone rose over the syncopated bass drum patter. Both blended with the quiet clink of silverware against china dishes and muted conversations punctuated with polite laughter. Wait staff wearing white shirts accentuated by teal and gold brocade vests moved among the tables, providing impeccable yet unpretentious service.

“You haven’t tasted your wine, Zara. Is it not to your liking?”

With a smile, Zara turned back to her dining partner. Alastair Boyd-Smith wore a faint frown, but the anxious set of his eyes betrayed a desperate desire to please. He was a lesser son of greater men, the fifth in line to an earldom in England. With blond hair and pale eyes, he was too fair for her liking. She was too dark for his, yet she knew precisely why he had invited her to dinner at the ultra-exclusive Club 33.

When he looked at her, Boyd-Smith did not just see a young Lebanese-Venezuelan woman, more exotic than beautiful. He saw instead the glamorous socialite who had graced the arms of Lucien Winter, heir to the multibillion-dollar Winter fortune, and Galahad, the perfect human being, created by Pioneer Labs.

Zara's stock in trade, already high as Lucien's ex-girlfriend, had risen yet higher with Galahad. Women envied her. Men craved her.

She was sparing, however, with her affection. Alastair she had selected for a specific purpose—a purpose that would soon play out. Her smile deepened as she traced her finger around the rim of her wineglass. Her blood-red fingernails gleamed beneath the glow of the candlelight.

"I'm sure the wine is wonderful, Alastair, but it wouldn't do to drink on an empty stomach when my head's already spinning." Her voice, sultry and faintly accented, resonated like a siren's song.

Alastair grinned, obviously responding as much to her tone as to her words. Oh, how he reminded her of an overeager puppy. Willpower kept her from laughing. "I expect the appetizers will be here soon," she said. "Please excuse me; I need to go to the ladies room."

She stood and made her way through the restaurant. As she passed a table, a Japanese man stopped her by placing his hand in her way. She tilted her head and studied him. The cold, narrow eyes and thin smile belonged on a much older man. His face, however, was unlined. If he smiled, he could be handsome.

"You are stunning." His voice resonated with a confidence and authority that Alastair lacked. He pulled a white rose from the vase on the table and handed it to her.

"Thank you." She accepted the rose, inhaled its fragrance, and brushed her lips against it. Her crimson lipstick stained its white petals. With a teasing smile, she reached down and brushed the rose against his lips. The back of her fingers grazed his cheek.

The voracious need in his eyes devoured her as he licked the faint smear of lipstick that transferred from the petals to his lips. His cocky expression promised her a world of pleasure and a life of privilege that would exceed anything her pasty English date could offer her.

He was, no doubt, right, but Zara offered him a rueful parting glance before continuing on her way to the restroom. She locked herself in a stall and set the rose on the floor, its lipstick-smear petal facing up. She pulled a pair of biodegradable silicon-carbon polymer gloves from her handbag and slid them over her hands. Next, she took out a perfume atomizer and spritzed it over the rose. Carefully, she peeled the thin layers of polymer off her upper and lower lips and sprayed the contents of the atomizer over them as well as the fingertips of the gloves.

Zara counted down ten seconds for the chemicals in the atomizer to counteract the toxins before dropping the lip peels and gloves into the toilet bowl. The rose petals followed. A flush disposed of all evidence.

Simple. Too simple.

Something fluttered in the pit of her stomach.

Not nerves surely, although wearing the poison on her lips was foolhardy to the point of insanity, as was gambling on Kaito Masura's habit of spontaneously offering flowers to attractive women.

Then again, Zara was nothing if not a risk-taker.

The atomizer went back into her handbag. She stepped out of the stall, reapplied her lipstick, smoothed her navy blue dress, and returned to her seat, weaving a different route through the tables.

