

# VELOCITY

ghostline

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for everyone who ever wanted to see the badass women  
fall in love without worrying about the stray bullet

# Chapter 1 - Available Light

## Rei

The call sheet said **WED 15 OCTOBER 1997 - RAIN BY NOON.**

By nine, the rain had not arrived but fog moved down from the hill in slow, uncommitted sheets. Grip-truck lights turned vague. Wet asphalt held cables, puddles and small avoidable errors with equal patience.

Rei stood at the edge of the closed street with her helmet under one arm.

The ramp sat eight inches to the right of its mark.

A man in black fleece and a headset was calling instructions across the street as if the force of his own irritation might improve the day. Two production assistants carrying paper cups walked into the shot and were sent back the other way. Someone had taped black plastic over a shopfront sign and one corner had already come loose, lifting and slapping faintly at the glass when the wind came down the street.

Rei looked from the ramp to the alley mouth.

On paper the sequence was simple. The actor ran from the club door into the street. Camera tracked from the far side. Rei crossed through frame too close and too fast, enough to let the body watching imagine collision without requiring one. The actor turned after her. Cut. Reset.

Then Rei would return to the start mark further along the kerb and take the second beat. Onto the short ramp, light lift over the broken strip of street, hard landing at the alley mouth, rear wheel beginning to slide, body low, turn through the slide into the alley.

In the edit, the two passes would read as one continuous escape.

The story wanted danger.

The schedule wanted one clean hour before the permit changed hands.

The ramp, eight inches right of its mark, wanted to put the landing through an oil stain someone had dusted badly with absorbent and then abandoned because the powder looked ugly on camera.

Rei set the helmet on an equipment case and crossed the street.

‘Hey,’ the second assistant director called, because on sets people often seemed to use *hey* where a name, a role, or thought should have been. ‘We’re not ready for talent.’

Rei turned her head.

He saw the bike jacket, then Miles Kade behind her, and corrected himself. 'Stunts. Sorry. We're not ready for stunts.'

'You are less ready than that,' Rei said.

Miles laughed once through his nose. He had worked with her several times before and had the useful habit of not requiring softness where accuracy would do.

'What did they move?' he asked.

'The ramp.'

'Of course they did.'

'The oil patch matters now.'

Miles followed the geometry after a second. Ramp. Oil. Cable. Wet street. Alley mouth. His face briefly became the face of a man seeing later paperwork, then returned to anger.

'Terry,' he called.

The man in the fleece looked over, still speaking into the headset. 'We're five from rehearsal.'

'No, we're ten from moving the damn ramp back before we put my rider into a kerb.'

Terry came across with the wounded speed of a man who believed the day had been arranged badly as a personal insult. 'The director shifted it for framing. He wants the bike closer to foreground.'

'The director can want it from the hospital if he likes,' Miles said. 'The mark is there for a reason.'

'It's eight inches.'

Rei crouched and touched two fingers to the asphalt where the tyre would come down. Cold. Slick under the water. Powder at the edge of the oil. She could make it work.

That did not make it the right version.

'The landing crosses the patch,' she said. 'Rear wheel goes left. If I correct before the alley, the shot dies. If I correct after, I hit brick.'

Terry stared at her as if the street had briefly acquired speech. 'Can't you just take it wider?'

'No.'

Miles smiled without pleasure. 'There. Technical consultation.'

Across the street, behind the monitors, someone said Andreja Volkov had arrived.

The set shifted before Rei turned.

Not dramatically. Crew still moved. The generator still coughed and steadied. Cables still needed lifting. But attention altered in pieces, like a cue travelling through an old mixing board. A grip straightened. The director took off his sunglasses although there was no sun. A production assistant became devoted to a clipboard.

Rei remained crouched until she had finished the line in her head. Then she looked.

Andreja Volkov stood near the first monitor with a woman Rei assumed was her manager, Flynn Harker. It would have been difficult to mistake the arrangement. Flynn was ash blonde, older, dressed in a worn blazer over an old black band shirt and trousers that could survive either a wet alley or a meeting with lawyers. One hand rested on a leather folio worn smooth at the corners from years of carrying contracts no one else wanted to read.

Andreja wore a long dark coat closed against the damp, no visible jewellery except a narrow ring on one hand. Her hair reached her shoulders and had not been adjusted for camera. She did not look like someone arriving to be filmed. She looked like someone entering a situation already aware of what it might demand.

The crew made room around her without being asked.

Rei had seen the photographs. Magazine covers in rehearsal rooms. Album sleeves in other people's apartments. A poster in a bar in Osaka gone pale at the edges from cigarette smoke. She knew the public outline well enough. The band, the split, the solo record, the stories other people liked to tell because they could not bear to leave an artist alone in her own work.

The woman on the street made poor use of those photographs.

Sharper. Less available. Beautiful, yes, but the word did not travel very far. Beauty was common on sets. It was brought in, lit, powdered, protected from weather. Andreja's beauty had something more difficult in it, a gathered force as if every visible part of her had been argued into public one by one.

Flynn was saying something. Andreja listened with the expression of a woman tolerating an argument because the person making it had earned the right to be tiresome.

Then she turned her attention past Flynn.

Not to the ramp.

To Rei.

It did not slide over her and sort her into crew, stunt, rider, risk. It paused.

Rei stood.

'Can we make a decision before my permit dies?' Terry asked.

'Move the ramp,' Miles said.

'The director wants foreground.'

'The director can have a longer lens.'

'He wants the bike closer.'

'He wants the idea of the bike closer,' Rei said. 'Not the bike.'

Terry stared at her. Miles turned his face away, but one shoulder moved with hidden laughter.

