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THE

*Long*

GAME

ELENA ARMAS

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THE  
*Long*  
GAME

ELENA ARMAS



SIMON &  
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London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

*For all the girls who might have lost it once or twice,  
so what?  
Let those beautiful feelings rain on them, babe.*

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Adalyn*

The head rolled off his shoulders and halted at my feet with a thump.

Goosebumps erupted at the top of my spine and spread down my body.

I should have been familiar with the scene. I should remember something I had lived and was watching on a screen. But I didn't. So when silence fell, plunging the Miami Flames' facilities into a sudden vacuum, my heart dropped to my stomach. And when the voice of one of the camera guys was caught by the mic asking in a whisper, "Dude, are you recording this?" I was pretty sure I stopped breathing.

Oh God. What—

The top of Paul's head popped out of the headless neckline of Sparkles, the mascot's costume, and a wave of panic washed over me.

Paul blinked, anger and shock meshing in his expression before spitting a "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

My lips parted, as if some instinctual part of my brain wanted to answer him. Now. Even when it wouldn't make a difference. "I—"

The image on the screen froze, forcing my gaze up to the face of the man holding the iPad that had reproduced the thirty seconds that had been missing from my memory.

"I think we've seen enough," Andrew Underwood, CEO and managing director of the Miami Flames FC and Miami-based business mogul, stated.

"I beg to differ," the man by his side said with a light chuckle. "This is a crisis meeting and we should make sure we have all the details." A crisis meeting? "In fact," David continued, "I think we should play it again from the beginning. I'm

not sure what Adalyn was grunting while decapitating our dear Sparkles. Was it just angry growling or actual words she was—”

“David,” Andrew interjected, dropping the device on the unnecessarily large desk separating them from me. “This is serious.”

“It is,” the younger man agreed, and I didn’t need to look at him to know he was smirking. I knew that smirk. I’d kissed that smirk. Dated it for a complete year. Then, worked under it when he’d been handed the position I’d dreamed of my whole life. “It’s not every day we get the head of communications of an MLS club gunning for the team’s mascot in six-inch heels.” I sensed—heard—that smile widening, and I felt my face turning to stone. “A shocking turn, surely. But also—”

“Unacceptable,” Andrew finished for him. “Everyone in this room knows that.” Those pale blue eyes met mine, sharp and unforgiving. Which wasn’t a surprise. I also knew that glare. I’d endured The Glare for most of my life. He continued, “Adalyn’s outburst was inexcusable, but you shouldn’t forget yourself. This is my daughter you’re talking about.”

I lifted my chin, as if the reminder wasn’t something I tried to ignore on a daily basis.

Adalyn Reyes, the overachieving daughter of the CEO of the soccer franchise she’d been working for all her life.

“I apologize for the tone, Andrew,” David said, and even if his tone had sobered, I still didn’t look at him. I couldn’t. Not after everything that had gone down in the last twenty-four hours. Not after what I’d learned. “But as VP of operations of the Flames I’m concerned about the repercussions of the incident.”

The incident.

My lips pressed into a tight line.

My father clicked his tongue, returning his eyes to the device and unlocking it again.

His finger swiped up and down, and left and right, until a document popped open. Even upside down, I immediately recognized what he was looking at. It was the template I’d designed for the press and media reports. The one that

everyone used now. I'd created the color-coded system for priority items that was currently making the screen shine with bright red.

Red, as in top priority. Red, as in crisis.

We hadn't had one in months. Years.

"I haven't approved that," I muttered, hearing my voice for the first time since my father had hit play on the video. I cleared my throat. "Every report should go through me before reaching management."

But my father only exhaled, deep and long, ignoring me in favor of scrolling through the—I leaned forward—fifteen-page report.

My eyes widened. "Can I—"

"Media impact of the incident," he said over me. "Let's start with that."

My lips popped open again, but David moved closer, his mane of dirty blond hair distracting me. His smirk met my gaze, and I could immediately tell he knew something. Something I didn't.

"Virality rate," my father continued, tapping the screen with his index finger. My stomach dropped. Virality? Of what? My father's eyebrows crumpled. "How is an impression different from a view?"

"What platform are we talking about?" I rushed out, squaring my shoulders. "That's why I have to approve these. I usually add notes for you. If you let me have a look I can—"

David tsked, his gaze dropping to the iPad in my father's hands. Then he quipped, "I guess it doesn't really matter, Andrew." His eyes returned to mine. "The video has six million views across all platforms. I think we all understand that."

The video.

Six million views.

Across all platforms.

My knees wobbled. *I* wobbled. And I wasn't one to.

Often, I'd been told I was too clinical, my humor too dry, and my smiles too rare. My assistant, Kelly, the only one in the Flames' offices who has made the effort to befriend me, openly calls me an unbothered queen. But I know most people here refer to me as an ice queen, or snow queen, or whatever variation of the term that references being cold and female. I'd never let it bother me.



Because I never wavered. Or wobbled. Or let things affect me.

