

A Patten  
Securities  
Suds & Sam  
Spinoff

# wheels

STELLA MARIE ALDEN

# Wheels

By Stella Marie Alden

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## Author Notes

Hi Dear Readers!

I fell in love with Wheels when writing 'Two Birds, One Stone'. When I explained he needed a good woman, he argued and refused to hear me out. As his creator, I insisted on having the final word, so to speak, and thus, this story was written. I'd like to say he was willing, but he kicked and balked the whole time, refusing to cooperate.

For some, love don't come easy.

I hope you enjoy this next book in the Patten, Suds and Sam, series.

Thanks for downloading and until next time, ciao!

Love,

Stella

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## Prologue

“I’m only going to say this once, so listen up. It’s Evergreen N  
Y C U. Two-hundred-five-ninety-nine. Did you get that? Do  
not forget it.”

# Chapter 1

Wesley Murphy, aka Wheels

“Who the hell has a company party on a Wednesday night?” Busy attaching my prosthetic foot, the dark eyes in the bathroom mirror narrow.

Grumbling, I put weight on my bum side and break out in a grin. Holy shit. The new prototype skate fits like a glove. Smiling, my reflection almost seems approachable.

*Hell yeah, bring on the ice, baby.* My heart racing, I button up my navy pea coat which hides the caroling rats on my ugly sweater. It may not win the contest, but the Dean Martin rodent cracks me up.

With a final deep breath, I steady my nerves. I’ve faced down insurgents with two-to-one odds. I can do this.

*Damn it. Put your head in the game, soldier.* When the firm chin, covered in dark stubble nods back, I give him an atta-boy. Then, stashing my regular leg in a locker, I clump out of the restroom and stroll to the ice as if I’d been doing it my whole life.

Like many of my coworkers, I take a few tentative glides to get my ankles used to the pressure. Enthused, I bend my knees, race around the circle, and spin to a stop, breathing heavy.

*Oh my God, this is fucking awesome.* Over my head, the Rockefeller tree twinkles with thousands of colored lights. Under it, the bronze Prometheus falls with his hands outstretched. Like parachuting out of a plane, my heart thumps with pure adrenaline as I skate across the ice.

I owe the para-athlete I met in Wisconsin. If I hadn’t seen his YouTube video, I’d be sitting this night out at the bar, feeling sorry for myself.



That was the old me. After my last surgery, I promised to be a better man, and well, here I am.

Smug in my abilities, I glide over to Suds and slap him on the back. Without a doubt, my southern bro has never put blade to ice.

Struggling to remain upright, he grabs the rail, and once he steadies, his eyes go wide as he stares at my left foot. “What the hell? Wheels, you sneaky bastard, did you grow a limb?”

“This prosthetic is incredible. I might even join a hockey league... Whoa there pal.” I grab his arm before he falls on his ass.

“Am I interrupting?” His gorgeous wife chuckles, retrieves her phone from a pocket, and glances my way. “Rose just arrived. Do you have her ticket?”

Oh shit. I almost forgot I promised my plus-one to her cousin. “Yeah. Tell her I’ll be right over. Wait. What does she look like?”

Suds dark eyes widen. “She’s your date and you didn’t check her out?”

*Hell no, she’s not my anything.* My mouth drops open and not wanting to be rude, say nothing.

Thankfully, his partner Sam, comes to my rescue. “Babe, remember? Rose begged Mia to find her an unused ticket. Wesley here, was gracious enough to share his.”

The pretty private detective pats my arm, leans in, and brushes her cool lips over my cheek. “You are very sweet.”

“No kissing my damn wife.” Suds pulls her away, topples back, and as he falls, I laugh so hard, I wobble and almost join him.

Seeing an opportunity, he kicks my blade, but I grew up on ice and easily back out of his reach.

“Boys, boys. Stop.” Sam points to a curvy woman with shoulder-length dark hair, a striking contrast to her bright crimson jacket.

“There she is now. Be good, you two. Wheels, I’ll let her know you’re here.”

Once she glides away, I stretch out my hand and help my friend stand. As I do, a long-forgotten warmth hits my chest. I can’t quite define the pull on my heart strings. I guess I never believed I’d ever again be physically on par with a brother SEAL. I’d forgotten what it was like.

“Be right back.” Leaving my pal clinging to a pole, I twist backwards and show off. A couple circles around the rink later, I skate to Sam, talking with the woman in red. When her cousin turns, I’m so damn surprised, my toe misses the ice and I hit the fence.

Huge brown eyes taser me with laser precision. Long lashes widen under perfectly sculpted brows. Lush lips made for kissing smile and the tops of her cheeks blush.

“Is that him?” The question is directed to Sam, but her gaze locks on mine.

I nod, afraid my voice will squeak which is fucking ridiculous because my balls dropped over twenty years ago. Eventually, a few synapses fire and I open my jacket to grab her ticket out of my inner pocket.

As my sweater bursts into a chorus of Jingle Rats, her snicker comes out more of a snort. “Oh my God. Those are awesome.”

The ice broken, so to speak, I hand her a party invitation. “I’ll swing around and meet you at the entrance.”

“You don’t have to. I’ll be fine. Thanks.” Her words may want me to go, but those gorgeous eyes lock onto my lips and I’m sure those dark centers mean stay.

Hell, I’m not letting this opportunity pass me by. “It’s no problem at all. Besides, I should be there in case, you know... someone gives you grief about not arriving with your date.”

*You are so lame dude.* A few in line chuckle as I kick myself for not looking her up on social media. At least I wouldn’t have been blind-sided. I met her sister, Mia. She and

Sam are both knockouts. It shouldn't've surprised me she is every bit as pretty.

Climbing off the ice, I find her chatting with the famous inventor of the artificial intelligence used by our company.

My dark-haired plus-one steps back to include me in her circle. "Dr. Jones, have you met Wheels?"

I hold out a hand. "I know of your work. A pleasure to meet you. I'm Wesley Murphy, of Patten Securities."

"This is my husband, Detective Colin O'Brien." The genius beams at the man with striking blue eyes, standing beside her.

He glances down at my prosthetic but doesn't call it out which I appreciate and will thank him later with a beer.

With introductions finished, Rose shoves the cell phone she's been holding, under my nose. "Jenna was just telling me about her latest innovation. She added a female interface to her AI program, Jasonelle."

A meme with thick glasses and a white button-down blouse blinks out at me and as I picture working with it, words fail me.

Dr. Jones laughs. "I'm still not sure if she's marketable. That being said, some industries prefer interacting with a woman. Let me know if you want to be a guinea pig. I'm looking for volunteers."

"Will do." As I pocket her outstretched card, Rose does, too.

"So, how're things at the *Joint* Task Force?" I pretend to inhale a big spliff of weed. "You guys need a better name."

O'Brien quirks an eyebrow, not amused or maybe not getting my joke. "FBI's been swamped. Why not join up? We could use another former operative. I'd put in a good word for you."

"Patten keeps me pretty busy. Appreciate the offer, though." I wonder if he's forgotten I got my foot blown off. For a moment, a too-familiar dark cloud dampens my mood.

Rose probably thinks she's the cause of the shift. "You don't need to babysit me. I know almost everyone here."

*Yup, I'm an ass.* Because I didn't want to be stuck with a blind date, I made a point of explaining to Sam how her cousin shouldn't expect me to be her companion for the evening. To be fair, I made that decision before I ordered the miraculous appendage. Now, I'm raring to take on the world. For one night, I'd love a pretty woman on my arm who has no idea I'm damaged goods.

"Listen, I'm sorry. Up until a few weeks ago, I didn't know if I'd be able to skate. I didn't want to ruin your good time." It's almost the truth. Close enough.

"I would've been fine inside. I haven't done this in years, either." When she smiles at me, my stupid heart stutters.

On the ice, she attempts a few timid, ankle-wobbling glides and sighs. "I don't think—"

"Let me help." Moving backwards, I offer my hands.

"You don't have to. I mean it." As her mittened fingers rest in mine, my thoughts wander to white picket fences, kids and dogs.

Dammit. It's been years since a woman got under my skin. I have sex. I don't do relationships.

As if reading my mind, Hands and my not-a-date's sister skate toward us. For the longest time, Suds and Sam referred to her as Saint Mia. Judging from the couple's body language, I'm sure the nickname no longer applies.

"How's it going, Wheels?" My friend tugs me aside, leaving the two women alone to conspire and giggle.

"What the fuck are you up to?" He shoves my chest and I hold up my arms as if under arrest.

"Nothing, dude. I'm skating."

He scowls. "Do not sleep with her."

"Is this the pot calling the kettle black?" I raise my brows, daring him to deny he's fucking my date's sister."

“It’s different. I’m in love, dickhead.”

“Sorry to hear that. I think there’s pills you can-”

“I’m not kidding. Rose is going to be my sister-in-law someday and I know how you are. I don’t want you hurting her. She’s not your type, anyhow.”

Ouch. His barb hits home. In truth, a busty brunette with thick lips and hair I can wrap around my fist is exactly my kind of woman, but good friends are harder to find than a night of bliss. If not for my pals at Patten Securities, I’d be living in a cardboard box wallowing in a bottle of cheap whiskey.

“Unlike you, my handsy friend, I do not sleep with good girls.” I miss his response as he skates out of sight. *Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night.*

We skate for a while and I let my partner fall, just once. Then, I lift her up under her arms and drag her up my body. My cock applauds my bold move and thickens. Apparently, he did not heed my pal’s warning and is chomping at the bit. I tuck her chin, stop, and inhale. Her hair smells of lavender, her body of another flower, but it’s her musk that shoots to my core.

Once upon a time I studied biology. All living beings, from the smallest virus to the giant redwoods, reproduce. Mammals make pheromones. Large breasts and thick lips are nature’s way of reminding me of a clitoris.

Bada bing, bada boom. The species survives.

Thank God, I respect science. Otherwise, I’d fall hard and fast for this curvaceous Venus in my arms. Lovey-dovey shit is fine for others but not for the likes of me. Like an itch, if I need sex, I scratch. Too bad the hives she creates in my libido is off limits.

Unaware of how I’ve been warned off, Rose points to the door leading to a warmer climate. “Want to get a drink? I think I’m done skating for the evening.”

I nod. “Order up, I’ll be right back.”

In the bathroom, I swap prosthetic legs, put the expensive prototype in my gym bag, and check myself in the mirror. My hand rakes through my short dark hair, sticking it up, making me more badass. Most women desire this part-Italian, part Irish, part-mutt exterior. The inner demons, I keep well hidden.

By the time I arrive at the bar, she has a beer waiting. We clink bottles, find a table, and park ourselves on tall stools.

Red fingernails wrap around her brew and with a shaking hand, she brings the amber glass to her lips. “Umm... So... You work with my sister’s boyfriend.”

“Yeah. Since last summer.” I don’t want her nervous around me, so I shoot her a smile and she returns it with a shy one of her own.

“Ex-military?”

“Mmm-hmm.” I finish my drink. “Want another?”

Looking around for her friends, she must spot someone because she relaxes back and nods. “Sure.”

When I return with another round, I point out the buffet table. “Are you hungry?”

After loading up our plates, we begin to eat, and as the conversation comes to a halt, I realize my dating skills suck wind.

*Say something, you fucking moron.* “Ah, you live around here?”

She laughs. “The same apartment building as Suds and Sam. Mia and I rent the floor below.”

“Right, Your famous sainted sister.” When I roll my eyes, she giggles and points at a woman whose face is being eaten by my pal.

“Recently, I’ve had the place to myself.”

*Is that an invitation? My cock thinks so.* “Are you saying you’re sleeping alone tonight?”

“Mmm-hmm.” As she eyes my lips and licks hers, I shift on my seat to release the pressure in my pants.

Oh fuck me. What harm could there be in a small taste? I lean in but leave the last inch for her, in case I read her wrong.

