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**KING  
OF  
ENVY**

ANA HUANG



PIATKUS

## CHAPTER 1

Ayana



"CONGRATULATIONS. HALF THE PEOPLE HERE WANT to kill you, and the other half want to be you." My fiancé's lips brushed my cheek. "Now *that's* an accomplishment."

"I'm not sure that's something to be proud of," I said out of the corner of my mouth. I kept my smile planted firmly in place. People were watching. "Especially the second part."

"When the guest list reads like a who's who of fashion, it is," he said. "Inspiring envy amongst this crowd is a talent. Embrace it, MOTY."

I huffed out a laugh. "I swear you're prouder of that title than I am."

MOTY was short for Model of the Year. Eight months had passed since I received the prestigious title, and Jordan still brought it up any chance he got.

"What can I say? It proves I have a good eye." He winked. "I remember when Hank told everyone he'd found the 'face of the century' at a random college party in D.C. Now look at you."

My smile wavered at the mention of my agent before I caught

myself. “I don’t know about face of the century, but this definitely beats a sweaty frat house.”

I took a sip of champagne and glanced around the outdoor garden. We were currently playing host and hostess at an end-of-summer cocktail party for Jacob Ford, the iconic luxury department store Jordan’s grandfather founded more than fifty years ago.

Jordan gave me my big break as a model when he chose me to be the store’s ambassador four years ago. The size and success of that one campaign had unlocked more doors than two years of casting calls and small bookings had. I owed my career to him and Jacob Ford.

He’d rented out a beautiful rooftop garden for today’s party. The drinks were flowing, the sun was shining, and half the guests were staring at us, discreetly or not-so-discreetly whispering behind their hands. Jordan was right. Some of them definitely wanted to kill me.

Modeling was a cutthroat industry. My rise to fame over the past few years, coupled with my engagement to one of New York’s most eligible bachelors, hadn’t endeared me to many of my peers. Friends were few, and *genuine* friends were even fewer.

It was what it was, but sometimes, I mourned the life I would’ve lived were I not quite so visible.

“Uh-oh.” Jordan straightened. “Missile incoming. Gird your loins, or she’ll blast you to bits.”

My brief bout of melancholy popped like one of the bubbles in my drink. I stifled another laugh even as I heeded Jordan’s advice and braced for impact.

The indomitable Orla Ford was no laughing matter. While Jordan was the CEO of Jacob Ford, his grandmother was the majority shareholder and family matriarch. She ruled the Ford clan from her estate in Rhode Island, and her ability to bend half

of Manhattan to her will from two hundred miles away was a testament to her force of character.

“You are the hosts of this party, yes?” she said as she drew close. The elegant eighty-four-year-old cut a sharp figure in her floral suit and signature diamond-and-emerald necklace, but up close, she looked exhausted. Her cheeks were sunken, and there was a slight shake in her hands.

Nevertheless, she stood tall and proud, her eyes narrowing as she awaited our response.

“Yes, Grandmother,” Jordan said, all traces of levity gone.

“Then why are you giggling here in the corner like schoolchildren instead of *hosting*?” Orla clucked her tongue. “Dante and Vivian Russo are here. Stella Alonso is here. Go network. You’re engaged now—you’ll have plenty of time for couple activities later.”

My face heated at the knowing tone she used to describe “couple activities.” Jordan placed his drink on a nearby table and sped off. I moved to follow him, but his grandmother stopped me with a hand on my arm.

“Not you, dear. Not yet.” She swept a discerning eye over me. “You look lovely.”

“Thank you,” I said, pleased. Compliments from Orla were rare, and I didn’t take her approval lightly.

I wore a gauzy saffron yellow minidress from the store’s in-house collection. My silk pressed hair cascaded past my shoulders in loose waves, and my gravity-defying heels put me two inches above Jordan’s even six feet. They’d cost an absurd amount of money, but they were so beautiful I couldn’t resist.

Everyone had their indulgences; mine were shoes and perfume. Also knitting, but my projects came out so misshapen I’d yet to admit *that* particular hobby to anyone.

“I wanted to speak to you because we don’t see each other

in person often,” Orla said. “I know you and Jordan have been engaged for quite a while now—sixteen months, I believe—but I...” She faltered. Her breath wheezed.

I almost reached for her to make sure she was okay, but she shook it off a moment later like nothing had happened.

“I haven’t gotten a chance to properly welcome you to the family.” She clasped my hand in hers. “For the longest time, I thought Jordan would never find the right partner. He’s my only grandchild, and I was...concerned. He’s certainly never dated anyone for longer than a few weeks. I worried that when he finally *did* bring someone home, it’d be some trollop off the streets. I’m very glad it’s you instead.” Orla patted my hand. “You’re a beautiful couple. I know you’ll take good care of him.” She sounded sincere but a touch sad.

