

Chapter One

Hauk's steambike raced down the dark highway, seven of those damn mercenaries from The Hands of Atropos in pursuit and gaining. "Come on...come on..." he urged his little steam-engine that couldn't.

"If you break your bike, Tally will kill us!" Brayden yelled over the wind as he desperately clutched onto Hauk.

"Tally needs to speed it up! I can outmaneuver, but I can't outrace a real motorcycle," Hauk shouted back.

"This is a real motorcycle."

"Ninety percent of the time I'd agree with you." Usually he appreciated the genius it took to build a bike that used no gasoline and emitted no CO₂. But right now the Hands were nigh on top of them and his accelerator was maxed out. Practicality was about to all-too-literally beat the shit out of idealism. "Just keep hold of that backpack and let me drive."

But there was no point. They were caught on the highway, where Hauk and his inferior speed were at the disadvantage. Even swerving between cars he couldn't pull ahead. The damn Hands would take the shoulder and press on, police lights blaring.

Oh yeah, this time they had the law on their side. Political bastards.

"Godsdammit, Hauk, why are you slowing down?"

"So you can make a run for it with the stash. I'll hold 'em off as long as I can."

For once Brayden was silent as the blaring sirens crescendoed.

His silence didn't last. "Even you aren't bulletproof." He drummed Hauk's arm in sudden excitement. "Exit here! Here!"

Hauk would question later. For now he veered a hard right that snaked them across two lanes of traffic and onto the feeder. Their tails didn't make the cut in time. Hauk exhaled in relief, but he knew their spot of luck wouldn't last. The Hands of Atropos would roll from the shadows like rats in pursuit of raw meat and continue the chase.

"Under the highway. Head for downtown."

"We're not leading them home." But Hauk took the turn anyway. They'd have a better shot at losing them in the streets of downtown Austin—as well as a better chance of wrecking his new bike or driving amok through unsuspecting pedestrians. Like the Hands of Atropos and their bosses at the Order of Ananke, Hauk and the other Citizens of the Underlight didn't like drawing attention to themselves. It might be the only thing the warring groups agreed on.

"Catrina's got her holiday show tonight at the abandoned electric station by the lake. She'll hide us until it's clear."

Fear, irrational and more gut-deep than what any armed enemy could inspire, clenched Hauk's stomach. Reflexively his hand released the accelerator and the bike stalled out beneath the overpass. He bit out, "I'm not going to Catrina's."

"You'll be fine. Just keep moving."

"Come up with a new plan."

"Fine. Keep your helmet on when you walk inside. That's the new plan."

Hauk glared at his friend through the face shield. "Yeah, 'cause *that* won't get us noticed."

Brayden huffed. "Then take it off. It's a flippin' maze in there. No one will see you. And she doesn't care about your face anyway. Now, for the love of the gods, let's get our asses and our ill-gotten goods somewhere safe." He slapped the backpack of evidence they'd risked their

necks tonight to acquire. “What’s in here is more important than your pride.”

Hauk clenched his jaw. “Did you forget the part where I’m a wanted man and can’t just go gallivanting around in public?”

A bullet slammed against the pilings.

Brayden screeched, “Get us out of here!”

Hauk slammed the accelerator and the bike zipped forward in a cloud of steam. Maybe he would head to Catrina’s. He knew her; she wouldn’t turn him in. And he and Brayden had worked too hard tonight to get caught now.

But it wasn’t Catrina who set his mind on edge. Her “show” was Pussy Will-Oh! Burlesque, an always-crowded affair full of jazz music, neon cocktails and amazingly talented, scantily clad women. Hauk didn’t like crowds, and crowds didn’t like him. His face and body, or what was left of it from his time in Afghanistan, was a mess of burn scars and tattoos. He could kill the joy in a room simply by stepping from the shadows. And women? He’d take any amount of physical pain over the horrified looks his disfigured form invariably put on their faces.