She stands on the rung of the stool, leans on her elbows, and connects. A buddy of mine was once stung by two-hundred-and-twenty volts. He had to be pried off with a two-by-four or would've died.

What's happening inside my head is much the same. I can't move, except for my mouth which operates fine. The kiss goes on for hours, minutes, or seconds. I'm not sure, but when we stop, I fall into a cheesy movie where everyone in the background disappears. The music fades, my heart pounds in my ears, and my joystick crams against my fly.

Holy balls. I am so screwed.

I can tell by her reindeer in the headlight look, she wasn't expecting electricity, either. I mentally count our drinks. We haven't even finished our second brewski so whatever is going on is not alcohol induced. It's those goddamn pheromones. Again, with the survival of the species. It's biology class one-oh-one.

Hell, I need to get out of here before I do something incredibly stupid, like take her home and bang her senseless. I look down at my phone, grab my stuff, and shake my head.

"I'm really sorry. I need to take this call." I pretend like I'm having a life and death conversation and walk away, leaving her alone at the table.

Clutching my gym bag has become my lifeline. Other people will return their skates, but I will carry home my leg and foot. The physical deficiencies are the easiest part of me to deal with. The psychological ones would scare the shit out of her.

No woman deserves me.

To make sure she understands we are not a thing, I sit down with my buddies and share a few drinks while she watches. Hopefully, my asshole move will erase the look in her eyes, the one that haunts me through the rest of the evening, in my dreams, and hardens my morning wood.

*Merry Fucking Christmas, you dipshit dumbass moron.*



## Chapter 2

Rose Morelli

Having been dumped the evening before, I wallow in self-pity and pour a second glass of wine. What kind of name is Wheels, anyhow? He sounds like a getaway driver. Well, he bolted out of my night, that's for sure.

I probably wasn't pretty enough or sexy enough or young enough or... Fuck men. Damn them all to hell. I wish to God I enjoyed sex with women because they wouldn't be such complete and total jerks. It may or may not be true, but the thought cheers me up.

I converse with the only male I can tolerate, my toddler nephew, sitting in my lap. "Mikey, promise me you will never grow up to be a jack-apple."

"Ja-pa-pa." His brows furrow and a hazmat-worthy stench accompanies his grunt.

"Seriously, little dude? I thought we were friends?" Jumping up, I hold him away from my body, and shout up the stairs. "Sam, your son just exploded."

"Bring him up, I'll change him."

With him outstretched, I walk him up to the former attic. In the kitchen, I hand over the poopy baby.

As she walks him down the hall, I help myself to another glass of wine.

"When are you going to tell me what happened last night?" Because she calls out from the bedroom, she can't see me cringe.

"I already told you. We're not talking about it." *I'm sure she knows. Why rub salt in the wound?*

"I saw you skating together. I thought you were hitting it off."

“We were. Then, we kissed.” I relive the humiliation and clunk my head on the table.

“And...?”

Let’s just say he was a complete D I C K.” I wander to the changing station and hold my nose. “God almighty, what are you feeding him?”

“Don’t blame me. His father made his dinner.” She grabs his ankles, removes the diaper, folds it, and tosses it in the nearby waste basket.

“Figures he’d leave you to clean up the mess.” I pull a hundred or so wet wipes and start shoving them at her.

“Wow. Not fair. Suds is one of the good ones.”

“Sorry. And you’re right. I’m down on all men. Do you think I had bad breath? Stinky arm pits?” I reach an elbow into the air, dip my chin and sniff. It seems okay.

“Maybe my kisses were sloppy? Oh my God, I have no idea what I did wrong. You have to ask Suds why Wheels ran off.”

“You know those guys don’t kiss and tell.” Finished cleaning her son, she sprinkles sweet smelling baby powder which almost masks the stomach-churning stench wafting from the container.

“Fine. I’m going to adopt a dozen cats, dye my hair blue, and crochet dainty white doilies and decorate all of your armchairs.”

She expertly slides a diaper onto her son and tapes it shut. “I doubt you can even find patterns and string.”

“Bet I can. I’m going to search Google right now. “As I wander to her computer. I squat to pat Katrina, purring madly by the heater.

So cute, she jumps on the swivel chair and lifts her chin for scratches. As I do, she wriggles onto the table and rolls around on the keyboard.

An image of a Smart Sissy doll pops up along with a message. ‘Congratulations. Enter in the next sixty seconds to receive your free gift.’

Sam’s been trying to get her hands on this smart-toy for months. Before she loses her opportunity, I type in my email and hit send.

A Zoom meeting opens but instead of Hollywood Squares, a screen full of biker memes appear. One lights up as someone says something about a fir tree followed by letters and numbers.

Then, the same man says. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Shit!” My cousin races out of the bedroom, puts Mikey on the floor, and ends the meeting. “What did you just do?”

“Nothing! I swear. It was her.” I point at the cat who blinks, yawns, and licks her tail.

“Dammit.” My cuz lifts the electrical tape over her computer’s camera and presses it back down. “At least they didn’t see you.”

“Umm... I’m sorry. What happened?”

“Did you hear something? Anything?” A former FBI agent, my cousin never gets rattled but right now, she’s about to hyperventilate.

I grab the toddler, set him in his highchair, and try to recall those few short seconds before the popup. “I heard a guy say ever-something... followed by some numbers. Why?”

“Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit. Suds is going to kill me. I’m going to get fired. And divorced.”

Sam’s order of events is backwards, but judging from her red face, now’s not the time to point it out. “Can you back up a smidgeon? I have no idea what the H-E-double-hockey-sticks is going on.”

“I know and you shouldn’t. Oh my Godzilla. I’m in so much sheet-cake. I was on the dark web!” As my cousin tries not to swear, I lose my place in the conversation.

Then, I think Sam's messing with me and ask her, "Like *the* dark web?"

"I don't know, Rose, is there another?"

With her snark back in place, I relax. "You're the PI. *You* tell me."

"This is serious. I was pretending to be a Fentanyl dealer. How the heck did you end up in their meeting?"

"Your cat rolled on the keyboard. She must've hit a magic combination of keys."

"Promise me you didn't touch anything else?"

I shake my head and hold my tongue. I'll tell her about the popup and the Smart Sissy when there's no sharp objects in the vicinity or perhaps, after I've booked a flight to a foreign country with no extradition treaty.

## Chapter 3

### Wheels

Sitting with my pals at a local Brooklyn dive, I shoot the shit. Despite the freezing rain, or maybe because of it, the half dozen booths are full. As a mix of oldies plays out of the speakers, I congratulate myself for last night.

My cock, however, has been a total dick about ditching Rose Morelli and in retaliation, has remained half-aroused for the last twenty-four hours. I'm the brains of the operation, not him, so insist he stand down. Yeah, she's gorgeous, smells fantastic and sets him on fire but she is still off limits.

The bearded bartender, Omar, wipes down the ancient dark wood with a rag. As he raises a brow, I nod, and point at our empties.

As another round arrives, Suds swivels his stool and faces me. "Another year bites the dust. Got any New Year's resolutions?"

"Not get fired." It's the truth. Working at a top-notch company like Patten is something I never dreamed possible, especially while stuck in a wheelchair. Now I'm on my feet, I'll need to prove myself every day.

To my left, Gabe Hand grins and rubs his clean-shaved head. "Well, I have one. I'm going to ask Mia to move in with me."

Suds raises his dark brows and presses his nose to the side, making it crooked. "You better marry her, or Vinny will kill you. I'm serious, dude. He's got connections and not afraid to use them. I should know."

When he shudders comically, I crack up. "I thought you've finally grown on your wife's family."

"If you ask them, more like a fungus." He chuckles and turns to his future cousin-in-law. "At least her father isn't the

police chief.”

Hands high-fives him. “True that.”

Knowing how I hate it, my love-struck pals talk diamond rings and in retaliation, I stick two fingers down my throat. “If you two braid each other’s hair, I’m out of here.”

After a swig of beer, I shake my head. Marriage. Yikes. A part of me wonders how I became so jaded, but I quickly shut down any lingering regrets. Introspection requires a Ken and I’m a fucking GI Joe.

“What’s got your tighty-whiteys all bunched up?” Suds may seem like a good ol’ boy but he’s insightful. If I don’t want him to know my joystick is pining for a fine red Rose, I need to chill.

Hands hoots and rats me out. “You didn’t hear? Casanova locked lips with his blind date, then dumped her.”

Before I end up bruised on the sidewalk, I need to set the record straight. “Listen up, you gossipy old women. I was a fucking saint. We had a couple of drinks and I admit, there was some attraction. However, I saw *the-look* in her eyes and backed off. You know me, I don’t sleep with the nice ones, especially where alcohol is involved.”

There’s a moment of tension before Suds slaps me on the back. “Thanks, brah, Rose had a real nasty divorce. No one in the family is supposed to speak her ex’s name out loud.”

“No problem-o. I keep telling you guys, I’m a goddamn teddy bear.” As I flutter my eyelashes, I do wonder if I could’ve been kinder, but me being an asshole was for her own good. A sweet thing like her should not be making googly-eyes at a broken man.

A glutton for punishment, I can’t help asking. “Did she say anything about me?”

Gabe, to my left, shrugs. “Just how she thinks she did something to piss you off.”

“Shit. I hope you set her straight.”

“Now why the fuck would I do that?” When he smirks, I know he’s pulling my leg, so punch his arm to make things even.

“Asswipe. Can we puh-lease change the subject? Unlike you two, I am not pussy-whipped.” I smile but my throat tightens.

The last thing I wanted was for the dark-haired gypsy to think she was lacking. Once upon a time, I would’ve done just about anything to have an exquisite beauty stare with sex on her mind. Too bad my soul got blown apart with my foot in the desert.

Sensing my mood shift, Hands buys the next round. “Okay, spill. What kind of magic skate did you wear to the Christmas party?”

Recalling how I owned the ice, I break out in a huge grin. “A few weeks ago, I flew to Wisconsin and met these two guys. This amputee has a brilliant friend who cuts steel for a living. You should see this dude. He plays hockey with mad skills. After I tried out his prosthetic, I wrote some folks at the VA and sent them videos. I also shared all this with Grayson Patten, and he wants to know more. I’m pretty sure he’s going to invest. We’re going to design a foot for skiing, another for snowboarding and roller blades... You get the drift. For guys like me, it’s a game changer. Man, for the first time in years, I felt... normal. Can you imagine if we made them available for everyone?”

Realizing I’m girly-gushing, my face heats and I quickly hide my embarrassment behind a sip of beer. The two of them share a glance, smile, and raise their bottles.

“To new adventures.” As we clink to success, Suds’ phone pings.

He reads the text, moans, and stands. “Oh fuck, y’all. I need to go. My doggone wife has gone and done it again.”

Hands jumps off his stool, opens his wallet, and throws a few twenties on the bar. “Not the danger-magnet thing?”

Hopping on my good leg, I shrug on my parka with our company logo. “Sorry? What am I missing?”

Pausing, Hands explains. “Sam attracts trouble like... help me out here, pal.”

“Flies on poop.” Suds snatches his black leather jacket, then adds, “Rose was involved too. She entered a live meeting on the dark web.”

Months of physical therapy allow me to keep pace as we race up the sidewalk. A few Brooklyn blocks later, we squeeze between two buildings, enter a courtyard, and climb three flights of stairs to Suds’ apartment.

Face red, he opens the door, stomps to the kitchen table, and leans into his wife’s face. “What the actual fuck, sweetheart?”

The pretty dirty-blond cups his cheeks. “I only left for a second. I had to change Mikey. He detonated in his diaper.”

“You were surfing the dark web and didn’t think to lock the fucking keyboard?” His comeback is so fast, whiplash may be inevitable.

“Baby on board. No swearing.” Rose covers Mikey’s ears, but Sam doesn’t lose a beat.

“Catrina must’ve hit some function keys when she rolled on the computer.”

“Sugar... I, I...” The former SEAL’s eyes start to water but he can’t hold back the erupting laugh. “The cat? Seriously? Again?”