From the monitor, Andreja's expression sharpened.

Terry said, 'Fine. Move it back.'

The grips moved the ramp without grace. The director appeared to mourn the death of his foreground, had the oil patch pointed out to him, and made a face suggesting safety had once again inconvenienced art.

Rei watched the ramp settle on the chalk marks and checked the angle herself. Front edge stable. Right brace slightly loose. She put one boot against it and pressed. The support complained.

'Brace,' she said.

A grip brought a wedge without argument. People who worked with weight and balance rarely needed the danger explained twice.

By the time the ramp was usable, the fog had lowered another degree into the street. The whole setup had acquired the wet grey tone the director had probably wanted and would later claim to have planned.

Rei took her helmet and walked back to her bike. It waited near the kerb with a black cloth over the tank to keep the damp off the controls. Props had wanted to dirty the matte grey fairing further for continuity and been discouraged. It was already scuffed where it ought to be scuffed. Weather had settled in the seams. It did not need counterfeit life added by a man with glycerine.

Her jacket hung open. The leather was soft with wear, darkened slightly by the air. She zipped it, tightened the gloves, and picked up the helmet.

Her phone began ringing inside the equipment case.

A thin, wrong-country sound. Not the American chirp most people had started to recognise. Not a pager either. Two nearby production assistants turned.

'What is that?' one of them asked.

Rei opened the case, took out the little handset, and read the display. Japanese text. Weak signal. A number with no stored name. She declined the call.

'Is that a phone?' the assistant said.

'Yes.'

'From where?'

'Elsewhere.'

Miles passed behind her and said, 'Don't ask follow-ups unless you have a spare hour and emotional resilience.'

'That seems inaccurate,' Rei said.

'I wish it were.'

The assistant looked delighted and confused. Rei put on the helmet.

The world narrowed in the useful way.

Not smaller. Cleaner.

Inside the visor the street resolved into what mattered: ramp, alley mouth, camera track, actor at the club door, extras under umbrellas they would lose on action, camera operator under rain cover, Miles at the mark with one hand raised, Terry pretending not to be nervous, Andreja beside the monitors with the coat collar turned up against the damp.

Andreja was still paying attention.

Not to the motorcycle in the ordinary hungry way people watched danger when they had paid to remain outside it. Rei knew that appetite. Andreja's attention moved from the ramp to the turn to the alley mouth and back to Rei's hands.

Rei noticed that she noticed.

That was new.

Miles lifted his voice. 'Rehearsal speed. Thirty per cent. No lift.'

Rei nodded once.

The engine turned over under her like something already awake and not impressed by patience. She rolled the bike to the start position, felt the front brake answer, touched the throttle once, and listened. Cold tyre. Wet street. Correct ramp. Narrow alley mouth. Camera track slightly too close on the left, but still outside harm if the operator stayed where he'd been told.

He would drift.

They often did.

She marked it.

'Roll playback,' Terry called.

The speakers cracked. A fragment of piano entered the street, close and low, almost swallowed by the generator. Then a voice, Andreja's voice, rough enough at the edge to thin the air beside the kerb.

Rei had heard the records.

She had not heard this.

The song began as if it had started too near the microphone and refused to retreat. She could not make out every word over the set noise. That did not matter first. The timing did. The first vocal line entered later than the body expected. The second delayed the obvious place again. A chord held long enough to become

uncomfortable and then opened under a low string tone that seemed to arrive from somewhere behind the room.

Rei rested one gloved hand on the throttle.

The song understood delay.

'Background,' Terry called.

Extras moved.

'Picture's up.'

The actor at the club door shook out her hands and tried to look cold rather than frightened. She was good-looking in the camera way, all structure and arranged distress. Her eyes flicked once to the bike.

Rei turned her head enough that the helmet moved.

Miles stepped beside her. 'You good?'

'Yes.'

'Thirty per cent.'

'Yes.'

'I am saying it twice because you're you.'

'I heard it once.'

'And yet I feel better having done it.'

Rei let that pass.

The song continued under set calls. Something in the chorus opened and then declined to become large. Rei filed it with the ramp, the wet, the camera drift, and the woman in the dark coat by the monitor.

'Action.'

The actor ran.

Rei counted half a breath, released the brake, and entered the street.

At thirty per cent, the bike wanted to be insulted. She let it complain, kept the approach clean, passed close enough to lift the actor's coat hem without touching balance, then peeled away before the ramp.

No lift. No alley turn. Just path, distance, cut.

'Cut,' Terry called. 'Good. Reset.'

The director immediately began talking too much.

'Can we get closer?' he asked, moving towards Miles. 'It looked great, but if we can feel the bike almost take her, that's the image.'

'The point is not actually taking her,' Miles said.

'No, obviously. But emotionally.'

'Emotionally, I prefer my performers not hit.'

Andreja's voice came from the monitor. 'The shot is not improved by enlarging the mistake.'

The director stopped.

Rei had already taken off the helmet. She turned.

Andreja had not raised her voice. She had no need to. The street made room for it. For one brief second, even the generator seemed to lower itself out of courtesy.

The director smiled too quickly. 'Of course. I only mean the image needs more danger.'

'The image has danger,' Andreja said.

'Sometimes the audience needs help feeling it.'

'The audience does not need help being lied to.'

A pause.

Flynn looked at the ground. Not to hide amusement. To keep it off the record.

The director's smile held and suffered. 'We can keep the line as is.'

'Yes,' Andreja said. 'You can.'

Rei watched her a second longer than necessary.

Andreja looked back.

## Andreja

Flynn had told her to attend the shoot because the video was necessary.

