

An excerpt from **The Ultimatum**

To set the scene: *Bianca St. Ives doesn't need anyone to take care of her. An internationally wanted thief — really, a modern Robin Hood — she travels the world on jobs for everyone from foreign governments to shadowy private patrons. But when her cover is blown on-assignment at a party for the Crown Prince of Bahrain, she has to get out fast.*

And an unexpected encounter with a fellow gala attendee slows her up—but only for a moment.

“Well, hello there, beautiful.” He had a low, deep voice, rich with amusement and something else. He spoke English with the faintest of underlying accents, the origin of which she was in too much distress to even try to place. Shoving away from the wall he'd been leaning against, he moved to stand over her.

Her pulse skyrocketed. Her heart thumped. Her fight or flight response had jumped directly to fight even before she landed, but to her horror she discovered that both options were beyond her: she couldn't move. Forget harnessing her body's reactions. She was struggling to suck in air.

“You know, when I first heard scratching inside the wall here, I was thinking rats.” He gave her a slow once-over, blatant male interest warring with the twinkle in his eyes. “This is much better.”

By way of a smart comeback, she wheezed. God, she needed to breathe!

“Take your time,” he advised, his eyes on her legs, which were bent at the knee and all akimbo, giving him an unfettered view all the way up to her crotch.

Eat dirt and die, she thought. Good thing she couldn't talk.

“Is this like spelunking? Only in your underwear? Very nice underwear too, I might add.” His eyes were doing a slow crawl over the rest of her.

Wheeze.

He was tall, probably around six-three although it was difficult to be certain since she was looking up at him while lying flat on her back. He was about thirty, lean, with broad shoulders, narrow hips and long legs, and he looked good in a classic black tux, which was what he was wearing. His hair was coal black and wavy, brushed back from his face and long enough so that it curled up a little on the ends, which just reached the collar of his white shirt. He had a wide forehead, broad

cheekbones, a square, clean-shaven jaw. His brows were straight black slashes above caramel brown eyes that were, at the moment, checking her out with an unmistakably carnal gleam in them. His nose was aquiline, and had been broken once: it had a bump on the left side of the bridge. His mouth was a little thin, a little cruel looking despite the hint of humor in the curve of it as he looked her over. His skin was deeply tanned, leading her to conclude that he'd spent a great deal of time outdoors in either this or some other sunbaked locale.

He was handsome, sexy even, but that wasn't what sent a shiver snaking down her spine. Her instincts screamed that he was dangerous. Underneath the humor and the sexual interest, he was looking at her like a predator eyeing prey.

Armed? She couldn't tell, but it was better to err on the side of yes. A pistol in a shoulder holster, maybe, or tucked into his waistband at the small of his back.

No way was his presence in the men's room at this particular moment an accident.

Was he one of the Prince's men? Or Durand's? Her heart lurched.

Then adrenaline — and ice water — flooded her veins as survival mode kicked in.

She finally managed to suck in air.

If he'd moved quicker, he might have succeeded in capturing her while she was helpless, handcuffing her or tying her up or whatever it was he had in mind to do to subdue her.

Too late: she wasn't helpless any longer.

His weakness was right there in front of her, in the hot gleam in his eyes as they moved over her, in his obvious assumption that he could take his time with her, that he was bigger and badder and stronger, that he had her and she couldn't get away.

The scraps of black lingerie, the strapless bra offering up her breasts as way more of an eye-full than they actually were, the filmy panties, the sky-high heels and long gloves, but most of all the blatant suggestiveness of her garter belt and (now torn at the knees, but still working for her) fishnets were doing exactly what they were supposed to do: getting him to think with body parts other than his brain.

Well, everyone was entitled to a mistake now and then.

"Help me up?" Her voice was husky, suggestive, its sexy breathiness aided by the fact that she still didn't have her breathing completely normalized. He abandoned

his slow perusal of her body to meet her eyes. Projecting sultry invitation for all she was worth, she gave him a small, intimate smile and held up her hand.

Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly.

He did.

"My pleasure," he said, and took her hand. His was big, long-fingered, strong. He pulled her to her feet easily.

She let him, smiling at him even as her bruised tailbone sent a twinge up her spine, resisting the urge to flip him over her hip, throw him to the ground, use a blood choke on him and have done. First, because there was something in the way he held himself that made her suspect he might be able to launch a counter to such a move, and second, because fighting was noisy and King Kong, always supposing he hadn't gone in search of orders or reinforcements, wasn't far away. The last thing she wanted to do was bring him into the picture again.

Best to string this guy along until she could take him out silently. The only problem with that was, she didn't have a lot of time. A discreet glance at her watch told her that it was two minutes, forty-one seconds until midnight.

She needed to move this along.

"Thank you." On her feet now, she was able to verify that he was, indeed, around six-three, and that despite the appearance he gave of leanness he was broader and more muscular than she had at first supposed. She estimated his weight at around one-ninety, which meant he outweighed her by a good seventy pounds. A glance at the pair of them in the mirror over the sink confirmed it: he seemed to dwarf her. He was inches taller, twice as broad, a good-looking guy in a tux looming over a slim, blonde girl who looked like he'd special ordered her from Hookers R Us.

Their comparative sizes actually worked to her advantage. The fact that he was so much physically larger meant that he wasn't on his guard with her, because he was confident he could overpower her at will.

That thing people said about assumptions? His were about to bite him in the ass.