I purposely overlooked her use of the word “trollop”—the woman was in her late eighties, after all—and masked my confusion with another smile.

Orla wasn’t a sentimental person, and she’d already welcomed me to the family at my engagement party over a year ago. Perhaps she’d forgotten?

“I appreciate that, Orla. You’ve been so kind to me since we announced our engagement. I’m, um, really excited to join the family.”

If she noticed my small verbal stumble, she didn’t mention it. “Of course, dear. I had to tell you in person. I couldn’t count on my daughter to do it. The only thing she knows how to do is spend my money and take on increasingly appalling lovers.” She glanced to the side. “Ah, there’s Buffy Darlington. Excuse me, but I must go say hi.”

Orla gave my hand one last pat before she left.

I blinked at the empty spot she’d vacated. What the hell just happened?

“You look shell-shocked. What did she say? Did she berate you for wearing heels that make you taller than me?” Jordan reappeared like a ghost materializing out of thin air now that his grandmother was gone. He loved her, but he was also terrified of her. “You know how picky she is about appearances. It doesn’t look good when the woman is taller than the man. Blah, blah, blah.”

“Well, I’m five-ten in flats, so that’s going to be hard,” I quipped. “But no, she didn’t mention my heels.” I gave him a quick summary of our conversation. “Also, I don’t want to alarm you, but is she okay? She looks a little pale, and her hands keep shaking.”

Jordan frowned. “I’m sure she’s fine. She got the flu last week, and she’s still recovering. Of course, she insisted on flying here for the party anyway. She loves any chance to brag about the company and our wedding.” He gulped down the fresh glass of scotch in his hand. “Speaking of which, don’t forget we have dinner with Vuk on Friday to go over some wedding stuff. I booked us a table at that new French bistro in the West Village.”

The champagne soured in my stomach.

Vuk Markovic was Jordan’s old college roommate and best man. I didn’t know him well, but our previous interactions hadn’t been the warmest. In fact, I was pretty sure he despised me.

I had no idea why. I was always friendly and cordial toward him, and I’d never paid attention to the rumors that the powerful CEO was possibly involved in shadier businesses than running the world’s largest liquor and spirits company.

Jordan was one of the best guys I knew. We’d clicked while I was working on the Jacob Ford campaign, and we’d been friends since. He wouldn’t ask someone to be his best man if they weren’t on the up and up. Right?

“Friday in the Village. Got it,” I said. “I’m kind of surprised he’s not here today.”

“Are you?” Jordan sounded skeptical. “Vuk hates parties. I’m pretty sure he thinks the seventh circle of hell is a black-tie gala with live music.”

I laughed. “I don’t know. He’s attended a lot more parties this year. *Mode de Vie* even mentioned it in their profile of him last month.”

“True, but I wouldn’t count on that trend continuing. Vuk does what he needs to do for business and that’s it. A garden cocktail party doesn’t fall under that umbrella.” Jordan cursed. “Shit. My grandmother’s staring daggers at me again. I’m going to find some ‘important’ person to talk to before she stabs me with an ice pick. I suppose we can’t be seen next to each other for the rest of the party, or she’ll accuse us of not hosting properly.”

“Same.” We shook hands solemnly, our mouths twitching in an attempt to hold in our laughter. “Good luck, soldier,” I said. “See you on the other side.”

Jordan responded with a laconic two-finger salute. He disappeared into the crowd, and I took a final sip of my drink before I moved toward Stella Alonso and her husband.

I passed by Orla on the way. Her words echoed in my head.

*You’re a beautiful couple. I know you’ll take good care of him.*

I really did appreciate the sentiment. A lot of people thought she was scary—which she could be—but privately, she was warmer than others gave her credit for.

I returned her smile with another one of my own and ignored the quick twist of guilt in my gut.

Getting Orla’s approval was a big accomplishment, but I suspected she’d be less benevolent if she found out the truth: that my engagement to her grandson was a complete and utter sham.

## CHAPTER 2

*Ayana*



THAT FRIDAY, I SHOWED UP AS PROMISED AT THE BISTRO Jordan booked. The food was delicious, but sadly, it was hard to enjoy even a Michelin-starred meal when the person sitting across from you hated you.

He didn’t say it, of course, but I could *feel* the animosity rolling off him in waves, and it took all my willpower not to flinch beneath his glare.