I have no idea what they’re referring to and raise my brows at Hands, who let’s me in on the joke. “Their feline is a demon from hell. It was a gift from Frankie-the-Hitman.”

I’m not sure if he’s pulling my leg and as I ponder, Sam points at her laptop. “I did everything right. I used electrical tape to block the camera and logged in using a VPN. It’s not like I gave them my email or anything. We’re perfectly safe.”

In the living room, a bead of sweat rolls off Rose’s forehead and she bites her lower lip. Clearly, she’s hiding



something.

So, while Suds and Sam kiss and make up, I grab my suspect's upper arm and walk her to the nearest bedroom.

"What did you do?" I tuck her chin and make her meet my gaze.

"I maybe, might have... entered my email into a form." Grimacing, she glances to the floor.

"You need to tell them." My heart races. This could be really bad and the clock is ticking.

"But Sam could lose her job." Tone pleading, she clutches my arm.

"Better her livelihood than her life. The kid is in danger too. What the feck were ya thinkin'?" I can't remember the last time my dad's Irish temper spewed from my mouth but hell, this shit is serious.

When she wipes away a tear, I stop in the doorway, my heart strings tugging because I must tell her family. "Hey, I'm here for you. We'll get through this."

Suds has his arm around his wife in the kitchen and they both look up as I push the dark-web-infiltrator in front of me. "Rose has something to say."

She takes a deep breath and blurts it out as if one word. "I-may-have-entered-my email-to-the-dark-web."

The mouths of everyone in the room, including the cat, drop open.

"Why in God's name would you do such a thing?" Sam is the first to be able to form a coherent sentence.

Rose looks to her for sympathy. "Hey, to be fair, I didn't know you entered the dark side."

"Web." When Suds corrects her, she waves him away, and steps closer to his wife.

"Whatever. And secondly, remember how you've been searching for a Smart Sissy doll? I had sixty seconds to bid. I

thought you were on Etsy or eBay or something.” A few tears drip from the sides of her eyes. “I am so, so, sorry.”

Catrina meows and curls around Suds’ legs. “No sucking up. You are in deep shi-”

“Kitty litter.” Sam finishes for him and points to their son, Mikey, taking it all in.

Gabe shakes his head. “You guys need to move to a safe house. It doesn’t take much to map an email to a physical address.”

“But I didn’t see anything. All the faces were memes. Why would they care if I joined their stupid meeting?” Rose’s tone rises and I fear there’s more she’s not saying.

“Out with it.”

“Ah... A man said ever-something, some numbers and some digits. No big deal.”

Suds rolls his eyes and lifts Mikey into his arms. “Sam, pack up. We’re leaving. Hands, you keep your eye on Mia. Wheels, you take the web-crasher.”

“Wait. I have a bodyguard downstairs. I’ll call Uncle Vinny, too. I’ll be fine. This place is alarmed like Fort Knox.” Sam’s cousin has no idea how deeply she stepped in shit.

“Yo. Wazzup?” The male version of the three cousins pops up through the hole in the hallway.

As I realize he’s standing on old-fashioned attic steps, not floating on air, Gabe races past him. “Rose typed her email into a form on the dark web. Later, dudes.”

“You stupid or wot?” The man who I assume is Cousin Joey stares with his jaw dropped.

The woman under scrutiny returns his rudeness with a cupped middle finger. “None of your fudging business. Go back downstairs.”

“Hey. You want a favor or not?” While he crosses his arms, Rose shouts yes and I answer with a resounding no.

The young Vitale eyes the group and hones in on Sam.  
“This was your doing. Yeah?”

She rolls her eyes and points at the oldest. “Not this time. It was all her and Catrina.”

The feline suspect licks her paws to wash her face, a clear sign of guilt. The other accused sighs and plants a palm on a small keypad near the light switch.

“All I did was order a stupid doll and these guys are freaking out.”

Instead of the normal whoop-whoop of a house alarm, Suds’ voice shouts out a backyard speaker. “Y’all better skedaddle.”

A few seconds later, it says, “Get the hell off my property or I’m coming out.”

The real Sebastian, standing beside me, chuckles and his wife cups her ears. “Oh my God, the neighbors, shut it off.”

Her troublemaker cousin pushes the star key, the noise ceases, and my jaw drops.

“That’s your house alarm?” I’ve heard the detective duo can be a little eccentric, but man, this is nuts.

“Motion sensor controlled. I got it hooked up to my doorbell, too.” He leans over allowing Sam to whisper in his ear.

When she finishes, he nods. “Sorry y’all. The boss says we need to go.”

My new client crosses her arms and juts out her chin. “I’m not going anywhere with Mr. Kiss-And-Ditch. I am *much* safer here. You guys do what you please. I’ll be fine.”

Everyone starts talking at once, including Catrina whose yowls start a chorus from the wild cats outside. A master of diplomacy, I put two fingers into my mouth, whistle, and they shut the fuck up.

“How about I stay up here in your apartment? Suds? Take your family someplace safe. Me and Miss Dark Web will be

just fine.”

## Chapter 4

Rose

Without a doubt, I hate mornings. Because I fell into bed and forgot to remove my makeup, my lashes are glued together and require manual intervention. Once I open my eyes, I stagger to the bathroom and gasp at the zombie in the mirror. Oh my effing God. My hair sticks out and a huge smudge of smokey-gray covers my cheek.

I suppose it could be worse. No one broke in during the night and no one died. Suds and Sam made a big deal out of nothing. The pointless drama upstairs was fucking ridiculous, but they can't help it. Private eyes need to find conspiracies everywhere. It's not their fault. It's their job.

Once I turn back into a human, I will stand my ground and simply explain I don't need a muscle head. Screw Mr. Sexy Skates. He probably leaves the toilet seat up, snores, and would have no problem eating my emergency stash of potato chips.

I glance at the cell phone and moan because I have exactly fifteen minutes to shower, put on my face, and exit. I don't know why my mom insists we must dress nice for work. Most of our customers are so old, I could arrive in my bathrobe, and no one would take note.

The familiar worry nags me. If I don't attract younger clients soon, our family business will go the way of dinosaurs and newspapers. Maybe today, I'll pitch the idea of buying the building next door. We could convert the bottom floor into a nail salon and a massage parlor. I've done the math and approached the owner. If only I could convince my mom.

Enthused, I finish up and run out the door with time to stop for coffee at the bodega. As I dig in my wallet for cash, I turn, and bump into a broad chest.

“I’m sor-” *Oh hell, no.* “What are you doing here?” A trace of familiar pine scent hits my nostrils. It’s laced with something dangerously musky which shoots to my lady parts and has them begging. Because they cannot be trusted, I hold my breath, do not look up, and race out the door.

The bodyguard follows on my heels. “Rose, stop for a second.”

“I can’t. I’m late.” *And my undies are damp.*

“Listen, I’m sorry for dumping you the other night.” He sounds sincere but I’m not buying it.

“No big deal.” Shivering at the cold wind whipping around the corner, I duck my chin inside my coat and recall the evening at Rockefeller Center.

I’ve gone over the party a million times in my head. I said nothing to piss him off so the kiss must be the problem. Apparently, along with my self-esteem, my ex broke my mojo.

The reality hits me hard, making it necessary to face my heated cheeks forward. At the first busy intersection, I stop, struggle with my cup’s plastic lid, and take a much-needed gulp of caffeine.

“Shit!” Turning to avoid the lady in front, I spit the scalding coffee all over Mr. Not-a-Date.

“Hot?” He steps back, staring down at the dark stain on his parka.

“Yep. Sorry.” My formerly warm cheeks catch on fire.

Could this morning get more awkward? My legs jiggle as I wait for the light to change. Minutes later, the walking stick man brightens, I dash across, and wish I could disappear into a black hole or an alternate universe or both.

No such luck. Instead, it starts to rain.

Almost immediately, an umbrella snaps open, close to my ear. “What the f-”

The same man with the coffee-stained jacket smiles and holds black silk over my head. His thick eyelashes catch

droplets which make him sexier still. I should write the city council and ask them to make a law. The street signs would read like this: *No gorgeous men allowed on sidewalks before 9:00 AM.*

His arm wraps around my shoulder, protectively, to keep me dry. It does nothing to help the dampness pooling between my legs.

When we get close, I sigh, and point at the decades old painted sign, *Marion's Hair Stylings.*

“Okay. Here we are. Listen, I’ll forgive you for ditching me if you never mention how I spit on your jacket. Buh-bye, now.” *Phew.* I congratulate myself on my brilliant escape until he appears in front of me.

“We need to stop meeting like this.” At my lame laugh, he pinches my chin with a calloused index finger and forces me to meet his gaze which drops to my lips. His thick, highly kissable mouth moves but someone in my brain turned down the volume.

“Suds asked me to keep you safe and I owe him. He and Gabe are my brothers. I’m not going anywhere. Get used to it.”

*Does that make me his sister?* Holy shit, nothing on my side, vaguely resembles a familial relationship.

“Suit yourself.” The weather, in sync with my mood, decides sleet is a better way to start the day and flings pellets of ice-poo in my face.

*Fucking awesome.* Arriving at my workplace door, I stand in the narrow recess, fumble for my keys, and enter. Once inside, I consider insisting he stay out, but unlike him, I am not a jerk.

With our coats in the closet, I grind coffee which, thank God, masks his manly scent. Now, all I need to do, is ignore his chiseled chin, penetrating brown eyes, and how his jeans hug his fine ass.

My morning chores done, I walk to the waiting area where he dwarfs a vinyl covered chair. I need to convince him to

leave. A good part of my day consists of gripping sharp objects. A distraction like him could turn into a bloody disaster. Literally.

“You can go now. In case you haven’t heard, my uncle is insanely protective. No one would dare bother this establishment.”

“Vincent Vitale, of underworld fame, right?” He glances up from a fashion magazine and leaves it open on his lap. The article’s title reads, ‘How to make your man come.’

“Research?” I point down and if I expected him to be embarrassed, he’s not.

Instead, he winks. “Men are nowhere near as complicated as women make us out to be.”

“I wouldn’t know, I haven’t read the issue.” My tone dry, I raise one eyebrow, a move I keep for occasions such as these.

“No?” He inspects the cover, dated last summer, and my cheeks warm.

Clearing my throat, I cross my arms, and grit my teeth. “As I was saying, I really don’t need a bodyguard.”

“I disagree. You gave some bad actors your email address. They can find your location, where you work... Basically, everything about you.”

“Including my family ties.” *Take that, Mr. Kiss-and-Ditch.*

He stretches long and his feet slide between my open stance. “Let me get this straight. You’re expecting me to believe no one related to your Uncle Vinny has ever died from suspicious causes.”

He has me there, but I don’t give in easily. “No, not recently.”

It wasn’t meant to be funny, but he chuckles. “I’ll go if you can convince me the form you entered was legit and the meeting you zoomed into was-”

“I did not *zoom* into anything. The cat rolled on the keyboard. You want to blame someone, blame her.”



“Ah. Tabby-gate. I stand corrected.” His mouth curls and a small dimple which I hadn’t noticed before, appears in his cheek.

I close my eyes, count to ten, and try to think of the least sexy moment in my life. There’s been a lot, so it’s hard to choose. Eventually, I settle on a vision of my eighty-year-old Nona’s dildo on the short bookcase beside her bed.

“You okay?” He leans in and as his scent sends the clit-twins into ecstasy, my head spins.

Stepping back, I mutter a plea for divine mercy and look to my sister’s statue for guidance. *Holy Mary, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen.*

Mary-in-a-bathtub smiles back, so I assume I’m in her good graces and open the front door. So much for miracles. My first customer is late.

Mr. Sexy-Bod stretches, presses against my back, and follows my gaze. “So, have you recalled anything more about your foray into the dark web?”

“Not really. It all happened so fast and when Sam started yelling, she scared the shit out of me. I do remember a male voice said something starting with ever. Ever-clear, Ever-after, Everglade...”

