

DOUBLECROSS
MISSION HINDENBURG



C. ALEXANDER LONDON

SCHOLASTIC INC.

To Ben and Dillon and all the adventures they have ahead



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CHAPTER 1

Palm Beach, Florida

The seasonal citizens of Palm Beach, Florida, shuffled beneath the neatly tended palm trees along the sidewalk, rushing to catch their dinner reservations. The Outcast checked his watch.

4:45 P.M.

Oh, how he loathed the average member of his generation! For the wealthy retirees who wintered in Palm Beach there was little to do but shop at the luxury stores along Worth Avenue, lunch at the Beach Club, then dine out at five before settling into the evening's police procedural shows on television.

The Outcast locked his sleek gray Lexus and strolled beneath the Spanish-style colonnade that welcomed visitors to a — Cheesecake Factory?

He grunted. Chain restaurants. To his right and to his left, nothing but chain restaurants.

What an ignoble place, he thought, for a Cahill to die.

When he reached the gate he was looking for, he straightened his tie and pressed the buzzer.

A long time passed until finally a sharp voice blurted through the speaker, "Who is it? I'm just sitting down to dinner."

"Beatrice," the Outcast said. "I've brought you a gift."

He reached into his pocket, pulled out the small porcelain figurine he'd purchased for just this occasion, and held it up to the security camera. The statue was about the size of his palm, a smiling red-cheeked cat wearing small white wings, its paws extended as if in flight. A ghastly piece of "art," but it was sure to do the job. Beatrice loved her porcelain cat figurine collection.

A moment passed, and then the gate swung open. He strolled inside to a quiet courtyard where a sad cluster of potted plants had begun to wither. Beatrice had, no doubt, neglected to care for them herself and was too cheap to hire a gardener.

She opened the door at the rear of the courtyard and stood in front of him with her hands on her hips and her painted-on eyebrows raised in surprise. Her lips bore the ghastly shade of hot pink that she had been wearing for decades, smeared clownlike over her too-thin lips.

"I don't like unexpected guests," Beatrice told him.

The Outcast smiled. "You recognize me after all these years?"

She nodded slowly without moving to invite him in. "I didn't at first. But now that I see you in person, I know exactly who you are. A psychic once told me that I am an excellent judge of character. Always have

been, ever since I was a little girl. Faces change but a man's character never does."

"And are you glad to see me?" the Outcast asked her.

"You shouldn't be here," Beatrice snapped. "Not after what you've done."

"Then you want me to go?" He raised an eyebrow.

Beatrice acted as if she were studying her long false fingernails against the doorframe. Her voice rose to a mouselike pitch. "I didn't say *that*. You've come all this way . . . and you say you've brought a gift?"

The Outcast couldn't help but smile. *No, character never changes.* He held up the winged cat figurine. "Why don't we have a cup of coffee and catch up? I'd love to hear all the juicy gossip since I've been away."

Beatrice pointed at herself. "Gossip? Me? I never gossip. . . ."

The Outcast waited.

"But it *has* been an eventful time." She whistled. "Oh, the stories I have, you wouldn't believe. You know I raised Grace's two grandchildren and you're surely aware of what ungrateful teens they've become. Oh, don't just stand there, come in and I'll tell you all about it."

The Outcast nodded.

"But first, let's have that Cupid cat," Beatrice said, greed lighting her eyes. "It'll go perfectly in my collection."

"It isn't Cupid," the Outcast told her as he crossed the threshold into her condominium. "It's Icarus." He

cleared his throat, feeling ridiculous even saying it. "Cat Icarus."

"Icarus," Beatrice repeated. She obviously had no idea what that meant.

Beatrice had gone to the finest schools, but she had the intellectual curiosity of a three-toed sloth.

He lifted the winged cat figure up. "From Greek mythology."

"Oh, of course," Beatrice said. "Obviously." The corner of her mouth twitched.

"You know the story," the Outcast said. "How Icarus and his inventor father, Daedalus, were imprisoned inside the Minotaur's maze on the Greek island of Crete. To escape, Daedalus built two pairs of wings out of feathers and wax so he and his son could fly from the island together. He warned his prideful young son not to fly too high, for if he got too close to the sun, its heat would melt the wax that held the wings together. The boy, filled with the arrogance of youth, flew as high as he could on his borrowed wings. As he'd been warned, the wax melted, and the boy plummeted to his death in the sea."

"Well," Beatrice muttered with a shake of her head. "I prefer less gruesome stories, but of course it is a nice lesson for young people, I suppose, to respect their elders."

"Indeed," the Outcast agreed. He handed her the figurine. "Careful not to drop the little fellow. He'd shatter into a million pieces."

"The little ones are so fragile, aren't they?" Beatrice said as she placed the statue carefully into her winter

collection of cat figurines. There were at least fifty of them staring down from the shelves, farmer cats and doctor cats and spy cats and even a custom-made Beatrice cat, complete with hot pink lipstick. “I’ll go get that coffee,” Beatrice said with her back to him as she studied her cat collection proudly. “I only have instant. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Actually, Beatrice, I won’t be staying long enough for coffee,” the Outcast said. He pulled a syringe from his pocket as Beatrice turned to face him. Her jaw went slack, her eyes bulged.

“Now, there’s no need for that . . .” she croaked out. “And anyway . . . I’ll—I’ll scream.”

“No one will hear you,” he said calmly. “It’s dinner-time in Palm Beach and you can be certain all the televisions are cranked up very, very loud. You should have chosen somewhere else to winter.”

He rushed for Beatrice, who swung to block him. Her long nails raked across his cheek, but he caught her wrist and spun her around with one hand, gripping her tightly against his body. She squirmed but could not break free.

The Outcast pressed the syringe into her neck as he whispered in her ear, “You shouldn’t have recognized me, Beatrice. It would have been so much better for you if you hadn’t.”