

DAWN TO DUSK

SNEAK PEEK

ELLIS KAYE CREATES



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“You are certain you do not need medical assistance?” Mr. Amsel set a glass of water on his desk and settled into his plush chair. “I am able to call an ambulance,” he said, situating his spectacles.

“No, no. Just... give me a moment.” I reached for the water. Pain pinched at my shoulder blade—same spot where I’d been hit by shrapnel—and my hand trembled as I lifted the glass.

This injury wasn’t the only reason I felt weak. After talking and verifying and signing paperwork, Mr. Amsel—the bank president—had finally disclosed how much money I’d inherited.

And I had nearly fainted.

“It is such a pleasure to have you as a friend of this institution, Fräulein Barrett.” His mouth stretched wide, revealing sparkly white teeth. I could practically see euro signs glittering in the smile. “You can take your business anywhere. We here at Kopernikus-Bank understand this, and we thank you for entrusting us with your sizable assets.”

“Uh-huh.” I reached for the water again but thought better of it. “And when will the funds be available?”

“We are able to release twenty thousand euros today.” He

swiped several pieces of paper from a sleek printer. "After you have signed these forms, I will issue your girocard—debit card—and those funds will be available immediately." He hesitated. "Unless this amount is insufficient for you, Fräulein?"

I gave a swift shake of my head. Maybe too swift.

Maksim had warned me that my funds wouldn't be accessible all at once. There were processes, checks, transfers that had to happen. "The employees may appear relaxed," he'd said, "as if this is an everyday type of transaction. I can assure you it's not. Don't do anything that may prompt them to call the police."

"What would make them do that?"

"Appearing frazzled, rushed. Not playing the part. You're the granddaughter of a billionaire. You'll have to act like it."

I peeked down at my black slacks and dressy blouse. I never wore stuff like this, and the frumpy heels rubbing blisters on my feet reminded me why. But at least I looked the part.

I signed the papers and returned them to Mr. Amsel.

"Thank you, Fräulein." He reached into his suit jacket and pulled out a business card. "Please do contact me should you have any questions."

"That's awe— I mean, thank you very much." I'd been about to say "that's awesome" but decided on something more proper. Billionaires said "thank you very much," didn't they? I'd have to check next time I googled *things rich people say*.

I tucked the business card in my purse and showed myself out of the office. My heels thumped as I followed the staircase down to the foyer. The building opened up, and sunlight poured inside through the vaulted glass ceiling.

A receptionist manned the front desk, taking calls and typing on her keyboard. She peered around her computer and smiled. "Goodbye. Be careful." She didn't sound German. Actually, she sounded... French?

I offered a halfhearted wave. "Thanks. You, too."

"But you should be very careful."

My feet stalled. I turned away from the revolving door and stared at the woman. “S-sorry. Did you say *very* careful?”

She focused on her screen, seemingly unaware that her words had affected me.

Probably a translation issue. That was possible. She could have meant something different.

“Fräulein Barrett!”

I wheeled around. Mr. Amsel was hurrying down the staircase. “Fräulein,” he called. “You forgot your girocard.”

“Mr. Amsel.” I placed a hand to my chest, heart thumping full speed. “You startled me.”

“Forgive me, Fräulein.” He stepped off the staircase and crossed the foyer. His dress shoes clacked over the sleek tiles. His tie glistened in the sunlight.

He closed the gap and held the card toward me. I reached for it, planning to put it in my purse—but I couldn’t pry the card out of his grasp.

I tugged again. He wouldn’t let go.

“Mr. Amsel?”

“Be careful, Fräulein.” His bright mood turned stone-cold sober. “There is danger.”

My attention snapped to the receptionist. She was working away, her fingers clicking across the keyboard. That was the only sound. There were no other customers or employees in the lobby.

“Did you need something from Lilian?”

I focused on Mr. Amsel.

“She is our *Empfangsdame*. Receptionist.” His smile returned, and he released the debit card. “Do you need something from her, Fräulein?”

“N-no.”

“Then... is there anything else I may do for you?”

“I’m good.” *I think.* “Thanks.”

“Thank you, Fräulein. Goodbye.” He waved as I turned away. What in the actual hell?

The revolving door was big, wide, and I didn't recall it being so heavy. I grunted, pushing.

The enclosed space opened up, and I finally reached the sidewalk. Glass towers climbed into the sky. Exhaust fumes blended with the stench of hot pavement. The hum of motors created a backdrop of white noise.

I trekked up the sidewalk, heading for a nearby café—a.k.a. the meetup spot. Something brought me to a dead stop. I glanced around.

Dusty purple twilight settled on the city, but... there was no way it could've been this late. Could it? Had I been in the bank all day?

I pulled out my phone, planning to check the time. The screen stayed black.

Crap. The phone was dead.

I stuffed the device in my purse and hurried up the sidewalk. Maksim had been teaching me his rules of survival, and I tried to think of the one that'd be best for navigating this situation.