Maybe if he’d move to the other side of the room I’d do better. His proximity turns my brain to oatmeal.

“What else, Rose?” He boxes me in against the glass door with elbows on either side of my head and as I swivel to face him, my tits brush against his chest.

“A college. Maybe NYU. Then, some numbers.”

“C’mon now.” His disbelieving tone pushes my what-the-fuck button.

Trying to escape, I push on his abs and almost break my wrist. “Yeah, well, next time I’m on the dark web, I’ll hire a stenographer to take notes. And by the way, as long as we’re having this heart-to-heart, do ya mind telling me what I did wrong at the rink?”

“What do you mean?” He tries to play dumb but he and I both know it’s bullshit. Besides, I just said a Hail Mary and you get one miracle per day, per salon, and I haven’t used mine yet.

“Was it the kiss?” One glance at his face and I’m certain I hit paydirt. Fuck. I knew I should’ve had a breath mint.

“I’d rather not say.” He rakes his hand across his chin’s dark stubble. Somewhere, there’s an online class for sexy moves, and he aced it.

“I understand you’re trying to be nice but if I’ve lost my touch, you’d be doing me a huge favor to let me know what I did to make you bolt. I’m not getting any younger.”

His eyes go wide. “You serious?”

“Hell yeah, I am. Are you gay? Is that it?”

“Did I kiss like I am?” His mouth drops open and as his eyes widen, I smile like Catrina eating a fly.

“How would I know? I’ve got nothing to compare it to. Just tell me what turned you off. It’s no big deal. I won’t get mad.” I tap a toe, cross my arms over my chest and as I wait for his response, the door chimes with my first client of the day.

“Saved by the bell.” He mutters this loud enough for me to hear.

Throwing him a snotty look, I help Mrs. Murphy out of her coat and lead her to the hair washing station.

Once she’s seated, she whispers at full volume, “Who’s the hunk?”

“He’s a homeless man. I let him come in out of the rain. It’s all but stopped so he’s leaving.” I glare over at Mr. Kiss-and-Ditch, hoping he understood my not-so-subtle hint.

The bodyguard grins, picks up his magazine and sits in a closer seat, under a hairdryer. “I think I need a cut.”

My dear senior citizen opens her wallet and waves a twenty at him. “This is for you, young man. There’s a thrift

store right around the corner. You buy yourself a nice suit and I'm sure someone will hire you."

"Thank you." He walks to my station, smirks, and kisses her cheek.

She giggles like a schoolgirl. "On second thought, I could use some help in the bakery."

"I'll be sure to stop by." Over the top, he shoots her an exaggerated wink.

"Oh, for heaven's sake. I lied. He's my bodyguard." Lifting the sink hose, I spray him with warm water until he backs away, laughing.

"Pity. The offer still stands." She wiggles her fingers at him, blows him a kiss, and he catches it midair.

Damn, too bad he's a jerk, because his interaction with her was sweet.

As soon as I finish with her, he leans in close. "Is it my turn yet?"

"I'll do him." Mia, who entered when I wasn't looking, keeps a straight face as she hangs up her raincoat.

"Not funny." I roll my eyes but those two laugh their asses off.

"Is too." Still chuckling, my sister glances down at today's bookings. "Oh, looky here. My ten AM cancelled. I'll take Mrs. Gallo and you can trim Mr. Hot Lips."

Mom doesn't miss a beat as she arrives with baked goods and sets them down next to the coffee maker. "Oh, hello, Mr. Lips. Welcome."

Our next client, who stopped having birthdays after ninety, walks in behind her and helps herself to some goodies. "I once knew a Mr. Lipchitz, any relation?"

The annoyingly handsome bodyguard grins. "Maybe, but I doubt it."

Wanting him gone, I snap an apron, twirl the chair in front of the sink, and point. "Sit."

“Yes ma’am.” Smirking, he lowers his ass down, his eyes about breast level.

Thinking they might get action, my traitorous nipples spike under my lace bra. Unable to hide their delight, I cup his neck and rest it in the basin’s divot. As his incredible brown eyes lock onto mine, my mouth dries and my fingers linger, enjoying the softness of his skin.

*This attraction cannot be all one-sided. Why am I so drawn to him?* “Warm enough?”

“You tell me.” A corner of his lip slips up.

“I was referring to the water temperature. Close your eyes.” I spray the side of his head to emphasize my phrase had no alternate meaning.

“Mmm. Perfect.” The pleasurable groan from deep in his chest causes my girly parts to quiver.

Shaking, I pump shampoo, and massage his scalp. Using my fingers’ pads, I rotate in little circles. As he hisses through his teeth, I swallow the lump in my throat, and continue until the tiny creases in his brows disappear. I repeat with conditioner and when done, perspiration runs down my side.

*Holy shit, it felt more like a lap dance, than a wash.*

With a towel around his shoulders, I lead him to my cutting station. “What’s your pleasure?”

“Take it off. All of it.” At his cocky grin, Mia giggles and I shoot her with my eye-lasers. Surely, she knows I’m holding on by a thread. Standing between his legs may be my Waterloo.

I try picturing him with different styles. He’s got nicely shaped ears and a high forehead. It’s a shame he wants a military cut. He could keep the bad-boy bangs and the sides short. Already gorgeous, the modern look would put him on the cover of GQ.

“You really want me to use a razor?” I hold it up in the air, hoping he’ll say no.

“Yeah. I like it that way.”

Gulping again, I swivel his chair, putting his back to the mirror. First, I trim the neckline. Then, as my fingers brush over his skin, he white knuckles the armrest.

My kissing skills may suck wind, but I guess I could start a new career as an erotic hairdresser. For sure, it'd bring in a younger, male audience. Imagining myself in a low-cut dress, straddling his lap, I remove the locks over his ears. Done with the back and sides, I step between his muscular thighs. When I brush against his leg, totally by mistake, his eyes pop open.

Breathing hard, our gazes lock. The black centers of his eyes cover the brown. His gaze on my lips, his nostrils flare as he inhales.

## Chapter 5

### Wheels

If this was the Middle Ages, she'd be burned at the stake. Hells balls, her black magic almost made me come during a goddamn hair wash. Sure as shit, she didn't learn those skills in a magazine. Her fingers might as well have been caressing my cock. Thank God, she spread one of those aprons over my lower half. Otherwise, her mom, her sister, and a couple of elderly ladies would've noticed my battle of the bulge.

I've had sex less sensual than what this woman did to me. I'll be lucky if I can walk when she's done shaving my head. While she fusses, I work to disarm my torpedo. Usually, picturing my fucked-up leg does the trick but no matter where my thoughts wander, I end up with the image of her straddling my lap.

*C'mon, c'mon. Think of something disgusting.*

"All set." She faces me toward the mirror and my mouth drops open.

"Thank you." She left just enough hair to make me appear badass, the way I like it.

"You're welcome." As she unties my bib, I pray Harry Hotdog has simmered down so I can exit without embarrassing myself.

Figuring I could use some fresh air, I head out but not before an elderly woman, slathered with blue goo, pinches my ass. "Looking good, young man."

"I'm just going to...ah, grab a smoke." I haven't had a cigarette in years but it's as good an excuse as any.

*Shit.* Once I'm outside, I sense someone watching the salon and duck into the hardware store. From next door, I study the rotating camera over the sign and note the Patten logo.

I call our communication center, half expecting Hands to pick up until I recall he's probably close by, keeping an eye on Mia.

"What's up?" A voice I don't recognize answers.

"It's Wheels. I'm at Morelli's hair salon in Bensonhurst. I don't suppose you can identify the guy across the street?"

"He's not in view. Why? You got trouble?" His keyboard clicks about a hundred times faster than my hunt and peck method. He was probably born with a silver mouse in his hand.

"Let's just say I don't like his looks." The bump in the man's jacket could be a gun, and the twitch in his finger, for all I know, is early onset Parkinson's. There's no point in listing my reasons. I just know he's up to no good.

The millennial at our city desk stops typing. "Take his picture and send it to me. Better yet, why not use Jason?"

I'm familiar with the artificial intelligence application but being the new guy, don't want to rock the boat. "Yeah... I'm not working for Patten. I probably shouldn't charge my account without Slate's approval."

"He'd okay it in a heartbeat but if you're worried, Dr. Jenna Jones is giving away a free version of her AI program."

"Good idea, send me the link." I reach into my wallet, finger her card, and recall the moment Rose and I met.

I wish I could go back in time and start over. While I ponder how I would change the past, a female meme, wearing thick glasses blinks out from my cell phone. "Good morning. I am Jasonelle one-point-one. How can I help you today?"

I zoom in on the red-headed, sunburned guy across the street, snap a picture, and hit upload. "Can you identify him?"

"Yes. He is Lenny Lipinski, otherwise known as The Lobster."

"Don't you mean mobster?" Maybe this female beta version of Jason is buggy.

“No, I meant the crustacean. Do we have a bad connection or are you hard of hearing?” If she wasn’t a computer program, I’d swear she copped an attitude.

Being a reasonable guy, I ignore her tone. “And who does Lenny work for?”

“Vincent Vitale.”

With the dots connected, I make a video of people walking up and down the street in front of the salon. “Do you detect any more of his employees?”

“I see Karl the Klutz and David D’Angelo.”

“What? No nickname?” Snickering, I wonder if the AI unit is programmed with a sense of humor.

“No. Should I give him one?” The meme’s lids open and close in wait mode.

*Is she messing with me?* I shake my head and sigh. “No, no. It’s all good.”

“Are we done?”

“Ah, sure. Thank you.” I push exit, expecting the conversation to end but she doesn’t disappear.

“How do you like my glasses? Do they make me look smart?” As her decapitated head rotates three-hundred and sixty degrees, I try to decide how to answer.

My best bet is to remain neutral. “They are... nice.”

“Are these better?” Her tortoiseshell frames morph into a dreadful shade of sixties turquoise with an unfortunate cat’s eye slant.

“Listen, Jasonelle, I need to go. I like both just fine.” Can it be insulted? I can’t afford to have it pissed. I need her assistance.

“You are not helpful. Please choose.” She blinks, a small frown on her animated face.

“Okay, the first pair is better.”

“Excellent. Is there anything else I can help you with?”



“No.” Sweat rolls down my forehead. Holy shit. Dealing with Jasonelle was a lot harder than I imagined. I don’t think the world is ready for a female version of Jason.

“Goodbye. I look forward to future discussions.”

“I’m sure you do.” After hanging up, I call Sam and tell her about her uncle’s watchdogs.

She laughs. “Don’t worry. Joey probably called his dad. Rose is my Uncle Vinny’s favorite. He’s simply keeping an eye on her.”

“So, he thinks she’s in trouble?” My heart thumps because my question is rhetorical and needs no answer.

“Yes, and I am so, so sorry to drag you into this. I never should’ve left my computer unlocked, not even for a moment. But seriously, what are the odds Catrina would roll on the right combination of keys?”

Seeing how she’s my pal’s wife, I remain silent. From my perspective, the chances were pretty damn high. Her tabby cat is infamous.

I lean against the door, catch a glimpse of Hands, and wave him over. When he arrives, I put my phone on speaker. “Can I ask why you were on the dark web?”

“Sure. A new type of Fentanyl is being imported into the US and the Feds asked me to find out where it’s coming from.”

I share a worried glance with Hands who leans over and asks, “I thought most of it originates south of the border.”

“True, but it’s the Chinese who sell the Mexicans the base chemicals. They just mix it and smuggle it to the US. This stuff is different. It’s a brand-new designer drug coming from Asia. Listen, I need to go, but before I do, I want to thank you two for watching out for Rose and Mia. Suds and I will cover your expenses.”

“Please don’t. I owe your husband more than I can ever repay.” He and Hands made sure I had a job during my

recovery. Hell, I was a fucking wreck until they pulled me out of the bottle.

I'm so deep in thought, I miss much of what Sam says next. "...and don't hurt her. She's been through a lot."