Not until yesterday, when I—

David let out a chuckle. “You’re officially viral, Ads.”

*When I’d gunned for the team’s mascot in six-inch heels*, as David had put it.

My lunch crawled up my esophagus, partly because of that *Ads* I’d always hated so much and partly because I... God. I couldn’t believe this. I was viral. Viral.

“Six million views,” my father said with a shake of his head when I didn’t—couldn’t—speak. “Six million people have seen you bulldoze into the mascot, scratch at his face, and pluck his goddamn head off. Six million. That’s the population of Miami metropolitan.” The tips of his ears went red. “You even have your own hashtag: #sparklesgate. And people are using it next to the club’s.”

“I didn’t know it was all recorded,” I all but murmured, hating how my voice sounded. “I couldn’t know there was a video circulating, but—”

“There’s no *but* in this situation, Adalyn. You assaulted a colleague.” The word *assault* hung in the air, and my jaw clamped shut. “Paul is an employee and Sparkles is an entity of this team. He is a phoenix that embodies the fire, immortality, and transformation of the Miami Flames. Your team. And you attacked him while the press was in the house for the club’s anniversary. Journalists. Cameras. The team and their families. There were children watching, for Christ’s sake.”

I swallowed, making sure my shoulders remained squared. Strong. Image was everything in these situations. And I couldn’t break. Not here. Not again. “I understand, I do. Sparkles is an important symbol and he is well loved by the fans. But the word *assault* seems an exaggeration. I didn’t physically harm Paul, I...”

“You what?” my father pressed.

Apparently, I beheaded a six-foot-two bird made of foam, polyester, and acrylic feathers that goes by the name of Sparkles and represents immortality. According to the video evidence.

But saying that wouldn’t help, so my mouth hung open for what felt like the longest five seconds in history, and... I didn’t say a single thing.

My father's head tilted to the side. "Please, I'd love for you to explain."

My heart pounded. But there was nothing I could say, not without prompting a conversation I wasn't ready or equipped for. Not right now, and possibly not ever.

"It was..." I trailed off, once more hating the quality of my voice. "A forceful encounter. An accident."

David, who had been uncharacteristically quiet the last few minutes, snorted, and my face, so often called indifferent and cool, flamed.

My father placed the iPad on his desk with a sigh. "We're lucky David persuaded Paul not to press charges or sue us."

Charges. *A lawsuit.*

I felt sick to my stomach.

"I offered him a raise, which he obviously accepted," David added. "After all, this was such an out-of-character outburst for our very... composed Adalyn."

The way he said the word *composed*, as if it was something bad, a flaw, hit me square in the chest.

"We asked for the tape of the event," my father continued. "After you all but fled the... *scene*. But someone must have recorded the incident with their phone. David suspects it was one of the interns that came in with the camera crew."

David tsked. "Impossible to know for sure, though."

I couldn't believe this was happening. God, I couldn't believe what *I* had done.

A foreign and odd sensation pushed at the back of my eyes. It was like a prick of warmth that made my sight... misty. Was this—No. Were these—No. It couldn't be. I couldn't be about to cry.

"It's just a video," I said, but all I could think about was that I couldn't recall the last time I'd cried. "It will blow over." The sting in my eyes increased. "If there's something I know about the internet it is that everything is fleeting and short-lived." Why couldn't I remember the last time I'd cried? "No one will care about it tomorrow."

David's phone pinged, and he slipped it out of his pocket. "Oh," he said, looking at the screen. "I somehow doubt that. Seems like we're getting more than a few press inquiries. For you."

That was definitely concerning, but something else clicked. “Why...” I frowned, looked down at my phone. Nothing was there. “That email should come to me. Why am I not cc’d?” David shrugged and my father exhaled loudly from his post. Again. I glanced back at him, and his expression made something in me shift into action. “We can turn this around.” My voice sounded desperate. “I can turn this around. I swear. I will find a way to benefit from the wave of extra attention. Even the hashtag. We all know the team is not making headlines as it is, and we have been stuck at the bottom of the Eastern Conference for so long that...”

My father’s face hardened, his eyes turning an icy shade of blue.

Silence, heavy and thick, crystallized in the room.

And I knew then, in the way his eyelashes swept up and down, that whatever battle I’d been fighting was over. I’d said out loud the one thing that made his switch flip. The Miami Flames were in the mud. We hadn’t gotten to the playoffs in more than a decade. We were far from filling up stadiums. This was the one investment Andrew Underwood had made that hadn’t turned a profit. The one that had cost him more than just money. His pride.

“I just meant that—” I started.

But my battle was now lost. “‘Mascot Slaughter in Miami Flames’ Home,” he read from the iPad. “How’s that for some extra attention?”

I swallowed. “I think the use of the word *slaughter* is a stretch.”

He gave me a curt nod before continuing, “‘MLS Miami Flames’ Anniversary Ends in Massacre.’”

“*Massacre* also seems like the wrong word.”