Alastair was pouting. He had obviously witnessed her flirtatious exchange with Kaito. To make it up to him—after all, she would have had trouble entering Club 33 and gaining access to Kaito if not for him—Zara paid Alastair special attention through dinner. By the time their Kobe Carpaccio appetizers were eaten, he had forgotten the slight to his ego. Midway through his Moroccan spiced lamb entree, Alastair, blushing shyly, invited Zara to his ancestral home to meet his parents. She promised to consider his invitation; she was not scheduled to break his heart until the next day.

Moments after the waitress brought out their Strawberries Arnaud dessert, Kaito Masura, the *kumicho* of the Chinatsu-gumi yakuza and a platinum member of Club 33, collapsed from an apparent heart attack. The emergency medical technicians could not revive him. He was declared dead by the time the club manager began his rounds, assuring distressed diners that their evening meals would be complimentary to compensate for the inconvenience. The manager wrung his hands, his stricken gaze shuttling between Zara and Alastair. Was there anything else he could do for them?

Zara held on to the expression of wide-eyed shock and shook her head. He had done enough. Disney's near-fanatical desire to avoid bad publicity would ensure that Masura's "heart attack" would not make the morning news. She could not ask for more.

She bid Alastair goodnight in the parking lot and drove her rental car, a red Corvette, back to the Hotel Bel-Air. Her leisurely drive through Los Angeles's familiar streets was ruined only by

the occasional flutter in her stomach. It was ridiculous to be nervous. She had nothing to be concerned about. The kill was clean, untraceable.

She pulled into the curved driveway of the Hotel Bel-Air. A uniformed valet opened her car door and inclined his head as she stepped out. “Welcome back, Miss Itani.”

“Thank you, Jason.” She smiled at him. The subtly foreign inflections that had so charmed Alastair conceded to her natural American accent. Her hand trailed along the Corvette’s sleek lines. “Take good care of her.”

“Certainly, Miss Itani.”

Her smartphone rang as she had stepped into her suite and locked the door behind her. She glanced at the number before accepting the international call from Japan. “Good morning, Ayame-san.”

A well-modulated woman’s voice responded with a faint Japanese accent. “It is a beautiful morning, Zara-san. We have just received word of the misfortune that has befallen Chinatsugumi. On behalf of my father, I convey the deep gratitude of Isamu-gumi.”

“You are most welcome. I am honored to be a friend of Kazuo-san and the Isamu-gumi.”

“Your fee has been transferred to your account in Switzerland. *Domo arigatou gozaimasu.*”

“*Dou itashi mashite.*”

“The next time you are in Tokyo, we would be honored if you would visit us.”

Zara heard a smile in Ayame’s voice. She smiled too. “I would be pleased to do so. How is your son?”

“Oh.” Ayame’s voice softened. “He is six and a half weeks old, and perfect. So talkative. And Nikolai has been a wonderful father.”

“The yakuza are not giving you a hard time over marrying a *gaijin* and bearing his son?”

“Not when he can shoot faster and more accurately than they can.”

Zara laughed. She and Ayame spoke for several more minutes before exchanging goodbyes. She tossed the phone down on her bed, her thoughts still on her friend. Ayame had come a long way since their first meeting as freshmen at Princeton. In the ten years since, the quiet and unassuming Japanese girl had gone on to manage her father’s manufacturing business *and* his yakuza gang. She had married Nikolai Voronov, a former employee of Zara’s mercenary agency, Three Fates, and she was now the mother of a chubby and adorable child—a child who would likely grow up to become a key player in the world of Japanese organized crime.

Zara shook her head. Ayame's son's fate had been determined before he was born. As a non-believer in destiny, Zara found the thought mildly discouraging, at best, and hugely depressing, at worst. She kicked off her high heels and walked barefoot onto the patio. Darkness concealed the canyon views, but underwater spotlights lit the spa pool. The water sparkled, lapping gently against the sides of the pool. She dipped in a toe. The night air was cool but the water was still warm, sun-kissed from a long summer's day.

Perfect.

She tugged off her dress, shed her black lace lingerie, and stepped into the pool. She sank into the water up to her neck, closed her eyes, and allowed her mind to drift. Her thoughts wandered, as they almost always did, to Danyael Sabre. Had he been released from solitary confinement? Was he all right?