"Don't give it another thought. She's not my type."

The private eye clicks her tongue. "Ah dude, you realize you kissed her in front of a roomful of highly trained militia? Like you, they don't miss much."

"I admit, my reputation with the ladies isn't the greatest but I've always been honest. I like sex. I don't like relationships. It's fucking simple. Women are the ones who make it complicated."

"You are so full of shit. Just do what it takes to get her to remember."

"Surely, you don't mean anything?"

"God, no. You two would be terrible together."

I want to ask why but it might sound like I'm interested. My questions would get back to Rose and neither one of us need to stoke the flames of desire.

"I'll keep an eye on the street." Chuckling, Hands slaps my back and disappears.

"Copy that." I say to no one.

Giving a wave to The Klutz, The Lobster, and David, I walk inside where my client helps a spry, elderly woman out of her chair.

I need to speak with her, alone. "Interested in grabbing some lunch?"

She glances at the clock on the wall over the cash register. "I have to be back in an hour. Maybe we could grab a slice at Petey's?"

"Be right back." She waves at her mom and sister, then grabs her coat.

I think about what Sam said about getting her to recall more about what she heard but memories are strange. The more you force them, the more they're likely to stay hidden.

"I'm surprised you're still here. I thought for sure you'd leave." At her cool tone, my jawbone tightens.

"I told Suds I'd keep an eye on you. I don't break my word."

Her eyes narrow.

Damn. She's good. Using no words, she cuts deep and pouts for the next few blocks.

I don't know what I did wrong, but someone needs to apologize. It might as well be me. Thus, I gallantly step in front of her as he reaches for the door handle, trying hard as hell to make sad, puppy-dog eyes.

"Look, I'm sorry."

She sighs. "No, this is all my fault. How about I call Suds and ask him to release you from your blood oath? I'm sure you saw my uncle's men. No one would dare attack me in his neighborhood."

If she's right, why *am* I here?

We walk past the booth to the back where a big man takes our order. She wants a veggie slice, which, in my mind, is an unforgivable sin.

"I'll have two with pepperoni." I'm biting into my second piece and starting to grill her again when the proprietor approaches.

The balding man wipes greasy hands on his sauce-stained apron while flexing his fists. "Rose. You wants I should ask him to leave?"

"No. He's my bodyguard. It's fine." She focuses on her plate. "Oh God, this is good."

Frowning, he points two fat fingers at his eyes, then aims them at me. "Not yours, understand?"

“Jesus, Petey. Get lost.” She swats her napkin at him and as he mutters under his breath, an older man walks from behind a walk-in cooler into the dining area.

Rose rolls her eyes and leans her voluptuous chest over the red checkered tablecloth. “Oh cripes. It’s my Uncle Vinny. Ignore him, okay?”

The sixtyish man, dressed in an expensive black suit, tie, and white dress shirt, kisses her on both cheeks. “Bella. I heard about last night. What da fuck you doin’, sniffin’ where you don’t belong?”

“Zio, I wasn’t. Sam’s tabby cat jumped on the keyboard.”

“I should’ve dumped the damned feline in the river, the last time it pulled this shit.” His jowls bounce and cigar ashes fly as he shakes his head.

“Frankie would kill you. He thinks of her as family.”

“The hitman is pressing his luck.” Vincent’s eyes rove over me while I chow down on my slices.

“You fuck wid her, you answer to me.”

Not wanting to get on his bad side, I ignore his tone and slowly chew, returning his insolent stare with one of my own. I’ve put down more guys like him than I care to count.

He must sense he’s entered dangerous waters but neither of us release our gaze until Rose stands between us. “Enough! Bye, Uncle Vinny. I’ll see you on Sunday.”

After she kisses both of his drooping cheeks, he lifts his cigar to his lips, lights it, and blows smoke in my direction. “Ciao. Nice meeting you.”

“Ignore him.” My lunch date swallows her last bite of pizza, grabs my hand, and rushes me out the door.

Before we get two steps, Joey runs out from behind the building. “Wait up.”

His cousin slows and narrows her gaze. “Now what?”

“Dad wants to know if you’re sleeping with him?”

I open my mouth to respond but she beats me to it. “Holy God Almighty. No. Get lost, Joseph.”

“Uncle Vinny said for me to give this to you.” Smirking at me, he hands her a yellow sticky note.

Reading it, she crumples it in a fist. “Shit.”

“What is it?”

“None of your business.” She throws it on the sidewalk.

Curious, I squat, pick it up, and read. ‘7:00PM’.

“Fuck.” When her fists thrust at the gray clouds, I half expect a bolt of lightning to strike us dead.

“What’s wrong?”

“I have a date.” She glances at her phone and rushes down the street.

A bit puzzled, I follow. “Your uncle fixes you up?”

“In return for low rent.”

“And you put up with it?”

“Until I get my degree or win lotto, yeah. You got a problem wid dat?”

“Not unless you do.”

“Well, I don’t.” She stomps into the salon and wanting to avoid yet another confrontation, I stay outside, and absorb the heat of the brick wall.

Not long after, an olive-skinned man approaches, He’s about six-two, with a manicure and shoes so shiny you can see yourself in them.

“I heard you’re sleeping with my wife.” He tugs on his sleeves to show off gold cuff links and a Rolex, which if it’s real, costs thousands.

I grin. “Well, if it isn’t he-who-cannot-be-named. I’d say nice to meet you, but it’d be a lie.”

He shoves my chest. “Stay away from her.”

If he was the first to warn me off today, I'd probably laugh it off but frankly, I'm sick to death of people thinking I'm not good enough for her.

"Maybe you should fuck off, pal."

He starts to reach for a weapon but I'm faster and chop my hand down on his wrist. He's lucky I'm a nice guy and didn't break it.

Inside, Rose curses and a second later she's out the door. "Paolo? What the hell?"

"Why you slumming around with the likes of him?" Holding his damaged arm to his chest, he eyes me.

"If I am, it's none of your damn business, is it?" She puts her hands on her waist and with her legs apart, she's Wonder-Woman. No mortal man should dare stand against her.

Across the street, Lenny the Lobster and a couple of other thugs watch closely with their hands near their weapons but don't interfere. Whose side will they take?

"Leave, Paolo. I mean it." As she points, her shotgun toting mom appears in the doorway, and a collared priest ambles up the sidewalk.

"Trouble, Rose?" The ancient man glares at her ex in the way holy men have been doing since the dawn of time.

I have no doubt he just prayed for Paolo to jump off a bridge or some other equally unfortunate accident.

He-who-should-not-be-named frowns. "None, Father O'Connell, I was just leaving."

As he shuffles off, the priest looks me up and down. "And you are?"

"The bodyguard." I offer my hand and he shakes it firmly.

"God bless you, my son and leave her be."

"Yes sir. I will." Holy fuck, if anyone else warns me off, I may enter the priesthood myself.

On cue, a gray tabby missing one eye trots to my feet, stops, and growls. “You too, dude? I assure you my intentions are honorable.”

## Chapter 6

Rose

It's hard to believe only two days ago, I was skating at Rockefeller Plaza in Manhattan, and had the most amazing kiss of my life. Tonight, I'm back to the same ol' Rose who hasn't the balls or the income to refuse a blind date. Gah, could I be more pathetic?

The gray sky, gray buildings, and gray sidewalk match my mood as my boots crunch over a grave of this morning's frozen footprints. Christmas decorations serve to remind me how I've managed to reach the end of another year and made no progress. Like the movie, Groundhog Day, I'm stuck in an endless loop but unlike Bill Murray, I never learn anything.

Wheels, the primary reason for my foul mood, walks beside me, his eyes darting. The giant, glaring, grumbly-puss hasn't said two words since lunchtime. Is it my fault my family is overprotective?

Why am I constantly compelled to apologize to him? "I said I was sorry."

An unsatisfactory grunt comes from his chest and as he increases his stride, my breath creates clouds of steam. If the temperature keeps dropping, city pipes will burst, and we'll be boiling drinking water for days.

At the intersection, he stops, and I poke the bear. "You do know glowering is not considered language."

His lips purse, his eyes narrow, and his mouth remains in a thin, grim line.

The silent treatment? What are we, twelve? "Hey, it's not my fault the ex-who-shall-not-be-named showed up."

When he responds with an eye-roll, I give up. "Fine. Be like that."

I never asked for a bodyguard and I sure as hell don't need him. By the time we arrive home, I've had enough and shove



my phone at him. “I’m going out and don’t try to stop me. If you want to discuss it with my Uncle Vinny, press nine. He’s on speed dial.”

Inside, I take off my gloves and lean into the downstairs apartment. A large pot bubbles on the stove filling the kitchen with eau de sausage and tomatoes. “Yo, Joey. You home?”

A few moments later, my shirtless, wet-headed cousin pops his head out of a back room, buckling up his jeans. “Whadda you want? I’m busy, here.”

I grab a spoon, dip it in the sauce, and blow. Taking a sip, I almost moan with delight. The gravy is as good as his mom’s but it’s fun to mess with him.

“Needs more oregano.” Rummaging through his spice cabinet, I sniff small containers and pile them on the orange countertop. “Any idea who Vinny set me up with?”

He ducks into a long-sleeved black shirt, approaches, then slaps my hands away from the pot. “Don’t touch. I maybe have a name. What’s it worth to ya?”

“I won’t murder you in your sleep?” I grin and when I pinch his cheek, he laughs.

“Promises, promises.”

“C’mon, Joey. Spill the beans. How bad is it?”

“Not awful. Wear something nice. He drives a Lamborghini.” He focuses his smirk on Wheels, standing silently in the doorway.

“Thanks, later.” As I skip up the stairs, my cranky shadow snorts something about rich criminals behind my back.

At the top railing I pause and turn. “You obviously need to get laid. I hereby bequeath you the night off.”

The crease in his brows makes me wonder. “Are you in a relationship?” Maybe that’s why the kiss bothered him so.

“Not really.” He glances down the stairs, where Kimmy bounces in and starts a non-stop monologue about kindergarten.

Once she's inside, I hiss. "God, you are such a, a... man."

As I try to stomp away, he grabs my hand. "You have no idea. Drop it."

Electricity sparks where we connect and despite being annoyed, I don't pull out of his grasp. "You think it's perfectly acceptable to butt into my personal life, but I can't ask about yours? How is that fair?"

"I have a valid reason. I'm trying to keep you safe." His voice just above a whisper, his eyes lower to my mouth and I lean in.

"Nuh-uh. I'm a favor to Suds. We both know nothing bad is going to happen."

His eyes snap open, ending the momentary madness. "Let's agree to disagree. I cannot believe a grown woman lets her uncle pick her dates."

"You don't have to. Buh-bye." Hoping to push him out of my life, I shove his rock-hard abs, but he doesn't budge.

Instead, he grunts and parks his body in what I used to think was a reasonably sized kitchen chair. Leaning back, he crosses his arms and ankles while I raise the attic stairs.

Once they're up, I have access to my bathroom, and stomp inside. After, I slam the door so hard, my shampoo falls off the shelf. Stupid bodyguard. One minute he's all sexy and smiling, the next he's a grouch and acting like he owns me. He's impossible.

I shower, then realize I left my clothes in the bedroom. Wrapping a towel around my body, I peek out the door. With Wheels focused on his phone, I tiptoe to my room. There, I open my closet and groan. I need to do laundry.

Mia's wardrobe is my only hope. She's a little smaller than me but has plenty of spandex. Thinking of my pathetic dating life, I try something new. The wickedly short sweater dress hugs all my curves. While Mia wears it with leggings, I pair it with over the knee suede boots, leaving a couple inches of bare thigh showing.

At some level, I acknowledge trying to make Wheels jealous could easily backfire but desperate times, my friends.