My father’s index finger rose in the air. “‘Miami’s Favorite Bird Was Plucked and Roasted. Whose Head Will Roll Next?’” That finger returned to the screen and swiped. “‘Sparkles Deserved to Die.’” Another swipe. “‘A Love Letter to Lady Birdinator.’”

*Lady Birdinator*. Jesus.

I scoffed, earning a glance from a smirking David. “Those media outlets are just cashing in for easy clicks. They’re not making any serious assessments that should concern us or the franchise. My team will put together a strategy. We’ll send out a press release. We—”

“Daughter of Miami Flames Owner, Andrew Underwood, and Former Runway Model, Maricela Reyes, on the Spot After Horrible Incident with Team Mascot.”

That clammy sensation that had covered my skin since I'd entered this office climbed up my spine. Arms. Back of my neck.

He continued, “Adalyn Reyes Unhinged. Who Is the Heiress to the Underwood Empire?” I closed my eyes. “Miami Flames FC Under Review. Is the Club Finally Crumbling Down?” A drop of cold sweat trailed down my back. “Has Dull and Boring Flames' Head of Communications Finally Found Some Fire in Her? Female Rage Explained.”

*Dull and boring.*

*Finally found some fire in her.*

*Female rage.*

It didn't matter how straight I held myself in that moment, it was impossible to ignore how small I felt. Inadequate. And when I shifted my weight, even my tailored pantsuit felt wrong. Loose and prickly against my skin. Like I didn't belong in it.

“Well.” My father's voice brought me back. I refocused on him. His face. The hardness in his eyes. “I'm going to be honest, these are a little wordy to be headlines, but I guess it doesn't matter when they hit the nail on the head.” A pause. “Do you still think this is attention we could benefit from, Adalyn?”

I shook my head.

The man I'd looked up to and tried to impress so exhaustingly hard throughout all the years I'd worked for the club sighed. “Would you at least tell us what in the world prompted this?” he asked, and the question caught me so off guard, so unprepared, that I could only stand there, gaping at him.

“I...” I couldn't. Wouldn't.

Not with David right there. Maybe if he'd asked me yesterday, intercepted me and demanded an answer right as I was *fleeing the scene*, as he'd put it. Maybe I would have told him then. I clearly hadn't been myself. But I couldn't now.

I'd only prove that those accusations were right. That I was unprofessional. Unqualified for my job, and the job I aspired to have one day. How could I be in charge of anything when I'd lost it like that?

“Sweetheart,” David said, making me turn toward him. I couldn’t believe I’d ever allowed him to call me anything but Adalyn. But at least now, I knew why he had the courage to still do so. “You look so pale. Are you feeling okay?”

“Yes,” I croaked, even though I didn’t. Not by a long shot. “It’s just warm in here. And I... I hardly slept last night.” I cleared my throat, met my father’s gaze, words toppling out of my mouth. “You know how hard I’ve worked and how dedicated I am to the club. Couldn’t you just...” Forget this? Take my side? No questions asked. Be my father.

Andrew Underwood leaned back on his chair, the leather creaking beneath him. “Are you asking me to treat you differently just because you’re my daughter?”

Yes, I wanted to say. Just this once. But the pressure behind my eyes returned, distracting me.

“No.” He sliced the air in front of him with his hand. “I have never done that and will not start now. You’re still an Underwood and you’re better than asking for special treatment after embarrassing me and the whole club.”

*Embarrassing.* I had embarrassed myself, my father, and the club.

I had always prided myself on not letting my father’s words or actions as my boss affect me. But the ugly truth was that they did. That this, this boss-employee relationship was the only relationship we had.

This was all I had.

“You breached the code of conduct,” he continued. “This grants me grounds to fire you. And I might be doing you a favor, all things considered.”

I flinched.

In response, Andrew Underwood narrowed his eyes as he looked at me. And only after what seemed like an eternity, he let both his hands drop on the desk. “I don’t like the media requests David’s been getting all day.” He tilted his head. “You’re a distraction, so I want you to leave Miami while we fix this.”

David muttered something, but I couldn’t be sure. My father’s words echoed in my head.

Fix this. There was a solution then.

My father stood up from his chair. “Your assistant. What’s her name?”

“Kelly,” David answered for me.

“She’ll take over all communications and media inquiries,” my father continued with a nod. “Adalyn will bring her up to speed before leaving.” He took a step to the right, opening a drawer and looking back at me. “Get a hold on whatever is going on with you and let us do damage control over here.” He stuck the iPad inside. “And I’d rather you not mention this to your mother. If she learns I’ve exiled her only daughter until the end of the season I won’t hear the end of it.”

Exiled.

Until the end of the season.

That was... weeks from now. Months. Away from the Flames and Miami.

I gave him a nod.

“You’ll leave tomorrow. On an assignment. We have a philanthropic initiative that will require your presence and all that newfound... passion of yours.” He paused. “It’s something I’ve actually been thinking about for a while. So I guess now is as good a time as any.” He walked around his desk. “And, Adalyn? I expect you to take this as seriously as your job here. Don’t disappoint me again.”