I couldn't, and a burst of panic fluttered.

"You're fine," I told myself. "You don't need a rule. Just get to the café."

That was probably true, but as I continued up the sidewalk, I realized just how dark my surroundings had grown. My attention trailed up the nearest skyscraper. Not a single speck of light glowed, and the top of the building disappeared into thick shadows.

The same was true for the building next door. And the buildings across the street. My only source of light was a lamppost that cast dim yellow over the sidewalk.

But... what about the cars in the traffic jam? Shouldn't they have their headlights on?

They should have—in theory—but the traffic jam had vanished. Silence crashed into me. A shiver dragged up my spine. Something was very, very wrong.

“Bonsoir.”

The familiar voice slid into my ears and twisted through my psyche. *Oh, no. No. Please.*

“Did you miss me, *ma petite belle?*” A pause. A chuckle. “I think you did.”

The urge to scream swelled.

Émilien stood beneath a lamppost, directly across the street, and he was smirking. Light glinted off something in his hand.

Cuffs.

“No,” I whimpered, taking a measured step back. “Stay away from me.”

“Au contraire, ma chérie. You”—he held up the cuffs—“are mine.”

I whipped around, legs exploding in a sprint. Warm air rushed over my face. Flat pavement stretched beneath my feet.

I staggered, despite the smooth sidewalk, and nearly face-planted. Stupid heels. Why the hell had I worn these?

The bank building appeared on my right. I ran that way.

“Help!” My hands slammed against the revolving door. I pushed, expecting it to move.

It didn’t.

“Mr. Amsel?” I pressed my face to the glass. Shadows encased the foyer. Mr. Amsel and the receptionist were nowhere to be seen.

I banged on the glass, screaming, begging someone to let me in. There was no movement inside the foyer. And no matter how hard I pushed, the door wouldn’t budge.

Émilien tore across the street, head down, arms pumping. His face morphed into something vicious, animalistic.

I abandoned the bank building.

“Help! Someone help me!” My legs carried me up the sidewalk. I was heading in the opposite direction of where I needed to go. *Away* from the café.

“Maksim!” Tears blurred my vision. “Maksim, I need help!”

My cries were frantic yet strangely hopeful, as if my voice might reach all the way to the meetup spot.

That hope fizzled the farther I ran. Still, I screamed for him. “Maksim! *Maksim!*”

My feet thrashed, longing to go faster, when a dark chuckle penetrated my senses. Émilien didn’t sound like he was struggling or out of breath. Actually, he sounded like he was pacing me.

Because he was. He’d caught up easily, and now he was hanging back. Why?

He’s enjoying this.

The epiphany rocked me. He wasn’t chasing me to catch me. He wanted to mess with me first—a predator toying with its prey.

A circle and slash glowed red at the next crosswalk. *Don’t cross.* That was the message, but there were no cars coming.

I barreled across the street.

A blast shuddered the air, and gray pavement erupted. I screamed and dove, rolling. Chunks of cement rained down.

I jumped up and kept going.

The ground rumbled. Cement exploded. I covered my head, running. Still running.

The explosions continued as Émilien closed the gap. His fingers brushed my neck before clamping down.

I stumbled and hit the ground. My arm and shoulder scraped. My body rolled.

I skidded over a bump in the pavement, and a burst of light flared. An explosion barreled into me. My back slammed against something, and pain seared every part of my body...

I SUCKED in a breath and shot upright. Stale heat greeted me. My heart thudded as I took in my surroundings.

Silky sheets in bright, blazing white tangled my legs. Wooden posts stretched up from the bed, connecting to metal rods, and sheer curtains fell in long, flowing panels.

Relief swelled. I was at the rental house.

The first rays of dawn spilled through the windows, creating a natural nightlight in the otherwise dark room. “Maksim?”



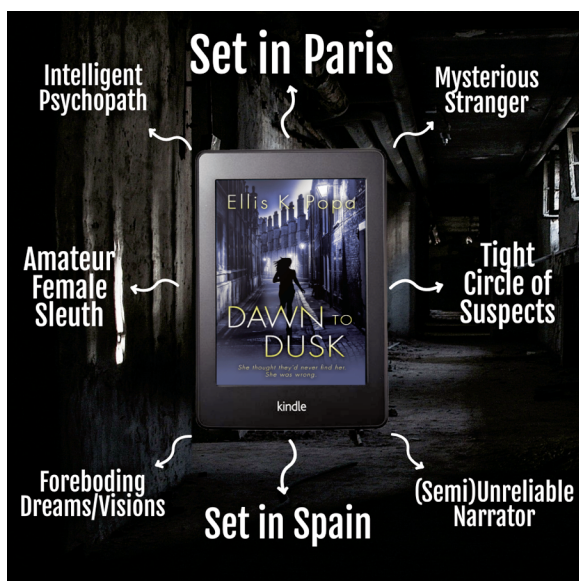
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