I took a sip of water and tried to avoid eye contact while Jordan rambled on about our wedding beside me.

“We secured the castle in Ireland, courtesy of Katrakis,” he said, oblivious to the tension suffocating the table. “Seven hundred guests. Five days in the countryside. Then the Ethiopian ceremony afterward in the States. It’s going to be the wedding of the year, and we’re thrilled. Aren’t we, sweetie?”

“Absolutely.” I smiled.

The idea of spending a week with seven hundred people I barely knew made me want to crawl into a hole and die. That wasn’t even counting the hundreds of guests my parents were inviting to the reception *they* were throwing for me in D.C.

Nevertheless, I had to play the role of excited fiancée. That was part of our deal. Jordan needed a wife to secure his inheritance; I needed money to get out of the soul-sucking contract my younger self had unwittingly signed in order to help my family.

Five million dollars upfront for five years of my life, plus an extra five mil once Jordan came into his inheritance. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement.

So why did I feel uneasy every time I thought about the ceremony?

“We’ve gotten RSVPs from almost everyone on the guest list.” Garret’s voice carried over the din in the restaurant. “Speaking of which, thank you for taking charge of the bachelor party. I know parties are...not your favorite.”

Silence.

It was always silence.

I finally braved a glance across the table, where his best man loomed like an immovable mountain of muscle and scars.

Vuk Markovic.

CEO of Markovic Holdings, chairman of the Valhalla Club’s management committee, and quite possibly the most intimidating person I’d ever met.

At six foot five, he towered over me even while sitting. His stern mouth and the vicious scar bisecting his otherwise devastating face lent him an air of quiet danger, but it was his eyes that sent goosebumps rippling over my skin.

Cold. Impassive. So pale a blue they were nearly white.

They met mine for a brief moment before Vuk flicked his gaze back to Jordan and responded with a few curt hand movements.

I’d learned American Sign Language in high school after my aunt lost her hearing, so I understood Vuk perfectly.

*I’m your best man. That’s my job.*

Not the most enthusiastic reply, but I couldn’t imagine Vuk expressing enthusiasm over anything. The man was made of ice.

“I know, but still,” Jordan said. “I appreciate it. *We* appreciate it.”

He squeezed my hand on the table; I faked another smile.

Nothing to see here. We were just another soon-to-be-married couple who were deeply in love with each other. *Obviously*.

A muscle ticked in Vuk’s jaw.

His eyes touched mine again, and I fought another wave of chills.

Neither Jordan nor I had told anyone else about our arrangement. It was too risky. There were literally millions of dollars riding on our ability to sell our relationship, and as much as I hated keeping secrets from my family, I *needed* the money.

But sometimes, Vuk looked at us, at me, like he—

The blare of a ringtone derailed my train of thought.

Jordan grimaced. “Sorry, I have to take this.” He removed his hand from mine and stood. “I’ll be right back. No dessert for me if the server asks, okay, babe?”

“Yep. Got it.” I hoped my reply sounded natural and not forced. Although we conversed easily one-on-one, our need to convince the world we were a happy couple put a strain on our interactions around other people.

Once Jordan was gone, Vuk and I lapsed into silence again.

“So,” I said brightly, wishing not for the first time that Jordan had chosen someone less terrifying to be his best man. “What do you have planned for the bachelor party? Poker? Lap dances? Be honest. I won’t get offended.”

I didn’t want to talk about the wedding, but I couldn’t think of anything else we might have in common.

Vuk regarded me coolly. One hand wrapped around his glass, the other remained on the table, and God knew he hadn’t engaged

in a single conversation with me since we met over a year ago. I doubted he'd start tonight.

*Okay then.* I guess he didn't want to talk about the wedding either.

I held back a sigh and took an unenthusiastic bite of salad.

I'd just forced the greens down when a family of three passed by our table. The daughter, who looked like she was around seven or eight years old, stopped to gawk at Vuk.

"Mom, Dad, look at his face." Her stage whisper was hardly a whisper when she was standing less than a foot away. "Why does it look like that?"

"Don't stare," her father admonished. "It's rude."

"But those scars! They're *gross*."

"Emily!" The mother glared at her daughter before casting an embarrassed glance in our direction. "I'm so sorry. She's..." Boisterous laughter from another table drowned out the rest of her apology.

She placed a hand on the little girl's shoulder and quickly ushered her out of the restaurant. The father trailed after them, taking great care not to look at Vuk.

Cold metal bit into my palm. I hadn't realized how hard I'd been gripping my fork, and I had to physically force my hand to uncurl.

