CHAPTER 5

Scepter & Scythe

You have been selected.

Solve the clues.

Deliver the answer.

If the task is correctly and competently completed, you will be considered for membership.

Razz flipped the card over, revealing a series of cryptic instructions. A gust of wind through the open front door raised goosebumps on the back of his neck, and he turned to find Monroe hauling in the next bag of laundry.

His fingertips tingled in that way right before one's brain registered the touch of a hot pan, and Razz nearly dropped the paper. The riddle, the code; it was time to solve and crack.

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It had been nearly a week since Razz had been to Salty Sweet. He blamed his burst of productivity, but the real reason was something darker. Despite all the optimism he felt of late, Razz didn't like change; he resisted it with every fiber of his being. He had struggled going away to college, and then he had struggled leaving after graduation. His five-year life-hiatus, while pathetic and wasteful, had been a reassuring bubble of stagnation.

This unwillingness to expand his boundaries went a long way toward explaining his rare and sudden activity. Rather than wade into icy water, he cannonballed into the depths. Change was inevitable, so Razz did what he could to expedite the process. Once he committed to something, he was all in.

The situation at Salty Sweet was antithetical to Razz's methods. He didn't gradually get to know people. Archie and Hatch had been his preordained best friends from the age of three, and his romantic encounters involved a bar, a bed, and an Uber.

For well over a year, Razz had maintained a flirtatious, antagonistic relationship with Mia. Careful to hide the depth of his obsession from onlookers. He dreamt of nights in her bed, fucking her in unspeakable ways. He could practically hear her cries and feel

her short nails raking down his back. Five days away had been unbearable.

“Hey, Pig.”

Every muscle in his body relaxed as Razz savored her warm caramel voice. The air smelled of coffee and baked goods. If there were a more comforting spot on Earth, Razz had yet to find it.

“Muffin.”

“Haven’t seen you lately. What have you been up to?”

If he detected a note of concern in her casual question, Razz ignored it and immediately shifted into the arrogant facade he knew annoyed her to no end. “Oh, not much. Burning cash in barrel fires, buying thoroughbreds.”

Mia rolled her eyes. “Sounds about right. Large coffee?”

“And something smells decent,” he lied. The aroma filling the cozy space was heaven-sent.

“It's a new flavor.” She met his gaze, daring his innuendo. “Peach.”

Razz just chuckled. “Muffin, big leaguers don’t swing at softballs. I’ll try one and supply some much-needed feedback.”

“I have no doubt.”

After paying, Razz took his usual seat and withdrew Hatch’s mysterious initiation instructions. It was go-time. He flipped it over and read the riddle.

In Khufu’s modern tomb, an emperor dwells.

Your master's house, a cemetery,

Past, present, and future.

“Looks simple enough.”

“What does?” Mia held the plate suspended above the riddle. Razz grasped her wrist and guided the muffin to the side. He hated touching her, hated the *want* it triggered. So he did what he always did.

“Put that peach there.” Razz tapped the table. “And scoot your peach back to the counter.”

Mia set the plate down as instructed and put her hands on her hips. “I thought big leaguers didn’t swing at softballs.”

“What can I say? Your ass is distracting.”

“Now you sound like your friend from last week.”

She was talking about Fudge. It was an insult that cut him to the quick. Rather than do the mature, polite thing, Razz apologized in his own way.

“Where would Khufu be buried in Manhattan?”

“Who is Khufu? A rapper?”

Razz chuckled. “No, but that would be a good rapper name.” He spun the printed card to face Mia. “Fourth Dynasty Egyptian ruler, enshrined in the Great Pyramid of Giza.”

“So, a modern pyramid.”

“Yes.”

Mia glanced over her shoulder at her coworker, who was alone at the counter, cleaning the glass on the pastry case. After Lorelei waved her off, Mia pulled up a chair and joined Razz at the tiny table.

“Which direction do you come from when you walk here?” she asked.

Razz thumbed over his shoulder. “Charles Street.”

“You really need to work on your situational awareness.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Razz took offense, but, in truth, he rarely paid attention to his surroundings.

Mia stood. “Come.”

Razz broke off a piece of the muffin and popped it in his mouth as he trailed her to the front door. “Damn, that’s good.”

He couldn’t see her face, but Razz noticed the tips of her ears turned pink. It seemed his situational awareness was razor-sharp where Mia was concerned.

Razz pointed to the camera over the door. “I see you added security. Smart.”

“Thanks. Now we are on record, solving your stupid riddle, so if there’s a prize or something, I want my share.” A crisp October breeze swirled around them as the sun

peeked through the buildings. She tapped the card he held and continued to the corner. “Stop staring at my ass and look up.”