Add to that, he was wanted for seven other soldiers on his squad who also went up in flames—but wound up in coffins. He didn’t remember a thing about that night to explain how he was the lone survivor. Maybe he *had* gone nuts and torched a barracks full of his fellow Rangers. But that didn’t feel right. He’d fought beside those men, relied on them. More importantly, they’d relied on him. He’d know if he’d violently betrayed his men and his country.

Wouldn’t he?

Hauk gritted his teeth as he turned his steambike toward the narrow lake that wound through downtown, reflecting neon-illuminated skyscrapers like a demented disco ball. He didn’t do public appearances. And he *really* didn’t do Catrina’s shows. Except, apparently, tonight.

Jolie Benoit’s heart beat an excited patter. She gripped tight to the silver lyra, a hoop suspended from the ceiling, as it lowered between the cement walkways of the abandoned electric company and into the spotlight below. She’d draped herself into the curve, one knee propped up in sensual invitation and one thigh hooking the metal for support. Her very first audience—at least, for this kind of dancing—came into view surrounding Pussy Will-Oh!’s little platform stage as they lounged at their cafe tables and drank exotic cocktails. Her obscenely long fake lashes batted furiously as she not-so-innocently licked a candy cane.

Jolie had been dancing her whole life, but while the pointe shoes were familiar, the rest of her costume was a far cry from the tights and leotards she’d worn as a student at the prim and proper Houston Ballet. Tonight a “Mrs. Claus” dress hid a red and white corset and a feathered bustle skirt. The white thigh-highs and garter belt was a combo she’d never worn outside the bedroom, but she’d proudly show them off in public tonight.

At seventeen she’d given up her dream of dancing professionally because of her parents’ insistence that “Benoits may study ballet. They attend and financially support the ballet. They don’t dance in it.” Such exposure would be beneath them.

Giddily she grinned and gave the candy cane one more long lick as the audience laughed. Speaking of exposure...if her parents only knew where she was dancing now. “I’ve been thinking about everyone’s favorite part of the holidays.” She pursed her lips and widened her eyes dramatically. “Everyone does have the same favorite part, right?”

The audience yelled back: “Presents!”

She blew out a breath of mock relief. “Oh, good. For a moment there I thought ‘hope’ or ‘good will’ was going to come up. But you’re my kind of audience. Presents! Yes!” She gave the candy another thoughtful lick. “But I got to thinking about it, and presents aren’t my favorite part anymore.” As the audience “aww”ed their reaction, she looked up at the twisting shadows from whence she’d descended. “Cassie, darling, could you let me down a little more? I know I look like I can handle this thing, but really, I just like riding it. Put me closer to the floor.”

The audience laughed as the lyra lowered until she could delicately step off.

“Much better. As I was saying, presents are no longer my favorite part of the holidays. Do you know why?”

“Why?” The echoed response reverberated around the cavernous space, filling even the darkest corners with joyous energy.

She loved burlesque audiences. They participated. The vibe was so real. So human.

She wrapped the candy cane and stuck it in her voluminous skirt. “Because! I won’t get presents this year. Or ever again. I had an epiphany. Want to hear my epiphany?”

The audience shouted an approval. The piano started playing the intro for the song she’d written—her songwriting debut, as well as her debut with Pussy Will-Oh!

“We get one day—*one* day—of presents for three hundred and sixty-four days of being good. Boxes of useless crap for a year’s worth of no fun? What kind of rip-off deal is that? This year, I decided...” She slowly peeled down a glove to cheering applause. “I’m going to be naughty those three hundred and sixty-four days.” The glove snapped off. She let it fall and moved to the other one. “And when the holidays come around...” She sang with her best whiskey voice, “*I’ll get nothing, get nothing...and like it!*”

She launched onto her toes for the striptease, using her classical training in ways she’d never been allowed as she sang and smiled and played with her audience. With the removal of two hairpins, her red-gold curls tumbled around her shoulders. The Santa dress unsnapped from the front to reveal her corset and bustle. Her toes carried her into the air again, and she spun and leaped to the howling appreciation of the audience. Then the bustle was gone, leaving her in a corset and ruffled hot pants. She stepped back onto the lyra.