Necessary was one of Flynn's more punishing words. It did not mean pleasant, artistically satisfying, morally clean, or likely to improve Andreja's day. It meant the thing had become unavoidable through the combined stupidity of other people and now had to be prevented from becoming expensive in public.

The new single required a visual object. Marketing wanted one. MTV would expect one. The press would use it if given the right shape. People would tear apart every frame whether Andreja helped them or not.

She had refused the first concept.

She had refused the second more thoroughly.

The third had been Flynn's, which was how Andreja knew it would be harder to kill. No conventional performance video. No staged confession. No mirrors, drowning, white dresses, or lingering shots of Andreja looking tragic beside a window. A little performance footage, enough for the public to attach song to body without being allowed to consume her entire face. The rest narrative. A woman mistaken for herself by places built for someone else.

'It is still filming me,' Andreja had said.

'It is filming around you,' Flynn had replied.

‘That distinction is convenient for you.’

‘Yes. That is why I chose it.’

Now Andreja stood on a wet San Francisco street watching a stunt rider prevent Paul Sutter from enlarging a mistake and felt, with irritation, that Flynn might have been right.

Not about the video. The video remained a compromise with public appetite. But about attending. About being present long enough to stop other people from flattening the song into the wrong thing.

Paul had used the word *raw* three times before ten in the morning. Andreja had mistrusted him on the first use and fully disliked him by the third. He seemed to believe honesty could be manufactured from poor light and women running from things.

The exchange with Rei should have ended when Paul agreed to keep the line. The ramp was correct. The schedule could continue its slow collapse towards lunch. Andreja could return her attention to the monitor and pretend the woman beside the motorcycle had not altered the pressure of the morning.

Instead Paul said, ‘Let’s go to seventy. Maybe a little air.’

Miles looked to Rei.

‘Seventy is fine,’ she said.

‘It stops being rehearsal at seventy.’

‘Yes.’

‘The tyres are still cold.’

‘Yes.’

‘You are irritatingly calm.’

‘That does not affect friction.’

‘It affects my blood pressure.’

Rei put the helmet back on before he could continue.

‘You are staring,’ Flynn said.

‘At the ramp.’

‘No, girl. You were staring at the stunt rider. You are now using the ramp as legal cover.’

Andreja did not turn. ‘That is ungenerous.’

‘It is accurate.’

‘She was right about the ramp.’

‘She was.’

‘And the director was not.’

‘That is not the section of the argument I am questioning.’

Andreja folded her arms inside the coat and watched Rei Kuromori move back to the start mark.

The name had been on the call sheet. Flynn had marked it in the margin because Flynn marked anything that might later matter. Stunt double, motorcycle work, fall sequence, maybe fight beat if time permitted. Twenty-three. Recommended by Miles Kade. Hard to book. No public profile worth speaking of. Excellent internal reputation.

Andreja had not expected the woman attached to the line.

The first thing was scale, because sets made bodies into measures. Rei was smaller than expected for someone treated with that kind of practical respect. Compact rather than slight. Lean through the shoulders, all economy. Short black hair darkened by fog. Eyes too light for the rest of her face until they were not. Black leather jacket cut close to the body. Not costume. Clothing that had entered the day with her and would leave with her once the shoot, the single, and every clipboard in sight had finished making demands.

The second thing was attention.

Rei read the street as if the street had agreed to be readable. No display. No visible urgency. The whole set entered her and came back out as consequence.

Andreja knew something about consequence.

The music began again from the speakers, thin through the street system, and she disliked hearing it there. Songs were not children. She had never liked that sentimental comparison. They did not need protection from weather or bad rooms. They did, however, suffer misuse, and this one was still too new to have built any defence.

*Available Light* had not yet been released. Almost no one outside the necessary circle had heard it. Flynn. The engineer. Two string players whose discretion had been secured in advance and confirmed by temperament. A mastering room in Los Angeles where a silver-haired man had listened once and then, to his credit, said nothing for several minutes.

Now it moved through rented speakers on a wet street while Paul prepared to ask the shot for more.

Andreja felt an internal door begin to close.

Then Rei moved.

Not on the rehearsal pass. That had been competent, clean, readable. This was the seventy per cent pass, when the motorcycle entered the street with enough speed for consequence to become visible.

The actor ran. Rei came in faster, closer to the feeling the director wanted without moving one inch closer to the actor. The bike crossed frame, front wheel lifting over the ramp, rear wheel landing

just past the stain, the first edge of a slide corrected before the camera could admire it. The alley opened and she took it low, engine throwing itself between brick and metal doors, then braked behind the set wall where the crash mats waited unused.

Andreja followed the movement before she knew she was doing so. Not detail by detail. Her attention went with Rei into the alley and did not return until the engine dropped behind the wall.

The shot stopped lying.

Not because it had become spectacular. Spectacle was cheap. Paul had been trying to buy it all morning with other people's bones. It became honest because the movement did not beg for admiration. It did not ask the frame to celebrate danger. It simply chose a path through it.

Flynn stopped writing.

'She changes the clip,' Flynn said.

Andreja disliked the relief she felt at Flynn noticing first. 'Yes.'

'Not by face.'

'No.'

'By movement.'

'Yes.'

Flynn closed the notebook and looked closely at Andreja. 'Useful. Potentially inconvenient.'

'Those categories overlap in your life.'

Andreja made herself turn back to the monitor, to Paul speaking to Miles, to Lena Stone adjusting her coat under wardrobe's hand. Lena was not bad. That mattered.

But when Rei moved, the clip came closer to the song.

Andreja crossed the street before she had finished deciding whether this was wise.