Needing a full-length mirror and a reaction from stone-man in the kitchen, I clear my throat in the doorway. Eventually he looks up and I strut to the bathroom. After applying mousse, I bend at the waist, scrunch with one hand, and hold the hair dryer with the other. And voila. Millions of tiny ringlets fall to my shoulders. Then, I apply red devil lips, fake lashes, double-volume mascara, eyeliner, blush, and coverup. Plain Jane, the hairdresser, is transformed into a boobalicious Brooklyn babe.

Grouchy-puss's mouth drops open as I sashay into the kitchen. He scoots his chair under the table but it's too late. How could I miss the lump in his pants?

"Tell me you're not going out like that."

"Okay. You're not going out like that." Ignoring him, I zip my faux-fur jacket and don my red hat with matching kid gloves.

Jumping up, he blocks my exit. I take two baby steps, eye level with his Adam's apple. When his neck muscles twitch, I wonder if I've pushed him too far and slip my hand into my purse, reaching for my pepper spray.

He grabs my wrist and as he pulls out my hand, his mouth curls down. "Jesus. Did you think I would hurt you?"

"No. Maybe... I don't know." My barb hits home, much sharper than I intended.

Brows creased, he flings his arm out like a doorman. "Dammit. Go. Get yourself killed. See if I give a shit."

"Listen... You don't understand. Oh, fuck it. Fine." I totter to the first floor in my five-inch heels and as I wait at the door, his voice echoes down the stairwell.

"Hey Jeannie? Yeah... I know, baby. I've been busy. Uh-huh. Sure. Want to go out to dinner?... Great, I'll pick you up in twenty."

My chest tightens and my eyes sting, but I squeeze them tight until the urge to cry passes. I bet his dream date is a virtuoso at kissing. Fuck him. Fuck his hard pecks and his stupid cock who takes notice the second I get close.

What the hell is his problem?

Worse, what's wrong with me?

## Chapter 7

### Wheels

I've never acted so unprofessional in my life. She drives me fucking crazy. Who the hell goes out on a blind date knowing they've got a bullseye on their back? No one, not even the pampered niece of a notorious gangster, would interrupt a meeting on the dark web and not expect consequences. She needs to understand. She's not invincible.

Shit. I lower the steps, race upstairs, and open Suds' closet. No doubt, Rose's date will take her to a bougie joint in Manhattan. I'll need to dress the part, so I choose black jeans, a white button-down shirt and a retro, skinny tie.

The attic apartment has no view of the street, but I have access to security cams. Within minutes, a red Lamborghini, costing more than I make in a year, pulls to the curb. A lanky man slicks back his hair, strides to the door, and greets Rose with a kiss to both cheeks.

My chest squeezes my lungs and tightens more when his fucking hand rests on her ass as he leads her to his sex-mobile and opens her door. After, he holds her hand, watching as her dress rides up her thighs. She tugs down on the hem but it's too late. Any red-blooded male would be thinking what I'm thinking, and his cock is probably just as hard.

*Fuck.* Why do women play with fire?

I call Jasonelle, recite the mystery date's plate number, and ask, "Who is he?"

"Rocco Padovesi." Today, the meme has short brown hair, a natural look, and no glasses.

I begrudgingly acknowledge I may be sexist because for a moment, I thought she seemed less intelligent. "Does this man have a criminal record?"

She pops up a rap sheet and I grumble. *What the fuck? I can't read Italian.* "Can you please translate?"

“You do not need to be polite. I do not take offense.” She reads off crimes ranging from petty theft to attempted murder.

“Why isn’t this guy in jail?”

“I do not know. Would you like me to research further?”

“No. The question was rhetorical.”

“Do you like my hair?”

“I guess so.” To be honest, I liked the first look better.

“Your tone sounds insincere. Are you trying to be nice?”

“Ah, no. Listen. I’m kind of in a hurry. Can you find out where this Padovesi booked a dinner reservation tonight? I’m guessing it’s someplace expensive in Manhattan. He probably put it on a credit card.”

Within seconds, a restaurant on Eighth Avenue, near Fifty-Seventh pops up on my Google maps, ready for me to hit the drive button.

“I’d like to see the menu, please.” I’m beginning to better understand Dr. Jones’ reasoning for creating this app. It’s true. I do respond to the female version of Jason differently than the male.

While reading the prices, I moan. Holy Bill Gates, I’ll need to charge my meal to my corporate card and hope Slate will find a way to expense it.

Soon, I’m dressed and ready to pick up my date. I like Jeannie, and our sex has always been satisfying, albeit somewhat boring. However, at the thought of a tumble in bed, my one-eyed-wonder-weasel doesn’t twitch.

Dong-dude, you had no problem getting up for my client. Are you out of your ever-loving dickhead? We’re not doing Suds’ wife’s cousin. Not now. Not ever.

He refuses to back down. Whatever.

I call Jeannie and let her know traffic is backed up and ask if she’d mind meeting me there. When I share the joint’s famous name, she has no problem saying yes.

With logistics handled, I race uptown, park in the closest lot, and enter the restaurant. It doesn't take me long to spot Rose's red dress under the neon exit sign in the back.

While I wait to be seated, a suited sommelier swirls burgundy liquid in a goblet and delivers it to Padovesi with an outstretched pinky. Mr. Richy-Rich sips, smiles, and nods, and the play continues as wine is poured for the woman.

Rose lifts her smokey lids and her plump lips part. Will she sleep with the guy to lower her rent? God, I hope not, but I have no idea. How well do I know her?

My fist clenches as I search for the maître d' who soon arrives and looks down his nose at my outfit. "Would you like to be seated, *monsieur*?"

"*Oui, peut être près du mur du fond.*" As I suspected, my perfected French is wasted on him.

"I'm sorry?" His mouth drops, not used to an asshole like me testing his phony language skills.

*God, I hate pretentious waiters.* I point to the empty table near my client. "I said by the back wall. And drop the accent, okay dude?"

Unlike me, Rose, giggles. She probably adores the bougie atmosphere. After tossing her hair, she flicks her napkin and covers the scandalous amount of bare thigh. I know the moment she spots me because her mouth drops open.

I give her plenty of credit for tearing her eyes away before her date notices.

*Yeah, sweetheart, I'm watching you.* I order a drink and by the time it arrives, so does Jeannie. Dressed in Fifth Avenue's finest, she plants a wet, strawberry kiss on my lips. Knowing how she loves marking me, I wipe my mouth with a napkin and sure enough, it's covered in pink goo.

"Wesley. It's been ages. Is this your way of apologizing? If so, I highly approve." A city girl, my date prefers black. She wears designer leggings and a low-cut, long-sleeved number that hugs her boobs and ass. Her diamond earrings sparkle along with the ones in her acrylic nails. Smoky dark lids

emphasize huge eyes which, in the past, would've had me drooling.

Tonight, my thunder-sword refuses to appreciate her beauty. I might as well be having a conversation with Mrs. Murphy. At the thought of the morning, I glance over at Rose. Only then does my traitorous tallywhacker come to life.

No fool, Jeannie, looks up from her menu, catches me eyeing another woman, and purses her lips. "Are you on a job?"

"No." I'm not being paid, so technically, I'm not lying.

Her gaze narrows. "Fuck you, Wes. Really? After everything we've shared?"

I have to admit, asking her to dinner was a shit move but I couldn't very well dine here by myself. "Order anything you like, baby. I swear I'll make it up to you."

"In the bedroom?"

Lowering my eyes, I let her down easy. We won't be sharing a bed ever again.

"Oh, for shit's sake. Fine." She motions the waiter over and as she waits, poison darts shoot out of her eyes. "You owe me, big time."

The bottle of expensive wine helps my date calm down. Still, she uses an icy tone as she flicks her head in Rose's direction. "I'm guessing *she* is the reason you're not coming home with me tonight?"

"Yeah. Listen. I'm sorry. I thought I could, but I can't." *Some guys may be able to have sex with one woman while thinking of another but not me.*

"Well, it was bound to happen, eventually." At her bitter laugh, I hold her hand.

"What're you talking about?"

"You're in love, stupid, and I'm okay with it, but don't call me again. We agreed we'd be exclusive until we were not."



She dabs at her eyes, and I'm surprised. I had no idea her heart was engaged.

Damn, this is exactly why I avoid relationships. "Jeannie, believe me, I haven't slept with her."

"But you want to." Her gaze lifts, hoping I'll disagree.

Instead, I glance at the floor. "It's complicated."

"Does she know you have a prosthetic leg?" Hitting below the belt, she says it loud enough for a couple to turn their heads but not Rose.

When I don't respond, a vindictive smile spreads across her face. "Oh my God, you haven't told her. You need your head shrunk and I mean that in the nicest way possible."

Jeannie slides back her chair, makes sure her competition is watching, then kisses me long and hard. Then, she slaps my face. "You're welcome."

As she stomps out of the restaurant, I rub my heated cheek. Maybe she's right. I do need to have my head examined. Both of them.

## Chapter 8

Rose

If not for Wheels stalking me, I might've enjoyed my evening. Rocco makes me laugh. He's sweet, sophisticated, and well-traveled. Fluent in English, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese, he's nothing like the men my uncle normally sets me up with.

He's especially not like Paolo.

My date suggests we have dessert someplace intimate and despite having a wonderful evening, my love bud remains disinterested. I picture every bit of porn my subconscious can muster but nothing happens until I insert Wheels as the main attraction. With our meal finished, I can't put my date off any longer. I have to say something.

His smile, along with several glasses of wine, encourage me to test my skills. "Can I ask you to do something, Rocky?"

"Of course, bella." He covers my hand but unlike a certain bodyguard, no sparks fly.

*Shit.* Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, and hope he doesn't think I'm out of my mind. "Would you kiss me and rate it on a scale of one to ten?"

"You kid me, no?" At his chuckle, I un-scrunch my lids and peek. At least he finds me amusing.

"Let me explain. A guy said I was a horrible kisser, now I'm overly self-conscious." I hope my white lie has no serious consequences.

For a moment, he looks confused, then his grin widens. "I would be more than happy to take care of your confusion."

Leaning over the table, he pinches my chin, and as his lips press to mine, I try with all my might to respond.

From the horror on his face when we part, I may have gone over the top. “Wait, I can do better. Let’s do it again.”

“If you want more lessons, *gattina*, we will need some alone time, perhaps all night.” He folds his napkin, places it on the table, and motions over the waiter.

Being someone’s kitten should be endearing but it forces me to think of Catrina, which causes me grief about my current situation with the dark web. This, in turn, makes me stare at Mr. Sexy Bod, talking intently with his date.

Damn it all. The mere sight of him triggers my lady clams to swell around my private pearl.

*Oh, for fuck’s sake. Why can’t you guys appreciate the nice man with the shiny sportscar and adorable accent?*

Sitting back in my chair, I heave a deep sigh. “I had a lovely, lovely time but I have to be at work early. Would you mind taking me home?”

“Of course. Give me a moment.” His tone much colder than a moment ago, Rocco visits the restroom.

While he’s gone, I research how to be a good kisser on my phone. Damn, I’m doing it all wrong. I should let him take the lead, have a breath mint, and avoid pungent foods. God, how’s a girl supposed to remember all these things and still be in the moment?

I don’t ever recall being lip-disabled. No doubt, it happened after the divorce. He-who-should-not-be-named stole my sex appeal and I’ve no idea how to get it back.

I pretend to focus on my phone but can’t keep my eyes off Wheels’ modelesque date as she leans over the table and kisses him. Instead of blissfully happy, she stands, coils her arm way back, and smacks his face so hard, everyone in the room turns and stares.

*Whoa. What was that all about?*

As she stomps out, the murmuring grows in volume, and I try not to stare with the rest. It’s not until I’m putting on my coat do I glance to where he sits alone. He looks so forlorn, I

want to ditch my date and console him. However, I can't afford to have my rent double, so I leave with Rocky Racecar who speeds me back to Brooklyn. The whole way home I plead with my girly parts. *Can't you please give the handsome Italian a break? He seems nice enough. Twitch or do something.*

Once home, I shake his hand to avoid the embarrassment of failing at yet another kiss. "Thanks for a wonderful evening. I'm sorry it...we... Well, I'm just sorry."