Razz did as commanded. Momentarily paused, Razz scanned the skyline as an annoyed jogger made a show of avoiding him. Mia clasped his elbow and moved him out of the flow of pedestrian traffic.

Razz followed her extended arm. “Well, what do you know?”

“The Pharaoh. It was built like two or three years ago.”

At about twenty stories high, Razz could only make out the top several floors from this distance, but what he could see was stunning. The palest pink granite facade called to mind the Gilded Age mansions of the late nineteenth century. As his eyes skated upward, the answer to the riddle lay before him. The edifice was topped with a modern glass pyramid, an architectural tip of the hat to I.M. Pei’s Louvre entrance.

Without thinking, Razz placed his hand on the small of Mia’s back below the tie of her apron. “Walk down there with me.”

She removed his hand and replied, “I can’t. Work.”

He bowed slightly. “A thousand pardons. I would never impugn your honor by rushing our courtship.”

Mia tucked a lock of hair that had escaped her ponytail behind her ear. “My doctor told me excessive eye rolling can cause headaches. So–” She turned and headed back to the coffee shop.

“Save my muffin, Muffin.”

She flipped him off over her shoulder, and Razz smiled.

The light changed, and Razz headed to TriBeCa, Googling building info as he walked.

When he cleared the final block, Razz gazed up at the spectacular structure.

Standing eighteen stories tall, The Pharaoh had an unheard-of amount of green space surrounding the building. Grass was a waste of money on a small island where real estate sold for over $2,000 per square foot. The Pharaoh’s residents were absorbing the cost of pastoral bliss. The building had achieved full occupancy a year before completion. While it seemed that most residents were secretive about their addresses, the paparazzi had captured some excellent shots of people rumored to live in The Pharaoh as they came and went.

Razz swiped through pictures of a celebrity chef, an A-list movie star, a supermodel,

and her rock star husband. He stopped at the last picture, spreading his fingers on the screen to zoom in. A stunning woman in a black ball gown was stepping out of a Rolls. Razz didn't know who she was and didn't care. It was the tuxedoed man extending his hand to help her that drew his attention.

Apollo Peck.

The fourth richest man in the world.

The most divisive public figure ever to grace the pages of gossip columns.

Showman.
Inventor.
Visionary.
Criminal.

People either loved Apollo Peck or they hated him. Razz knew Peck by reputation only, but fell firmly in the hate category. Apollo Peck had two great passions—neither of which was contributing to humankind. As Razz well knew, once someone had achieved a certain level of wealth (as Razz had at birth), money ceased to be a motivating factor for anything.

One of Peck's compulsions was women. The man was rumored to be kinkier than the Marquis de Sade. Peck had allegedly settled more sexual harassment claims than any financial firm in New York. He had even posed on the cover of *Esquire* in dom leathers, which brought Razz to Peck's other obsession: attention.

The guy was as thirsty as a marathoner.

Like a heroin addiction, the thrill that came from making one's first million, or hundred million, or billion, faded. Men like Peck needed something else to chase in order to replicate that high. Some of Peck's contemporaries pursued power; others chose adventure. Peck was hooked on notoriety. The man courted controversy like it was his job. The only spotlights Peck avoided were those that exposed jailable offenses–financial and other crimes, and any reports of his rumored recreational drug use. Other than that, Peck was happy if his name was on the lips of anyone and everyone.

Razz returned his attention to the building rising before him. Above the vast glass-fronted lobby entrance was a club level with a residents-only gym, spa, salon, and concierge medical office. There was also a coffee shop, as well as a private dining room with in-building delivery, run by a Michelin-starred chef.

Who knew Razz was slumming in his fourteen-million-dollar home?

Atop eighteen luxury co-ops sat the crown jewel. Capped with a pyramid of glass and

steel was a four-story residence. The building's website kindly provided a list of features for all the units, including this astonishing penthouse.

In addition to every bell and whistle that a fifty-million-dollar home should have—wine cellar, vault, media room, safe room, salt room, art gallery, outdoor terrace kitchen, catering kitchen, and so on—it also had the security of NORAD.

The first part of the riddle led to The Pharaoh, specifically the home of Apollo Peck. The second part was a series of hieroglyphs Razz must translate. Finally, there was some sort of poem containing a hidden message. Solving the cipher was the least of Razz's problems. He was already sure the task required stealing something from Peck's home, and the only way anyone was entering that residence was if they were invited.

The mere idea of pulling this off had Razz's heart racing; he felt alive for the first time in years. With an initial to-do list in place, Razz headed back to his muffin (and his Muffin) to have another cup of coffee and proceed with planning the crime of the century.

Certainly, no one on the island of Manhattan was a greater criminal mastermind.