She ground her teeth. What an absurd question. Of course, Danyael was not all right, although solitary confinement likely suited him perfectly. He did not want emotional ties. He wanted to be alone. Well, now he was. Bastard.

Perhaps it was time to make another visit to Colorado, to the super maximum-security prison, ADX Florence. She had visited twice before, but both times, the guards had turned her away. No one had seen Danyael since he had been arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment without parole.

He had been locked away without trial for killing twelve men in self-defense.

No, it had not all been self-defense. Ten of the twelve men he had killed to defend *her*.

Guilt pricked her. She wanted to see him. Her inadequate apology for betraying him would catch on her lips, but she wanted to see him again.

She supposed she could change her flight and make a stop at ADX Florence.

Her stomach fluttered. Was it indigestion or nerves? Either way, it was getting annoying. When had it started? A week ago? A week and a half, perhaps.

Zara climbed out of the pool, wrapped a towel around her body, and returned to her suite. She picked up her smartphone and called her assistant.

"Hello?" Karen Alder sounded half-asleep. It was past midnight on the east coast.

"I need you to change my flight tomorrow. I'll be making an overnight stop in Colorado Springs on the way back."

"Got it." Karen yawned. "Colorado Springs Airport. Hotel and rental car?"

“Yes.”

“Which identity do you want to use?”

“Just mine. It’s fine.”

“No one’s scheduled to die, huh? Okay, on it. Oh, your annual medical report came back from Dr. Tyler.”

“Hmm?”

“His e-mail said that everything looks good. He said something odd, though. He asked if you wanted him to send your medical report to your ob-gyn.”

“What for?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say. Did you want me to ask?”

The chill Zara felt had nothing to do with the air conditioning. “No, I’ll take care of it. Is the e-mail still in my inbox?”

“Yup.”

She hung up. *Damn it.*

She found what she needed in the twenty-four-hour pharmacy around the corner. Her heart raced but her hands were steady. She followed the instructions but hardly needed to wait. Double lines appeared on the pregnancy test kit immediately.

Her breath caught. “Fuck.”

CHAPTER TWO

The next day, Zara pulled her red Mustang convertible into a parking lot filled with dull-colored cars. Her car was no more out of place than she was; the violet sundress that matched her eyes was better suited for a picnic than for a visit to a super maximum-security prison. She stepped out of the car and tugged the sunglasses away from her face. Snowcapped mountains framed the squat detention blocks and tall watchtowers of the “Alcatraz of the Rockies.” Barren trees appeared twig-like in the parched ground. The chill wind snatched away the warmth of her breath. All ADX Florence needed to perfectly live up to the cliché of being hell on Earth was a sign that said, “Abandon hope all ye who enter here.”

ADX Florence, however, needed no signs. It stripped away hope simply by being what it was.

Zara stepped through the front doors, her head held high against the splinter of cold dread lodged in her chest. Everything at ADX Florence, including human contact, seemed designed to diminish humanity. She had left her weapons in the car, but the security search still took an interminably long time before she was admitted into the lobby.

She ignored the lingering stares of the prison guards. "I'm here to see Danyael Sabre." Her tone was brisk, strictly business.

The man behind the desk checked his computer terminal. He shook his head. "Can't do that."

"Why not?"

"He's in the infirmary."

"What happened?"

He shrugged. "Sorry, it's confidential information, unless you're family. No one's on the list of allowed visitors."

Zara slid her identification card across the desk. "I suggest you talk to your supervisor and find a way to add me to that list."

The guard stared at her. She could almost see the silent debate going through his head. Did he dare bother the prison warden with this presumptuous woman?

Zara met his gaze. All she had to do was create enough of a ruckus for the prison warden to contact either the Mutant Affairs Council or the National Security Agency. If Alex Saunders or Xin heard that she had come to see Danyael, they would consider her request. Alex would act from guilt, Xin from dispassionate curiosity; either was fine with her.