She’d been lying when she said she couldn’t use it.

The circle rose back into the air with her once more on it. She crooned about all the naughty things she planned to do as she unhooked the corset. Amidst escalating cheers the fabric fluttered to the ground, leaving her in a red lace bra as revealing as she could find while supporting her enough to dance.

Now for her favorite part of the routine. She took hold of the metal, flipped and swung, piked and did the splits, flashing the audience in a way that would’ve made her parents pass out—all from ten feet in the air and to resounding applause.

She backflipped off the lyra and sucked in air to sing the last chorus of her number: “*There may be coal in my stocking, my old friends may be mocking, but baby, I lived every day. I got nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing! Ow! And I like it this way.*”

The crowd hopped to its feet as she bowed, flushed with her success and ready for more.

In the shadows at the back of the party, Hauk tried unsuccessfully to close his jaw. He was supposed to join Brayden in a backroom, somewhere safe from all the eyes. But his feet were rooted to the floor, his own eyes locked on a goddess of beauty incarnate. And not just beauty. The way she sang. The way she *moved*. Every straight man in the room was praying for a chance to be on her naughty list, and damn his scars, he was still a man.

Albeit a foolish one.

The dancer's bright eyes flashed across her audience, soaking in their adulation, but they didn't penetrate back to his dark corner. Not that he'd want them to. Not in real life, anyway, when they would look at him with disgust or fear or pity. No, he needed to take his hard-on back to the office and ask politely for a cold drink.

But she was sauntering his way. He sank into the shadows as the dancer—Jolie, she'd been called—exited through the audience and back into the bowels of the building. Exactly where he needed to go.

He waited a beat and then another, hoping to give her enough time to reach her destination so he could remain unseen. He debated donning his motorcycle helmet, just in case, but that made him ridiculous. He'd stick with ugly. He pulled up his hoodie to hide the phoenix tattoo on his skull and shadow the rippling pink and white welts dappling his face.

His boots pounded like a machine press against the concrete as he followed Jolie's path. A few steps in he found a threadbare white sheet slung up across a wire to make a changing room out of an alcove off the main path. Light from behind the fabric outlined Jolie's curves as she shimmied out of her shorts. Once again he was stuck in place, frozen this time by a shadow.

The shadow laughed a rich sound of warm honey and forbidden things. "You know," she said, "the audience is supposed to stay in the other room. Following me back here is against the rules."

"I didn't, er, follow you. I'm looking for..." Gods, why could he think of words? "Catrina. I didn't mean to, uh, run into you." Changing, possibly naked. Behind a thin sheet.

"Aw..." He could hear her pout and it was damn cute. "And here I thought I'd inspired anarchy. Oh, well."

He took a step toward the sheet. "Oh, I'm an anarchist, all right." Most people would call him and the rest of the Citizens of the Underlight a pack of dangerous anarchists. Hauk didn't see it that way. He loved America, the heart and soul of her. But the reality of today was a crumbling façade of the freedom she espoused, and politicians and CEOs with an agenda most people knew nothing about—all members of Ananke—were holding the wrecking ball. America had become a valiant soul in a ravaged body.

A lot like him. His own body may be beyond repair, but he'd be damned if he let his country rot when he could do something about it.

A sultry "Hmm," brought his thoughts screeching back to the woman in front of him. "So I was uninspiring, then." She bent over to push her feet into boots, and her backside pressed against the sheet like a perfect heart. "How disappointing."

"Oh..." The word came out like a moan as he curled his fingers into fists. It took all the control he had to keep his hands off her perfect ass. "You're inspiring, all right."

She froze for just a moment before she stood, suddenly hesitant. "You have a delicious voice." She turned until her body pressed into the sheet again, this time from the front. "So, anarchist, what rules are you going to break tonight?"