Flynn did not stop her. That was either mercy or field research.

## Rei

She killed the engine.

Miles came down the alley shaking his head. 'You absolute menace.'

'You asked for seventy.'

'I asked for seventy. You gave me seventy and a half with attitude.'

'The slide was controlled.'

'I noticed. I briefly saw my future become paperwork.'

She unfastened the helmet. 'The camera drifted.'

Miles turned and shouted, 'Camera drifted. Tell Dave if he does it again Rei's going to correct him with physics.'

From the street, Dave shouted something unprintable.

Rei got off the bike and rolled it back. She knew, before thought fully arranged itself, that Andreja had not stopped watching.

The fog thickened slightly. The city beyond the blocked street seemed to have gone elsewhere. Crew moved with cables and coffee and clipped urgency. Someone had started arguing with the generator. The song fragment kept cycling in short pieces as sound checked playback against the street. It should have become irritating through repetition.

It did not.

Rei found herself listening for the breath before the first line.

At reset, the actor came over in the coat and boots meant for the shot. Her name was Lena Stone. Rei had met her briefly that morning. She had the particular set face of someone trying to be decent to the person doing the dangerous version for her without admitting how relieved she was not to be doing it herself.

'That was insane,' Lena said.

'No.'

Lena blinked. 'No?'

'It was planned.'

'I mean planned insanity.'

'Then it was not insanity.'

Lena laughed because she thought Rei was joking. That was acceptable. Most people reached the right place eventually.

'I'm supposed to ask if I can watch the monitor,' Lena said. 'That's allowed, right?'

'That is not my department.'

'You're very reassuring.'

'I am not attempting to be.'

Lena laughed again and went towards the monitor.

Rei checked the bike controls, tyre temperature, brake response, and the front edge of the ramp, which had shifted by less than a finger-width and still needed fixing. She crouched to adjust the brace herself.

A shadow fell across the ramp.

'You were right,' Andreja said.

Rei looked up.

At close range, Andreja's public face became less useful as a category. There was copper in her eyes, though not as colour first, more as a change in depth when the light moved. Her coat was dark

wool, expensive in the quiet way. Rain had caught along the shoulders and had not yet been brushed away. She was taller than Rei by enough to notice standing up, not enough for the difference to become the first fact.

'About what?' Rei asked.

Andreja's mouth altered slightly. 'The stunt path.'

'Yes.'

'You implied there were other objections.'

'The vocal entry lands late.'

Andreja went still.

Rei heard the risk half a second after speaking. Musicians were not always pleased when strangers noticed structure before being invited to.

'Not badly,' Rei said. 'Late usefully.'

Andreja held her there for a moment. 'You have heard the song once in fragments while men shouted over it.'

'More than once. It reset.'

'That is not the usual form of listening.'

'No.'

Andreja's gaze moved over her face. Not inspection. Something less tidy.

'What is your name?'

'Rei.'

'I know the name from the call sheet.'

'All right.'

'I was asking you to say it.'

Rei considered the distinction. 'Rei Kuromori.'

Andreja received the name with the same attention she had given the remark about the song. 'Andreja Volkov.'

'I know.'

'Yes,' Andreja said dryly. 'That is often the problem.'

'I know the records,' Rei said. 'Not the problem.'

Andreja did not answer immediately.

Behind them Terry yelled for five minutes. Someone else yelled that five minutes had been said seven minutes ago. Miles started swearing at the ramp brace from the other side of the bike. The generator coughed again and steadied. Andreja remained where she was.

'You ride, fall, and stop directors turning metaphors into injuries.'

'That is incomplete, but acceptable.'

The edge of a smile appeared this time and went.

Rei felt it physically, which was inconvenient.

Andreja looked down at the ramp, the oil stain, the alley mouth.  
'Do you always treat possible death as a timing issue?'

Rei followed the geometry once more. Ramp. Wheel. Brick. Body.  
Camera. Song. Andreja.

'Timing is often where people fail,' she said.

Andreja absorbed that without amusement.

'How reassuring.'

'It was not meant to reassure you.'

'I gathered that.'

There was heat in her now. Not softness. Not approval. Interest  
under discipline.

Rei's phone began ringing again inside the equipment case.

The sound cut between them, thin and precise.

Andreja glanced towards it.

Rei did not move at once.

'That is yours,' Andreja said.

'Yes.'

'You are not going to answer it.'

'No.'

'Why?'

'I am working.'

The almost-smile returned, smaller this time. 'A rare principle.'

Rei's gaze went, briefly, to the shape of Andreja's own phone inside  
the coat pocket. Andreja noticed and became very slightly severe.

'My manager has opinions about reachability,' she said.

'Mine does not.'

'You have a manager?'

'No.'

'That would explain the lack of opinions.'

Rei was still considering whether that was funny when Miles  
called, 'Rei. Last one before lunch. Full pass if you're good.'

She looked at the ramp, then at Andreja. 'I am.'

'Yes,' Andreja said, in a quiet voice. 'I noticed.'

The sentence entered differently from praise. Praise usually struck  
the visible part of the work, the landing, the risk survived, the  
spectacle delivered. This caught the part before spectacle, the  
refusal, the calibration, the correction made before anyone else had  
seen the need.

Rei picked up the helmet.

Andreja stepped back.

Not far.

## Andreja

Flynn appeared beside Andreja before Rei had reached the start mark. She had always had a talent for materialising at the end of a mistake.

‘Well,’ Flynn said.

‘Do not.’

‘I have not yet picked a sentence.’

‘You have picked several. I can feel them queueing.’

Flynn glanced towards Rei, now settling the bike into position.

‘The clip may need more of her.’

