

Rowan

Rowan needed to run lean and unfettered now.

They'd fought a bit about the original artwork and the dog. For the dog's sake, it was best she'd lost that battle. He was too old to be constantly on the move in the way she intended for the foreseeable future. It was surprising, when it came right down to it, how simple it was to dismantle the trappings of a relationship, to divest oneself of its many pieces and parts for the reward of exhaling and walking away.

Her name was not on the lease. Her mail was delivered to a post office box. It had been a good place to settle for a while—until it wasn't. Great sex, not much substance in Rowan's opinion, but wasn't that what she always went for to protect herself? Loving her required tolerating both the constant threat from her stalker and an inherited magic she had a less than competent understanding of—and pointed lack of control. The latter of which she usually worked hard to hide. What Rowan longed for and what she believed attainable regarding her love life had been on a collision course for a long time. What man would agree to live this way? None was the answer Rowan supplied without ever asking her partner of the moment. If she were honest, she probably chose men she was incapable of falling in love with.

Unfortunately for Peter, he was one of those men. Their relationship had revolved around passionate weekends before she flew out for a photo assignment until the pandemic illuminated the fact that they could not survive the daily togetherness of quarantine.

Rowan took one last look at the slim remains that constituted what she considered worthwhile belongings, packed in a pathetically small number of boxes, before rolling down the door to the rented storage compartment and locking it. This wasn't the first time she'd been on the move, traveling light, but it was the first time she'd decided running away wasn't her best or only choice. She headed north until she reached the London Underground, where she slid into a mix of students and professionally dressed office workers in the queue to scan their phones, Oyster cards or tickets for a ride on the District Line. Her thick, straight, dark brown hair was in a ponytail, her backpack in place, tote slung across her right shoulder, mask covering her mouth and nose.

As a nearly six feet tall former supermodel, hiding was difficult. She wouldn't miss the pandemic, but covering her face in public—oppressive and exhausting for millions—had been a temporary gateway to the freedom of anonymity she desperately needed. The COVID-19 pandemic had made hiding in plain sight easy. Now, with the end of 2022 a few short months away, nearly everyone in the U.K. was vaccinated. Rowan could still mask up, but she wouldn't blend in easily anymore.

She'd chosen to layer dark colored clothing today, wearing a long-sleeve shirt, covered by a hoodie, and finally a puffy, down-filled winter jacket. It offered warmth and a little

bulk to give her a slightly different shape that she hoped, coupled with the mask, would provide a bit of disguise. She planned to head home to the United States while she could still manage a small level of incognito. But there was one important stop before she left the U.K.

Rowan exited at Holborn, taking the mile-long escalator ever upward from the bowels of the London transportation system until she surfaced and headed toward Covent Garden. The air was brisk and cool but comfortable for early November. Much milder than it would be in the U.S. at this time of year. Minutes later, she tucked herself into the back left corner of a small Greek restaurant and unzipped the coat and hoodie but kept the mask in place and hood up. Her chair angled away from the window without losing sight of the street beyond. She'd scanned the sidewalk on her way, eyes seeking anyone looking faintly suspicious—a lurker, a too casually positioned watcher, someone who reappeared along her path as she moved forward. Occasionally, though less often, she was recognized from a magazine cover. Many prominent fashion publications had once displayed Rowan's image and now stood as reminders that her past life negated the hope she could easily go unnoticed.

Her stomach responded to the heavenly aroma coming from the kitchen, rumbling its noisy need. In the years spent entirely in front of a camera, she'd had to forego baklava and keep the portion sizes of moussaka and spanakopita relatively small. Lightheaded with hunger today, Rowan ordered dolmades, baked feta cheese, and hot tea, watching the passersby and the antics of a fat chef in the sandwich shop across the way as she waited for her food to arrive. By the time the bite-sized, stuffed vine leaves full of rice, herbs, and ground meat, followed by cheese and tea, were placed in front of her, she was ravenous. There would be no wine today. Rowan needed to keep her wits about her. She removed the mask to eat. With the exception of a few young teens hunched over laptops, oblivious to a world outside social media, the restaurant was empty. Although it was a relief that no one watched her a bit too closely, she was sure Jarrod was aware she was in London.