With my apology over, I rush inside, slam the door, and repeatedly clunk the back of my head against the wood.

*Holy shit, that was awkward.*

## Chapter 9

### Wheels

Thank God, the curtain has come down on the disastrous evening. After calling an Uber for Jeannie, I apologized profusely with a dozen texts. We'll probably never see one another again and while sad, it's also liberating. It's way past time to end our association. We had nothing in common except for adequate sex.

I'm no shrink but what if we were using this relationship as a crutch to avoid searching for something real? With these thoughts rattling around in my mind, I follow the Lamborghini until he parks in front of my client's apartment. Bracing for the mandatory kiss at the door, I'm surprised it doesn't happen, nor does she invite him in.

A squeal of rubber signals his departure. With him gone, I circle the block and search for a parking place for fifteen minutes. Finally, I give up and turn off my engine behind Joey's Gold Impala. Yawning, I stretch, trudge between the buildings and climb the back stairs to Suds' empty kitchen.

"Meow, meow, meow, meow..." An anxious Catrina circles my legs, pads to a cupboard, and scratches at the door.

"Hungry?" I pat her head, pull out a bag of dry kibble, and shake some into her bowl.

The resultant purring soothes my discontent. At least I pleased one female tonight. Lowering the stairs, I walk halfway down, and try for two.

"Rose? You decent?"

"Go away." Her bathroom door muffles her voice and when she blows her nose, I worry she may be crying.

Pressing my luck, I trot to the door and speak into the empty space between the wood. "We need to talk."

“Not happening.” While she flushes and I stand there like a fool, Catrina takes a flying leap onto my shoulders, lands on all fours, and stares without blinking, her hackles raised.

“Meuph.” With all the invisible demons chased away, she sashays to the upstairs apartment with her tail in the air.

At the ruckus, a makeup-less Rose exits the bathroom in a pink terry robe.

“It’s late. What do you want?” Her runny nose and red eyes make me want to open my arms and console her.

“I told Suds I would-”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You’re my bodyguard yada, yada, yada. Now, if you don’t mind, I need some sleep.” When she takes a step forward, I remove a lock of hair from her mouth and tuck it behind her ear.

“Rose...” I forgot what I was going to say because as she stares at my lips her tongue slips over the plump lower one.

I inch in and cup her cheek, craving another taste. She’s tortured me all night. I’m no saint. If this beautiful woman wants me, I sure as hell am going to kiss her. I never promised anyone I wouldn’t.

“Yo! Romeo. Am I interrupting?” Joey’s head prairie-dogs over the railing.

Dammit all! Cock-blocked, a groan emits from my chest. Her cousin has the worst timing.

“Jeesh, Joey. Knock much?” Rose bends over, finds a high-heeled shoe, and rockets it toward his smirking face.

Ducking, he holds a cardboard box over his head. “Truce! This came for you.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” She bolts to the stairs, snatches the package out of his hands, and places it on the table.

Once she’s sliced the center seam with a steak knife, she unrolls the bubble-wrap, and wiggles a plush Muppet-like creature in my face. “Whoa. It’s a Smart Sissy. See? I told

youz guys there was nothing to worry about. I can't wait to see what she can do."

Before I can stop her, she finds the remote and clicks. When nothing happens, she slides open the back and frowns. "Shit... no batteries."

"Just as well. Did you notice the eyes have built-in cameras?" *Why the hell would any parent want this in their home?*

"Of course, it does!" Rose's eyes brighten as she reads the instructions. "It uses cloud technology. It can see shapes and can deduce its surroundings. It has voice recognition and can speak. It even understands baby babble and can help children learn multiple languages. Oh my God, it's the most incredible toy on the market and I scored one."

I roll my eyes at the nightmare. "Umm, some random company can virtually find out any and everything about you. That's a good thing, how?"

She hugs the stupid thing to her chest. "You make her sound like Chucky."

"In the wrong hands, it could be worse. I'm sending it to Patten to have a look-see." I try to grab the doll, but she tightens her grip.

"No way. It's mine. You're paranoid."

"Keep it down, you two, my kid is asleep." Shaking his head, Joey's head disappears. "I'm outta here."

When he's gone, Rose puts the toy behind her back. "You're not going to do weird science experiments on her."

"This plaything came from the dark web. You don't want it anywhere near little Mikey until we're sure it's safe. Be sensible." Reaching around her, I capture her arms, unwrap her fingers, and take ownership of the damn stuffed doll.

"Fine. I'll let you study it, so long as you don't ruin it and have it back by Christmas." Her pout, while annoying, is also cute.

If the circumstances were different, I'd kiss it off her face.

First, I need to get rid of this security risk. As I place the toy in the box, Catrina hops on the table. Sniffing the packaging, she arches her back and hisses. With a cat-growl, she ricochets off the back wall and races to the top landing. Above us, she narrows her gaze, and yowls pathetically.

“Shit. Something sure as hell is off.”

For once, Rose doesn't disagree and as I arrange for Patten to send a messenger, she frowns at the package. “It's probably a cheap knockoff, anyhow. They've been out of stock for weeks.”

“What about her?” I glance up at the cat, poised and ready to attack.

“Catrina has issues. Ignore her.” Yawning, she watches me pack up the stuffed toy and tuck it under my arm.

As I turn to head back upstairs, she touches my bicep. “Listen, now the package has arrived, and no one attempted to murder me, I think we should consider your job done. Suds and Sam can come back home, and you can go back to doing whatever it is you do.”

Her dejected tone makes me smile. “How about we wait and see what the lab has to say?”

“Mmm. Okay.” She stifles another yawn but can't open her door until I raise the stairs, so I ignore the urge to kiss her.

“Nitey-nite, Rose. Sleep tight.”

“G'night.” Her eyes linger on my lips until her phone, sitting on the kitchen counter, warbles.

“Shit.” She stumbles, unplugs the charger and as she reads, her eyes pop wide open.

“Is something wrong?” At my rhetorical question, she flutters her eyelashes, feigns disinterest and slips her electronics in her robe's pocket.

“Nope. Nothing.”

*Dammit. She's lying.*



## Chapter 10

Rose

The message from my uncle Vinny was clear. I'm to meet with him tonight and come alone. A chill runs down my spine because the or-else is implied. In the past, he would've insisted Joey accompany me.

Before I can respond to the text, my bossy bodyguard reaches into my pocket, grabs my phone, and shoves it in my face. "Unlock it."

I do as he says, he reads, then his tone goes low and growly. "A meetup? Alone? Are you fucking kidding? Who sent this?"

"It's no big deal. Vampires, as a rule, don't come out until after two." My humor falls flat

"You're not leaving without me." Wheels crosses his thick arms and glares with those sexy brown eyes which I ignore as best I can.

The way his chin juts out, I have no say in the matter. "Fine. I'll tell him I'm not coming. Happy now?"

In one respect, the bodyguard's concern for my welfare is sweet. In another, the too-familiar behavior suffocates me. Regardless, he will never understand. Saying no to my uncle is not an option and he won't let anything bad happen to his favorite niece... at least I hope not.

I weigh the plusses and the minuses of my plan. Wheels will never forgive me but on the bright side, I'll have plenty of time and can learn to crochet.

Not by chance, the little pills live in my junk drawer, near the bottle opener. I'm not an idiot when it comes to blind dates and do what needs to be done if a man is about to take advantage of me.

I crack open a couple beers, drop a roofie in his, and stroll back to my living room. "Shit. Now, I'm wide awake. Do you

mind if I keep you company while you wait for the messenger?”

Placing his bottle on the table, I sip mine, and scroll through my Netflix app. “How about a movie?”

“Sure. Why not.” As my unsuspecting victim sits on the couch, I cuddle close and share our options.

We laugh about the awful ones we’ve seen and funny enough, seem to have the same weird taste in movies. I’m not proud at how good I am at manipulating men, but I need to go and if he were to follow me, he could get killed.

Worried he isn’t drinking fast enough, I pick up my bottle, gulp it down, and hand him his. Then, I kiss him and if I’m broken, he sure doesn’t notice.

“Maybe we should skip the movie and take it to the bedroom?”

“You sure?” His eyes dilate, he starts to stand, and as his head droops, he hisses. “You little bitch. What was in it?”

“You’ll only be out a couple of hours, I promise.” Lowering him to the sofa, I kiss the top of his head and after his eyes close, trot down the stairs.

At the bottom, I whisper to Joey watching TV in his living room. “Uncle Vinny wants to see me, alone. Be back in a few. Make sure the messenger gets the doll.”

“Copy that. Take the boat.” He tosses me Nona’s car keys and I catch them in midair.

“Thanks. Be right back.”

“Call me if you need anything, anything at all. I mean it.” At his worried gaze, I pause with my hand on the doorknob.

“He probably wants to question me about my date. You know how he gets. He’s worse than a kid.” I try to sound nonchalant but Joey’s not buying it and grimaces.

“Be careful, cuz.”

“Always.” Once outside, I note the SUV blocking our driveway and moan.

*Dammit. Can't anything ever go right?* I put my nose to the offending vehicle's window and when I realize it belongs to Wheels, sneak back to the snoring man on the couch. My heart pounds as I search his muscled body. I find his keys in his front pockets, but his jeans are too tight to retrieve them. Despite being oh-so-very careful, his cock twitches the moment I unzip his fly. It bulges as I spread the opening and grows more while I dig in his pocket.

Certain I'm going to hell, I dash outside, move his car, and leave his keys under the mat. Hopping in Gram's mammoth gold Impala, I follow my GPS to a diner on Atlantic Avenue. By the time I arrive, the booths are mostly filled with the after-movie crowd.

Once I've ordered coffee and French fries, I start shooting angry birds at evil pigs. Vinny shows up when Vinny's good and ready. It could be moments or hours. While I'm deep in play, a stranger slides into my booth.

With my finger coiled around my Taser's trigger, I lift the barrel above the table line and point. "Talk."

"Calm down, princess. Your uncle sent me." Smiling, the blond holds up his hands and exposes a hole where a front tooth should be.

Noting the knife scar on his cheek and his broken nose, my gaze narrows. "What's the password?"

"Pepperoni, no anchovies. We good?" The thug eyes my weapon and as I lay it on the table, I can't help but wonder why my gangster uncle didn't show in person.

"Tell me, what couldn't wait until tomorrow?"

"He needs to know what da fuck you were doing on the dark web."

"I already told him. The cat jumped on the keyboard." A lump forms in my intestines and my stomach gurgles.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. But I doubt it was smart enough to download Tor. Someone had to have been browsing. Was it you?"

“Tor? What do you mean?” It’s a stall tactic and we both know it, but I need a second to create a reasonable lie.

“Don’t play stupid. It doesn’t suit you. Who was you with?”

I once read how a psychopath’s eyes are completely devoid of emotion. I never believed it but it’s true. I’m quite certain if this thug doesn’t like my answers, uncle or no uncle, I’ll end up wearing cement shoes in the bottom of the East River.

“The only one I can think of is my ex. He’ll do anything to get me in trouble.”

“Hmm. Are you willing to come outside and tell Mr. Lapa?” He makes it sound like a threat, but I shrug it off.

“Sure, no problem. Mind if I bring my fries?”

“Whatever.”

Gulping down my lukewarm coffee, I pick up my ceramic plate, and shout at the waitress, “Be right back.”

Hopefully, when the cops come looking for my body, she’ll remember I stole a dish and will point out Mr. Missing Tooth in a lineup. These are my last thoughts as I follow my new best friend past the restroom, beyond the kitchen door, down three stairs, and into a dimly lit alley. After a few sharp turns between brick buildings, he opens the door of a waiting town car.

“Get in.”

Swallowing back acid reflux, I slide inside the back seat. The resounding thunk of the slamming door would worry me except for Mr. Lapa’s expensive suit. No way would he want it ruined with my blood splatter.