The prison guard hurried away. He returned fifteen minutes later with the warden, a heavy-set man in his fifties. The warden looked at her identification card and then up at her. "Miss Itani?" He glowered as he returned the card to her, together with a security pass. "Come this way."

The infirmary was connected to the main building by a long corridor intersected with locked doors. The warden said nothing as he escorted her through those doors. He paused and gestured to a reinforced glass panel set in a steel door. "There he is."

"Let me in."

He sighed. "Only those with psychic shields—"

“I don’t need psychic shields. I’ve learned how to be around Danyael without them. Let me in.”

The warden shook his head. “Fine, it’s on you. Don’t touch him. It’s all he needs to kill.”

She knew that too.

The warden held his security badge against the lock, and it clicked. Zara opened the door and walked into Danyael’s room.

She felt nothing.

It was the first hint that something was terribly wrong.

She should have felt *something*. Danyael was an alpha empath. His unshielded emotions should have driven her to tears, squeezing hurt and pain out of places she could never have imagined possible. Instead, an emotional void greeted her.

The room was silent except for the quiet and regular beeps of the machines monitoring Danyael’s erratic heartbeat and low blood pressure. She approached the bed and looked down at the unconscious man.

She almost did not recognize him. Danyael had lost a great deal of weight in the six months since she had seen him. His pale blond hair, shaved to a thin layer of fuzz, accentuated the gauntness in sharp lines of his features. He had been good-looking once—how could Galahad’s physical template be anything less than beautiful?—but now, he looked emaciated, like a man detained too long in a prisoner-of-war camp.

Her breath caught sharply. “What happened?” she heard herself ask the warden who had accompanied her into the room.

“Heart attack.”

“How?”

The warden shrugged. “Probably had a series of strong shocks. His heart couldn’t take it.”

“What do you mean ‘strong shocks’?”

He pointed to the silver collar around Danyael’s neck. “When he’s in his cell, a current runs through the collar every sixty seconds. The strength varies. Don’t want him to get used to it and anticipate it.”

Zara’s jaw dropped. “To what end?” How could that kind of deliberate cruelty have any purpose other than senseless torture?

The warden frowned. “He’s an alpha empath. We have to keep him under control.”

“Danyael *breaks* under kindness. All you had to do to keep him under control was say ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’”

He snorted. “You have no idea what he can do.”

Oh yes, she did. She had seen firsthand Danyael’s ability to drive people to suicide with little more than a touch, although each time he had acted only in self-defense or to protect the ones he loved. He had done nothing to warrant life imprisonment, let alone this kind of torment.

Oh, God. Danyael, what are they doing to you?

Blood had dried in the deep cracks in his lips. Steel handcuffs bound his chafed wrists to the steel rails on either side of the bed. Deep purple bruises stained the skin on the inside of his elbows. “What’s this?” she asked.

“Methaqualone injections. If he’s aware enough, he fights the needles going in.”

“You’re sedating him?”

“We have to. He’s dangerous.”

It explained the emotional void. Danyael’s central nervous system had been depressed into a near comatose state. Did Alex know what was happening to Danyael? Did he care?

She shuddered and closed her eyes as a familiar sensation brushed against her skin. *Danyael*. He was regaining consciousness. His empathic powers swelled like a tidal wave dredging the ocean depths, threatening the safety of the shoreline. Emotions too complex to tease apart, too vivid for words, clutched at her and threatened to drag her down into a place where she could no longer think, only feel.

Dimly, she heard the warden shout for backup, his voice somehow muted relative to the tiny clink of metal that punctuated her awareness. Danyael’s hand strained against the handcuff as he reached for her. His eyes flashed open, large and dark against the pallor of his skin. His irises were dilated; his gaze so unfocused that she did not think he could actually see her.

Tears trickled, unchecked, down her cheeks. She reached out. For a moment, her fingers brushed against his before the warden yanked her away from him.