‘The clip needs the right amount.’

‘That is not a denial.’

‘It was not meant to be.’

Flynn’s expression gave nothing away. That was how Andreja knew she was entertained. ‘Of course.’

‘Do not make *of course* sound like that.’

‘I used my neutral tone.’

‘You have never possessed one.’

Rei’s final pass began before Flynn could answer.

Full speed was not truly full speed. Andreja understood that by then. It was full enough for the camera, full enough for the body watching, full enough that if anything failed the distance between illusion and consequence would become administrative.

The bike entered the street under the first line of the song. Lena ran. Rei crossed frame and the wet road seemed to give itself over to her for one brief impossible second.

The front wheel lifted.

Not much.

Enough to change the texture of time.

Andreja’s body wanted to move. Uselessly. Forward, perhaps, as if there existed a version of the world in which she could cross thirty feet of wet asphalt and alter physics.

She did not move because she had spent too many years not moving under observation. The skill was not always useful. It held her now while Rei landed, corrected, and took the alley as if the brick walls had been built for her convenience.

The cut came and the crew exhaled properly this time.

Andreja’s hands were cold around the coffee cup.

Flynn wisely said nothing.

## Rei

The final pass was good enough to keep.

Rei knew before playback. The body knew when a thing had landed inside tolerance. Not perfect. Perfect did not exist in wet streets, rented equipment, and directors with emotional ambitions. But usable. Honest. Finished.

The bike had tried to offer more after the ramp and she had refused it. The refusal pleased her in the private way restraint sometimes did when chosen at the correct point.

Miles clapped once when she came out of the alley. 'Enough. Before anyone gets creative.'

'I can do another.'

'I know. That is why I said enough.'

'The tyre temperature is better now.'

'Rei.'

She turned her head.

He looked back with the expression of a man who had once spent forty minutes talking her out of a second stair fall because a director had mistaken gratitude for need. 'Done.'

'All right.'

'That was suspiciously easy.'

'You used the right word.'

'Done?'

'Yes.'

Miles smiled despite himself and turned away to defend the take from anyone who had not earned an opinion.

Rei rolled the bike back, shut it down, and rested one hand on the tank until the engine heat steadied under the glove. The street expanded around her again: crew noise, damp air, generator, coffee, wet wool, playback starting and stopping, someone laughing too loudly near craft services.

Her phone had stopped.

She checked because ignoring a call did not mean discarding information. The number had tried twice. No message. She knew three people who used that pattern and none of them were urgent until they called a third time.

She put the phone away.

'Still elsewhere?' the production assistant asked, hovering a little too close to the case.

Rei closed it. 'Yes.'

'That's cool.'

'It is mostly inconvenient.'

'Still cool.'

Rei considered. 'Sometimes.'

The assistant left looking unreasonably satisfied.

At the monitors, Paul replayed the pass. Rei did not usually watch unless asked. Watching herself work was useful only for correction, and correction came more efficiently from Miles, who would tell her if a shoulder had opened too soon or a mark needed cheating.

This time the song ran under the image, and Andreja was watching the monitor.

Rei walked over.

No one stopped her. That was one of the few advantages of being crew. Invisibility had doors.

The monitor looked better than the street had felt. Fog softened the shopfronts. Wet road threw light up under the bike. Lena's turn read as fear, perhaps too much of it, but the cut would help. Rei entered frame like an interruption the song had already made room for. The lift barely registered as stunt. It looked instead as if the street had failed to hold her.

Andreja stood with her arms folded, face unreadable to anyone who preferred simple categories.

Flynn stood beside her, notebook closed.

Paul said, 'That's the one.'

Miles said, 'Yes, because it's the last one.'

'No, I mean it's beautiful.'

Andreja said quietly, 'It is not beautiful.'

Paul looked injured.

Andreja did not appear to notice. 'It is right.'

Flynn glanced at Rei, waiting. Rei nodded once.

Paul tried to recover. 'Right can be beautiful.'

'Yes,' Andreja said. 'But you did not say right.'

Miles made a sound and disguised it badly as a cough.

The playback ran again. This time Rei watched the cut into Andreja's performance footage. Not much of it. A hand at a piano under low light. The edge of a face. A mouth near a microphone but not yielded fully to the camera. Rei had expected the transition to feel like interruption.

It did not.

She turned towards Andreja and found her already looking, her attention almost physical.

Andreja did not look away.

Neither did Rei.

Flynn said, 'Right, lunch people.'

Several of the crew startled as if she had rung a bell.

The set broke apart into the ordinary disorder of food. Paul went to make an urgent call about the schedule. Lena vanished under wardrobe's care.

Andreja moved towards the covered section by the monitors rather than towards catering. Flynn spoke to two crew members, refused something from Terry, accepted something else without changing expression, and somehow made a pocket of space around Andreja while appearing merely to stand there.

Rei took a paper cup of coffee because it was available and because heat was sometimes more useful than flavour. She stood beside the bike rather than under the tent. Fog collected in her hair. Her shoulders had begun to register the cold.

Nothing serious.

A shadow approached.

Flynn Harker stopped beside the bike.

'Rei Kuromori,' she said.

'Yes.'

'Good work this morning.'

'Yes.'

Flynn's mouth shifted. 'That clip may need more of what you're already giving it. Not another stunt. Not more drama for Paul. Just the right amount of movement in the right places.'

Rei held that. 'That is editing.'

'Partly,' Flynn said. 'It may help if you hear the song somewhere it does not have to fight a generator.'

Rei glanced towards the monitor tent. Andreja stood just inside the canvas edge with a paper cup in one hand, apparently watching the street.