Vuk, on the other hand, hadn't moved an inch. If it weren't for the near-imperceptible tightening of his lips, I would've thought he hadn't heard the girl at all.

How often did people openly stare and whisper for him to act so unfazed?

My earlier annoyance softened with sympathy. I wasn't sure whether I should address what happened, so I let the silence stretch on while I debated what to say next.

Besides the scar on his face, Vuk had additional burn scars

wrapped around his throat. They peeked out from the neck of his shirt, and though they weren't as visible, they were enough to make the average person do a double take.

But the little girl was wrong. They weren't gross; they were simply a part of him. Some people had freckles and moles; he had scars.

Vuk's lips tightened further. *If my appearance disturbs you so much, we can end dinner early.* His movements were sharp enough to cut glass. *I wouldn't want you to lose your appetite.*

Blood rushed to my face. I was mortified that I'd been caught staring—the very thing the little girl had done—but his assumptions regarding my character made me bristle.

Did he think me so rude and shallow that I would blatantly judge the way he looked over dinner?

"I wasn't staring at you because of your appearance," I said. "You're sitting across from me. It's natural that I look at you. I wasn't even *thinking* about you."

It was a bald-faced lie, but I certainly wasn't going to share my real thoughts with him. I had a feeling he'd hate sympathy more than he would rudeness.

Vuk arched his brow a fraction of an inch.

"I wasn't." I lifted my chin. "I was thinking about...Ireland. And how excited I am to visit."

He looked unimpressed. *You've been to Ireland before.*

This time, I was the one whose eyebrows flew up. "How do you know that?"

I'd studied abroad in Dublin for a summer, before I was scouted and dropped out of Howard to pursue modeling full-time. It wasn't a secret, but it wasn't common knowledge either.

There was a short pause before Vuk answered. *Jordan told me.*

I frowned. I didn't remember telling Jordan about Dublin, but I could be wrong. The past year and a half had been such a blur

that I barely remembered what life was like before I agreed to Jordan's marriage of convenience.

It was a long engagement, but I was marrying the heir to Jacob Ford. People expected us to have a lavish wedding, and those took time to plan.

Our ceremony was set for February, six months from now. After that, I'd receive my first five-million-dollar payment, and I could finally leave my agency.

They'd already taken too much of my money and soul; if I lost any more pieces of myself, I'd have nothing left.

"Are you bringing anyone to the wedding?" I asked Vuk.

Despite his public profile as a major CEO, he was notoriously private.

I knew he'd been born in Serbia and that his family moved to the U.S. when he was ten. He'd studied chemical engineering in college, where he met Jordan, and the pair had been roommates for their last two years at Thayer.

Some people called him the Serb because they said he hated being called by his real name, but I suspected that was just a rumor. Jordan always called him Vuk, and he never said a thing about it.

That was all I knew about him.

There was zero information about Vuk's personal life online, and I was oddly curious about his dating habits.

I'd never seen him out with a date, but he was rich, single, and powerful—the holy trinity, as far as half the women in Manhattan were concerned. He *had* to be dating someone, if only casually.

An indiscernible emotion flickered across his face. *Perhaps.*

"That's not really an answer."

*If I had another answer, I would've given it.*

I glared at him. "Do you get off on being difficult, or does it just come naturally to you?"

*Both.*

A small growl of frustration slipped out.

Vuk's mouth twitched. On anyone else, it might've passed for a hint of a smile, but the mere idea of Vuk Markovic smiling was so far-fetched, I was certain I was imagining things.

"I—"

A whoosh of air interrupted what I was sure would've been a thoroughly witty reply on my part.

"Sorry about that." Jordan sounded breathless as he settled back into his seat. I'd been so fixated on my conversation with Vuk, I hadn't even noticed his approach. "The call took longer than expected."

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

A furrow dug between his brows, and his previously neat hair stuck up like he'd been running his fingers through it.

"Not really." Jordan's voice was tight. "It's my grandmother. You were right. She's...not doing so well. I have to go to Rhode Island tomorrow to see her."

Orla had returned to her Newport estate after the party on Tuesday.

"What do you mean by not doing well?" I asked, concerned.

"I'm not sure. Her assistant just said I should go up and see her ASAP."

That couldn't be good.

My teeth dug into my lip. I wasn't close with Jordan's family, but I didn't want anything to happen to his grandmother either.

She was the reason for our arrangement. Orla had tired of waiting for her only grandchild to settle down, and she gave Jordan an ultimatum last year: marry within the next twenty-four months and *stay* married for at least five years, or she'd donate the entire family fortune to charity.

All one hundred and twenty million dollars of it.