“Don’t touch him.” The man fumbled with a remote control and pressed a button.

Danyael screamed. The guttural cry from his damaged vocal chords was no louder than a croak, but his body arched, convulsing from the electrical current surging through it.

Someone else screamed. A stunned moment later, Zara realized it was her. Danyael's anguish tore through her, his helplessness, his fury. The emotions swamping her—*his* emotions—pleaded for the mercy of death.

If she had carried her handgun into the prison, she would have put a bullet in his head, but she could only watch—helpless, furious—as his body slumped on the bed, once again purged of consciousness.

A medical technician plunged the contents of his syringe into Danyael's veins. Within moments, the whirlpool of Danyael's emotions dissipated beneath the chemical cocktail.

The warden turned to her. "Are you all right? God, you're lucky to be alive. He touched you. He could have killed you."

Danyael could have. But he would not.

Alex had once told her, "Danyael will not consciously or willingly harm you. That's why you're the only one who can bring him in. No one else has any emotional claim on him."

She still possessed that hold on him. She had felt it when their hands touched. In spite of everything they had both done to wreck their relationship, he still loved her.

Would he still care for her if he knew she was carrying Galahad's child?

She brushed aside the flustered concerns of the warden. She was fine. She could walk. She was leaving, and hell no, she would not be quiet about what she'd seen if someone asked. The warden looked furious but did nothing to detain her. Whoever had given her permission to see Danyael obviously outranked the warden in the grand scheme of life.

She would have put her money on Xin.

Her smartphone buzzed like an alarm clock on crack the moment she stepped outside the doors of ADX Florence. She rolled her eyes. The warden would be pleased to know that the prison's wireless suppressor devices worked great.

Zara scrolled through a half dozen missed calls. A Washington, D.C., phone number. No messages.

That's right. Keep moving. Do something, anything, to keep from thinking about—

The swell of emotions she had been fighting to contain overwhelmed her. Tears blurred her eyes. Willpower and pride got her back to her car when her legs would have given out beneath her.

She slid into the leather seat. Her phone rang but she tossed it aside. *Stop crying, damn it. Stop, stop, stop.*

She had made her choice six months earlier. She did not love Danyael; she did not want him. He was an alpha empath, a goddamned emotional train wreck. He was reserved to the point of social incompetence. He was a coward, on the run from his past. All he did was watch from the sidelines, afraid of life, afraid of himself.

None of her reasons for rejecting Danyael had changed.

Other memories—*different* memories—of Danyael pricked her, but it was easier to ignore the evidence of his courage and compassion than to accept that they changed her perspective of him. It was safer to disregard the facts that could alter her response to him.

He was in a super maximum-security prison for life. It did not matter what she felt for him. What difference did it make whether he died in twenty days or twenty years?

Twenty years of torture. An electric shock *every* minute for twenty years. Zara swallowed through the lump in her throat. She could not even do the math in her head. Nothing Danyael had done warranted that kind of torture.

What can I do?

Rationality fought down the compulsion to save Danyael.

He is nothing to me.

I made that choice six months ago. I stand by it.

The phone rang again. Zara stared at it; time to get back to the real world. She had to force Danyael out of her mind. Tugging down on her sunglasses to conceal her red-rimmed eyes, she accepted the call. “What is it?”

A cultured female voice responded. “Good afternoon, Miss Itani. Can you please hold for Admiral Falcón?”

Zara gritted her teeth. It would be absurdly childish, she supposed, to hang up out of principle. Besides, those government types were obnoxiously persistent. They would keep calling until they finally got her to listen.

A strong male voice came on the line. “Zara?”

“Cristóbal.”

He sighed.

Zara snorted. “Were you expecting me to say ‘Admiral Falcón’ or ‘sir’?”

“I know you better than that, Zara, but I was hoping for Uncle Cris.”

Her mother’s brother probably deserved the title, but why make it easy for him? Scowling, she ignored the niggling certainty that her recent encounter with Danyael had soured her mood.