Not entirely.

'We're testing the single tomorrow night,' Flynn said. 'Small room. Unannounced. Door list.'

'For the clip,' Rei said.

'For the edit,' Flynn said. Then, after a beat, 'Not only for the edit.'

Rei appreciated the honesty. 'Does Andreja know you are asking?'

'I am not asking yet.'

That, too, was honest enough.

Rei looked once more towards the tent. Then back. 'I would like to hear it.'

'Good.'

Flynn handed her a small white card with a number written in black ink.

‘Call after eight tonight,’ she said. ‘If no one answers, call once and hang up. No message. Do not use Andreja’s name unless they do first.’

Rei took the card. ‘You are also checking whether I can follow instructions.’

‘Obviously.’

‘That part is useful.’

Flynn laughed once. ‘Yes.’

She turned back towards the tent.

Rei stood with the card inside the jacket and the bike cooling beside her. Wet asphalt. Engine heat. Coffee. Fog. From the monitor tent, Andreja’s voice came through the speakers again, reset to the breath before the first line.

This time Rei caught one fragment clearly.

*Not enough light to be known.*

Then the generator swallowed the rest.

## Andreja

Flynn returned with the expression of a woman pretending she had not just moved a piece on the board.

Andreja disliked it on sight.

‘What did you do?’

‘I complimented the stunt rider.’

‘You never only compliment anyone.’

‘That is unfair. I once complimented a bassist in 1992 with no strategic purpose at all.’

‘And what happened?’

‘He joined your touring band six months later, but that was unrelated.’

Andreja closed her eyes briefly. ‘Flynn.’

‘I may invite her to tomorrow night.’

Andreja opened them.

‘The private room.’

‘Yes.’

‘The room I have not yet agreed to play in.’

Flynn looked at her. ‘Girl, you agreed last Tuesday.’

‘I agreed to the idea.’

‘You said, and I quote, if it must happen, keep it small and make sure no one talks.’

‘That is not agreement. That is surrender under pressure.’

‘Most of my work is making your surrender sound like intention.’

Andreja looked past her towards Rei because looking at Flynn had become temporarily unrewarding.

Rei stood by the bike, alone without seeming lonely. One paper cup in hand. Jacket still zipped. Rain dark at the shoulders. Someone passing too close to the motorcycle altered course without Rei needing to look up.

‘She is not a fan,’ Flynn said.

‘I did not ask.’

‘No. You arranged not to ask so thoroughly I thought I would answer anyway.’

Andreja’s mouth tightened.

Flynn softened by an amount most people would not have recognised as softness. ‘She knows the work. Not the costume around it.’

‘I noticed.’

‘Yes,’ Flynn said. ‘I noticed you noticing.’

Andreja said nothing.

The song began again through the speakers, reset to the breath before the first line. The engineer had left playback running low while people ate, which Andreja found offensive in principle and useful in practice. Street noise did not drown the song so much as change the pressure around it.

She heard the late entry now because Rei had named it. She had always known it. She had put it there. The difficulty was hearing a near-stranger catch the shape of it through rain, generators, and shouted instructions, and knowing near no longer felt entirely accurate.

At close range, Rei’s eyes had been worse. Too direct and too free of the ordinary little performances people made around Andreja. No hunger, no claim, no shine of admiration requiring management. Rei had looked at her as if Andreja had entered the available facts and would either remain there honestly or not at all.

Her public life had taught her the usual kinds of attention. Admiration shone. Professional interest weighed. Journalists bit. Fans either kept a careful distance or mistook intensity for intimacy. Industry counted money while pretending not to.

Rei’s attention did not belong neatly to any of them.

Andreja could feel herself being registered, but not consumed, not converted, not placed inside a story Rei had brought with her.

That should have made the encounter easier. It did not.

'What did she say?' Andreja asked.

'About the invitation?'

'About anything?'

'She asked whether you knew I was doing it.'

Andreja turned her head.

Flynn's face became almost aggressively neutral.

'And you said?'

'That I was not doing it yet.'

'Flynn.'

'She accepted the distinction.'

'She would.'

'You say that as if you know her.'

Andreja inhaled to object and found the objection badly assembled. She did not know Rei. She knew several minutes of work, a handful of sentences, one path across wet asphalt, and the fact that Rei had not once attempted to handle her. She knew that Rei's attention did not enter greedily. She knew that when Rei had said *I know the records, not the problem*, something in Andreja had stepped forward before being asked.

This was not knowledge.

It was also not nothing.

'I know the shape of the distinction,' she said.

Flynn accepted that, which was worse than argument. 'So does she.'

Lunch overran by fourteen minutes because Paul wanted to discuss the afternoon platform sequence with three people who knew more than he did and one person whose job appeared to consist of saying *energy* in places where engineering might have been more useful.

Andreja remained near the monitor tent and did not eat. Flynn handed her coffee at some point. Better than the catering version because Flynn believed suffering should have limits.

She drank half of it and watched Rei move through lunch without making any attempt to possess it. Not aloof. Not excluded either. Crew came to her. She answered. Miles sat on an equipment case near her and pointed at a diagram. Rei corrected something with one finger. Lena approached and asked a question that drew Rei's brows together briefly before she answered. The production assistant with the clipboard came back once and held out a packet. Rei looked at it, then at him, and accepted one piece, which seemed to please him beyond reason.

'Fruit leather,' Flynn said.

‘What?’

‘That is what he gave her. You were studying the exchange.’

‘I was not.’

‘You were.’

Andreja drank more coffee. ‘Your usefulness is intermittent.’

‘And yet essential.’

‘Unfortunately.’

Flynn smiled into her own cup.

Across the street Rei ate the fruit leather with the same seriousness she appeared to bring to everything else. Andreja turned away before desire became visible enough to require management. She still had several hours of public body left to survive.

The afternoon platform fall sequence was meant to be smaller.

Andreja had learned that this usually meant worse.

It was not truly a roof. It was the second-level fire escape and loading platform behind the club, reached by a narrow interior stair that smelled of wet timber, old beer and electrical dust. The shot required Lena’s character to run up the stairs, cross the platform and reach a door that would not open. In the finished clip, this would cut to the suggestion of a fall rather than a literal plunge. A stumble, a body losing purchase, hand against rail, camera whip, black.

The actual stunt required Rei to take the slip onto a pad just below frame, twist through shoulder and hip, and stop hard against the lower rail where the camera would catch only the violence of interruption.

Paul called it emotional collapse.

Miles called it a controlled low fall with bad rail proximity.

Rei said, ‘The second description is more useful.’

Andreja heard this because she had followed the crew through the alley on the grounds that the footage involved her song and was therefore her concern.

Flynn did not challenge this, which meant Flynn had already understood it was both true and incomplete.

The platform was slick. Even Paul, after touching the rail and examining his own damp fingers as if weather had betrayed him personally, conceded that the surface needed prep. The grips laid texture strips along the hidden side. Miles checked the pad placement again. Rei walked the route once in her boots, once in the softer shoes matched to Lena’s costume, then stood at the far corner and looked down.

She did not look excited.

That should have reassured Andreja. It did not.

Rei came down the stairs after blocking and passed close enough for Andreja to see a thin line of water along her jaw. Not sweat. Fog gathered there. She carried the fall shoes in one hand and her own boots in the other. Her socks were damp at the toes. For one second she looked younger. Not innocent. Only less armoured by the bike, the helmet, the clear mechanical argument of the morning.

Andreja should not have spoken.

'Is the rail necessary?'

Rei stopped. 'For the shot?'

'For your body.'

Rei looked once towards the platform, then back. 'The rail is not the dangerous part.'

'That does not answer the question.'

'No,' Rei said. 'It answers the more relevant one.'

Andreja folded her arms. 'You do this often.'

'Fall?'

'Replace a question with one you prefer.'

'It is usually faster.'

'Faster is not the only available measure.'

Rei looked at her with that same direct attention. 'No,' she said. 'It is only the one they pay me for.'

The answer should have sounded flippant. It did not. Too accurate. No self-pity in it. No performance of toughness either. Only the fact of a body whose risk had been made billable by people standing safely below.

Andreja had written songs about substitution. She had not expected the day to hand her so literal an answer.

'I dislike that,' she said.

Rei's face altered slightly. 'The fall?'

'The sentence.'

Andreja's phone rang inside the coat.

She shut her eyes for one second.

Rei said nothing.

The phone rang again.

'That will be Flynn,' Andreja said.

'She is thirty feet away.'

'Yes.'

'Does the phone improve that?'

'No. It makes her point more expensive.'

Rei's mouth changed before she stopped it.

Andreja saw. 'You are laughing at me.'

'No.'

'You nearly were.'

'I was laughing at the structure.'

'That is worse.'

The phone stopped.

Across the alley Flynn stood with her own phone in hand and a level of weaponised patience that should have been illegal.

Andreja did not look back.

'She believes I have been unsupervised too long,' she said.

'Have you?'

'Almost certainly.'

Rei nodded. 'Then the method is inefficient, but not inaccurate.'

Andreja stared for half a second and then laughed.

Not loudly. Not far. Once, low and unwilling. Enough to surprise her more than anyone else.

'I dislike you,' she said.

'No.'

Andreja's attention changed at once.

Rei seemed to know it the moment the word left her. The no had been too direct, too exact.

For one second neither of them rescued the conversation.

Andreja's gaze dropped to Rei's mouth. She did not move until Miles called from above. 'Rei, we're ready.'

Rei did not move immediately. 'I will not hit the rail with my head.'

'I did not ask.'

'No,' Rei said. 'But you wanted to.'

Andreja held her gaze.

'Then do not,' she said.

Rei nodded once, as if this were a usable instruction, and went back up the stairs.

The fall took three rehearsals and one take.

Andreja hated all four.

On the take, Rei ran. The slip happened at the mark but did not look marked. Her hand struck the rail, her body turned, shoulder taking the fall before hip. She hit the pad below frame with a sound Andreja felt behind her teeth, rolled hard, and came up against the lower rail with one arm extended through the gap.

The camera held.

For a fraction of a second, Rei's face turned towards the lens.

Not Lena's face. Not meant for the clip, probably. Too much of Rei. Wet hair against her forehead, eyes bright and unreadable, mouth open on breath rather than performance.

Then Miles stepped into frame, the take was cut and half the alley moved at once. Andreja stayed where she was.

The playback confirmed what she had already felt. The footage was not merely good. It was right.

The hand through the rail gave the image its first truly unbearable moment: not a woman collapsing, not a woman being hunted, but a person caught for one second between being seen and being used.

‘The camera sees too much of her face,’ Andreja said.

Paul blinked. ‘We can cut around that.’

‘No.’

Flynn looked at her.

Andreja kept her eyes on the monitor. ‘Not around it. Use less before. Let that be the only clear moment.’

‘The only clear moment of the double?’ Paul said.

Andreja looked at him.

He appeared to discover, belatedly, that the word had become unsafe terrain.

‘The only clear moment,’ she said.

Across the alley, Rei was watching her again.

This time Andreja knew enough not to pretend the attention had landed elsewhere.