“Why are you calling?”

“SEAL Team Three is heading out to Beirut tomorrow.”

“*Nakob*.”

“Right. They’re going to bring back the girls kidnapped by *Nakob*, and they need to do it with no fuss. Things have been quiet in the Middle East for a while; we don’t want to stir up trouble. They could use a local guide.”

“Local? I live in D.C.”

“You visit Lebanon every year and speak fluent Arabic and Lebanese. I’m told you have a host of local contacts.”

“Your FBI friends got chatty, huh?”

“No, your father did. He was worried about you.”

“What for?”

“Because rationality doesn’t get to dictate who we love, or why. He knows what you’re capable of, but in the end, you’re still his baby girl, his only child. But I’m not here as your uncle or to talk about your father. I’m here on behalf of the U.S. Navy, offering your usual fee, plus promissory notes to get you out of trouble the next time you run afoul of the government. Are you in?”

“Sure. Where and what time tomorrow?”

“Langley Air Force Base. Eighteen hundred hours.”

“I’ll be there.” She would not have to cancel her mid-morning appointment with her ob-gyn.

“Do I have to bring anything besides my weapons and SPF 50 sunscreen?”

“Manners wouldn’t hurt.”

Zara laughed. “Oh, I’m always polite to trained killers, especially those with a government-sized budget funding their training.”

“Zara—”

“I promise not to recruit any of your SEALs for Three Fates, at least not until they’ve completed their time with the Navy.”

“I guess that’s the best I can hope for. Good luck, Zara, and come back safe. Your father would never forgive me if he even knew we’re having this talk right now.”

Probably not. She disconnected the call. Cristóbal Falcón’s timing was perfect. An escapade into Lebanon’s Beqaa Valley would take her mind off Danyael’s insolvable situation. Hunting Nakob would provide an even greater diversion.

Nakob was an equal-opportunity terrorist cell active in Lebanon and Syria, frequently crossing borders to annoy Christians, Muslims, and atheists alike. Two weeks prior, they had kidnapped fifty female students from a private high school in Beirut and taken them somewhere.

The “somewhere” was the problem. No one knew where, although Zara wondered how a terrorist splinter cell—at least twenty strong—and fifty girls could possibly remain unnoticed. The Lebanese government was criticized for its inability to find the missing students. Last she heard, the government was consulting with “international experts,” which apparently included the U.S. Armed Forces. No surprise. The U.S. ambassador’s daughter was among the girls taken.

Her phone rang again, its tone customized. An image of Danyael—*no, Galahad*—flickered through her mind. She shoved it aside as she accepted the call. “Galahad.”

“Zara.” His unaccented voice, a melodic tenor that usually had women sighing in delight, no longer triggered the delicious thrill of anticipation in her. “I went by your townhouse this morning, but you weren’t there. How was your trip to the west coast?”

“Lucrative.”

“Will you be back in D.C. tonight in time for the Great Gatsby Ball?”

Damn it. She had forgotten about the annual summer gala hosted by the International Club of D.C., and that she had promised to attend it with Galahad. Her flight would get her back into D.C. with just enough time to make it a crazy scramble. “Can you pick me up at eight?”

“Yes, of course. It’ll be amazing. Everyone will be watching us.”

She could not even muster a smile in response.

Galahad had spent the first twenty-five years of his life as a prisoner and test subject at Pioneer Laboratories. He was an exceptionally fast learner, but twenty-five years of social and emotional maturity was too much to expect from six months of freedom. He was a child—

Something tickled low in her abdomen. Her hand rested against the fluttering sensation. Not nerves. She knew better.

—and now a father.

The only man she knew less emotionally equipped to be a father was Danyael.

She would have hurled her phone through the windshield if the car hadn't been rented. What was it about her that attracted such basket cases?

Then again, she was something of a basket case herself. Like attracted like.

"I'll see you tonight," she said. She hung up and ground her teeth. *God damn it. Whatever I did in my past life to deserve this, I hope it was worth it.*

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