## **Rei**

The day ended after dark, as days on sets often did after promising not to.

The street had become wet enough to hold every light twice. Crew moved through reflections, breaking down stands, coiling cable, carrying folded mats and apple boxes back into trucks. The fog had finally admitted it was close to rain, though the rain still had the manners not to arrive properly. Beyond the permit boundary the city had returned to its own life.

Rei signed the stunt log, returned the matched costume pieces, checked the bike, checked the bruising at her shoulder, checked her phone.

Three calls now.

That changed the category.

She stepped into the partial shelter beside the grip truck, angled away from the wind, and returned the call. Weak signal, then steadier after she shifted one pace to the left.

A man answered. She listened.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Not tonight.’

He spoke again.  
'I know what it is.'

A pause.

'No. Tell Sato the simulation data can wait forty-eight hours. If it cannot, he can send it to Edwards and let them discover the same fault more slowly.'

Another pause, longer.

Through the gap beside the truck, she saw Andreja standing by the monitor while Flynn spoke to Paul. Andreja's expression had returned to its public arrangement, but one hand had closed around the paper cup hard enough to deform the cardboard.

Rei turned her attention back to the call.

'No,' she said. 'That is unrelated.'

The man laughed on the other end. Rei declined to assist him.

'Tell him to call me tomorrow,' she said, and ended it.

When she turned, Andreja was there.

Not close enough to make it a performance. Not accidentally either.

'That sounded like an argument.'

'It was an instruction.'

'Those are often mistaken for one another.'

'Not by the person receiving it.'

Andreja's mouth shifted again at the edge. Rei was beginning to classify this as a difficulty with no obvious solution.

'You are needed elsewhere?' Andreja asked.

'Not tonight.'

'That was not exactly the question.'

'No,' Rei said. 'But it is the part that changes the day.'

'And the part that does not?'

Rei slid the phone back into the case. 'A risk-assessment contract. Flight simulation data. They found something late and want me to confirm the fault.'

'They?'

'Yes.'

Andreja accepted the boundary in the pronoun. Rei liked that immediately.

'Will you?'

'Confirm it?'

'Yes.'

'Probably.'

'But not tonight.'

'No.'

'Because you are working.'

'Yes.'

Andreja's gaze dipped briefly towards Rei's shoulder, not to the injured place exactly, but close enough. 'And because you have done enough work for one day?'

'No.'

'I see.'

A crew member came too near the truck, saw them both, muttered an apology to no one in particular and took a wider route. Neither moved for him.

Andreja's attention dropped once more, not to the phone case this time, not to the shoulder.

To Rei's hands.

'Are you going to call the number?' she asked.

'The one Flynn gave me?'

'Yes.'

'If I say yes, does that count as improper access to your manager's methods?'

Andreja's mouth altered properly this time, brief and real. 'No. It only confirms you noticed there were methods.'

'There are always methods.'

'With Flynn there are systems.'

'Yes.'

'And with you?'

Rei considered this. 'Mostly routes.'

Andreja held the word for a moment. 'And which do you use for people?'

'Neither, usually.'

'Usually?'

Rei looked at her. 'You are making the distinction less useful.'

Andreja's face changed. More alert than either of them had any use for.

'Yes,' she said quietly. 'I thought I might be.'

Flynn appeared in the middle distance and did not call this time. She simply looked at them with the expression of a woman who could wait because the waiting itself was data.

Andreja noticed her at once.

'Flynn,' Rei said.

'Yes.'

'She is patient when she thinks patience will cost someone more.'

'That is one of her sweeter qualities.'

Rei's attention went, despite herself, to the edge of Andreja's mouth again.

Andreja saw.

'Go home,' she said.

Rei looked at her.

'To your route,' Andreja added. 'Before Flynn begins treating this as an experiment she can supervise in person.'

Rei considered the bike, the phone, the card inside the jacket, the weak ache already beginning to spread through the shoulder.

Then she said, 'All right.'

Before the silence could become the wrong sort of caution, she asked, 'If I call after eight, and someone answers, what am I meant to say?'

Andreja's gaze flicked once towards Flynn, then back. 'You are asking me to betray my own gatekeeping.'

'Yes.'

She gave one brief laugh through her nose. 'Say your name.'

'That is all?'

'If they are competent, yes.'

Rei accepted that. 'All right.'

Andreja studied her face for one more beat, as if deciding whether to leave the moment there.

She did not.

'If Flynn gives you the address,' she said, 'come.'

'I will,' she said.

'Good night, Rei Kuromori,' Andreja said.

The full name landed with more force than it should have. Perhaps because Andreja had asked for it earlier and was now giving it back as if she had kept hold of it all afternoon.

'Good night, Andreja Volkov.'

Andreja stayed where she was a moment longer than required.

Then she stepped away.

Rei put on the helmet before her expression could become visible enough for the crew to use. The visor lowered the world into wet light and dark shapes. She started the bike. The engine answered at once, heat moving up through cold air, familiar and clean.

Andreja remained in the near-rain until Flynn reached her with an umbrella she did not open quickly enough.

Rei pulled away from the kerb.

At the corner she checked the mirror.

Andreja was still there.

This time Rei let herself smile where no one could see it.

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San Francisco, 1997.

Stunt rider Rei Kuromori is used to leaving before anything can become permanent. Musician Andreja Volkov has built a life around controlling what the world is allowed to know about her.

When a film shoot brings them together, attraction becomes intimacy, and intimacy becomes something harder to keep separate from the machinery of fame, work and public attention.

*Velocity* is a romantic suspense novel about risk, privacy, movement, and two women learning that staying does not have to mean surrender.

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