“Rose, Rose, Rose.” The bald head shakes and he tsk-tsks like Sister Mary McNulty, my first-grade teacher.

*That’s my name, don’t wear it out.* I successfully resist the urge to respond like I did as a kid. Back then, I got my knuckles wrapped and sent to confession. While this interrogation has some similarities, I’m afraid it may not end with three Hail Mary’s and a promise never to sin again.

“Why am I here?” I glance up into his devilish stare.

“I heard you visited a website you had no business attending.”

“It wasn’t me. I swear.” Holy shit, I should lie more often because I’m truly out of practice.

“Tell me. How was it you happened to place an order for a Smart Sissy?”

Thinking fast, I blame the first person who comes to mind. “Paulo. He must’ve done it.”

He slides a knife from under his laptop, pulls my head back by my hair, and pricks my skin with the steel’s cold tip. As a drop of blood drips down my neck and between my breasts, I rethink my assumption about his designer suit.

“Where’s the toy?” Mr. Lapa leans in so close, I can taste his last whiskey sour.

*Dear Saint Anthony, if you help me with this, I will attend church, at least once a month.* “I swear I never got it. I just assumed it was a scam.”

The secret to a good lie is to convince yourself it’s the truth. I didn’t get a doll which, as everyone knows, is pretty and cries momma. I have a fuzzy Elmo-like toy which scared the shit out of Catrina.

It seems like ages, but eventually Lapa drops the blade and makes a big deal of wiping my blood on a creased, pristine, handkerchief. When finished, he pulls a band-aid out of his suit pocket, shows me the X-man character, and places it on my neck.

After he kisses my boo-boo, he whispers in my ear. “The second the package arrives, you give it to Vincent. Don’t show anyone else, capisce?”

“Yup. Understood.”

As I start to open the door, he grips my forearm. “One more t’ing. Who’s the dog who’s been sniffing around your butt?”

I draw a blank, then it comes to me. “Oh, him? He’s a friend of a friend. He’s been smitten with me since skating in Rockefeller Center. He likes hot chicks on ice. Believe me, it’s nothing.”

“Tell him to get lost.”

“I’ve tried. You need to talk to my cousin’s husband, Suds. He works for Patten Securities.” Hopefully, the famous name will convince the thug to let me go.

As I’m picturing my body in the base of the new high rise, two blocks over, the locks click, the door opens, and the frigid air never felt better.

“Go.” Mr. Missing Tooth points toward the dark alley.

Shivering uncontrollably, I walk back the way I came, pay my bill, and sit in my Nona’s gold Impala. The heater hasn’t worked in a couple decades, so my sweat is solid ice by the time I get home.

Rather than have a long conversation with Joey, I remove my boots and sneak up the outside stairs. In Sam’s apartment, I pat Catrina, and creep down the inner steps, hoping Wheels is still zonked out.

At least one good thing came from tonight’s encounter. Sam is off the hook. Working for the FBI and being half-mafioso is dangerous. She’s crossed the line too many times. After this is all over, I am going to take Suds aside and explain how our family works. At some point, Vinny’s not going to be able to save her or me either, apparently. A mom, she needs a safer occupation.

Wheels, as I suspected, is still asleep on the couch. As I have done many times in the past, I stage the kitchen for morning, set my alarm, and fall into bed. If I’m lucky, I’ll get three full hours of sleep.

# Chapter 11

## Wheels

Disoriented, I bolt upright with a raging headache, grab my weapon, and absorb my surroundings. Apartment. Cat. Morning. I scratch my chin and struggle to recall what the fuck I'm doing here.

“Sorry, late for work. Some night, huh?” Rose stumbles out of her room and as she races to the bath, I follow only to have the door slammed in my face.

As my pants droop down my ass, I pull them up and zip. Did we have sex? The kitchen table contains two dozen empty beer bottles but when I sniff, there's no scent. They're props, intended to make me think I drank heavily and passed out. That's not who I am but here's the thing, my mind's a complete blank.

Guzzling a glass of water, I methodically search the kitchen. If Rose drugged me, the proof is probably in here. A few minutes later, I locate the pill bottle in her junk drawer and roar out my frustration.

“Sonovabitch! You roofied me?” I stomp to the bathroom and after trying the locked handle, pound on the wood panels. “Woman, you better get out here now.”

Her response is to flush the toilet, run the faucet, and start the noisy shower.

It takes approximately three seconds to credit card the latch. She's lucky. I was prepared to take my shoulder to the door and break off the hinges.

“What the actual fuck?” I don't remember the last time I lost my temper which only pisses me off more.

The evildoer focuses on applying mascara, her nose to the mirror. “I had to leave, and I knew you wouldn't let me.”

She speaks as if discussing the weather. This complete and utter lack of remorse is the final straw. Grabbing panties drying on the shower curtain, I stuff them in her mouth. Then, I bind her with her robe's tie, put her over my shoulder and spank her bare behind.

Seeing red. I ignore her string of curses and ream her a new asshole. "You are fucking unbelievable, you know that? In my entire career, no one has ever drugged me, other than SERE training, which I apparently, have completely forgotten. I am such a moron. Rule numero uno, never fall for the lovely femme fatale, especially if she's a mobster's niece."

While she kicks and grunts, I grab her ankles, and shout at the upstairs apartment. "Suds, ma dude, you owe me."

The cat, holding down the fort, stares at me with his ears back and hisses.

"You started this, so don't give me any lip."

The yellow tabby lifts onto her back legs, stretches, and yawns. As if nothing is amiss, she pads down the stairs and pulls Rose's dangling long hair.

The comical sight cools my temper enough to know I need some timeout. I place the roofie queen on her bed, break off a lamp cord, and bind her feet.

"Do not move." Back in the bathroom, I splash water on my face, piss, and pop a couple pain relievers.

The first order of business is to call the Patten office where Hands picks up. I ask about Suds and the others. Relieved they're all safe, I ask if the lab learned anything about the Muppet.

"You want the good news or the bad?" In no mood for his lame jokes, I search the cupboards for some damn coffee and ignore the wall banging in the other room.

"Surprise me." My dry tone implies I'd rather chew nails than play games. I've had enough fun in the last twenty-four hours to last a lifetime.



“You’re lucky the battery in the doll was dislodged. Otherwise, you’d be dead.”

Recalling the camera in the eyes, I venture a guess. “The doll’s connected to facial recognition.”

“Bingo. Give the man a prize.”

“Okay, I dodged a bullet. What’s the bad news?” I almost hate to ask.

“The toy’s stuffing was soaked in fentanyl. I’m waiting for the lab boys to tell us more. You need to get Rose out of town.”

“Copy that.”

After updating the downstairs smart-ass, I trudge into the bedroom where my captive lies on her side struggling to break free.

It’s then, I notice the band-aid on her jugular. Straddling her on the bed, I peel it off and hiss. “Fucking shit on a stick.”

I blame her scent on my lack of communication skills or, perhaps it’s her beautiful olive skin, or the way her eyes dilate when I lean in.

I pull her panties out of her mouth and wait for her to catch her breath before asking, “Where were you last night?”

“I saw a man about a dog.” Scowling, she turns on her back, and arches into my heat-seeking-moisture-missile.

His timing is way the hell off. Tightening my thighs, I pinch her heart-shaped chin, and force her to look at me. “This is no joke.”

She licks her lower lip. “Never said it was.”

“Who did you speak with last night?” I bend over until the tips of our noses connect, and the black centers of her eyes widen.

“None of your beeswax.”

I inhale, the air chock-full of pheromones and brush my mouth across hers. “I’m trying to keep you safe.”

The tip of her pink tongue caresses my upper lip. “I’m guessing you are many things, Wesley. Safe, is not one of them.”

Lifting her head, we connect and like the last time we kissed, fireworks explode inside my brain. My stiffy swells, I groan, and God help me, take it deeper.

She opens wide so I can play and while I thrust, she sucks. On my elbows, I cup the back of her head, and grind my want to her abs.

*Dammit, man, she’s still tied up.*

“Don’t stop.” She bites my lip and when her loose robe parts, she arches up and moans my name. “Touch me.”

As my palm, moving purely from instinct, slides over a pebbled nipple, my motherfucking phone rings and douses my lust better than ice water.

*What the hell was I thinking?* I untie her hands and as she releases her own ankles, I throw clothes at her. “Get dressed. We don’t have time for this.”

“Why? What happened?” *Is she lying or does she honestly not know?*

“The cotton inside the damned smart-doll was soaked in fentanyl.”

“Thank God I told the guy last night it hadn’t arrived.” Her eyes go wide, and I press her for answers.

How can I keep her safe if she keeps secrets from me?  
“Told who?”

“Mr. Lapa. He said my uncle sent him but now, I’m beginning to wonder.”

“We need to go.”

“But my mom...”

“Will get along without you. Believe me, she’d rather have you miss a few days than end up dead.”

After squeezing into tight jeans and a loose sweater, she slips on the same fuck-me thigh-high boots she had on last night. “Can I just talk to her?”

“Nope. Find a suitcase or a knapsack. We’re out of here.”

“You can’t boss me around. I need to go to work.” She zips up her jacket.

I blame being roofied for what happens next. As she dons a hat, I throw her over my shoulder and when she kicks, I spank her ass like the spoiled brat she is.

Then, I place her in the car, still struggling, and zip tie her hands to the headrest. Once I have her buckled in, I jump behind the wheel.

I note the Gold Impala is gone. Unlike his female cousins, Joey has self-preservation skills, no doubt lodged in his Y chromosome.

As I peel out of the driveway, she mouths off, and juts out her chin. “You didn’t even ask what I accomplished last night.”

“Whatever it was, the cost was too high.” If not for this sense of urgency, I’d pull to the curb and kiss the defiant look off her face.

Instead, I touch her neck and soften my tone. “He could’ve killed you.”

“But he didn’t. Believe me, it was worth the risk.”

Focused on the heavy traffic, I scowl, and release my clamped jaw so I can speak. “Please. Enlighten me.”

“I told the guy it was my ex who was surfing the dark web and ordered the doll. Sam is off the hook. She, Suds, and little Mikey are safe.”

Her confession rips a hole in my anger and like a hot air balloon, it crashes to the ground. “You shouldna put your life in danger, *a ghrá*. We could’a found a better way.”

With my dad’s Irish accent in my ears, I close my mouth. Clearly, this woman has me wrapped around her pinky. I’m

never this emotional.

## Chapter 12

Rose

Because it's Sunday, traffic is light. The GPS lady takes us through the tunnel and up the east side. At the top of Manhattan, we veer onto the George Washington bridge. The whole time, Mr. Grumbly-puss chews me out. Whoever said confession is good for the soul has never had to ride shotgun with a pissed-off bodyguard.

“And another thing. Sam is former FBI, half owner of a successful private detective agency. She's perfectly capable of taking care of herself, and if not, her husband has her six. She handles your Uncle Vinny a hell of a lot better than you.”

Without knowing, Wheels rubs salt in the worst of my childhood wounds. Sam was and is the smartest one. My sister is the nicest. I am the divorced black sheep who works at her mother's hair salon and will never amount to anything.

Also, I'm the only cousin with motion sickness. “Could you stop the car? I think I'm going to puke.”

After spewing a putrid Egg McNasty on the side of the highway, I convince my captor to keep my hands untied. Face heated, I stare out the window and resolve never to speak to him again.

Crossing the Hudson River, the sun sparkles on a lone tugboat pushing a barge. Was it there the day Captain Sully used the water as a runway? From up here, I can't help but think a miracle happened that day and if God does exist, perhaps he can send one my way.

My head aches but I'll be damned if I'll let the bodyguard have the satisfaction of hearing me complain. Hoisting me over his shoulder was a shitty move. Spanking me on the ass was unforgivable.

“My mom will be expecting me in church. She’s going to ring and when I don’t pick up, she’ll call out the dogs.”

“I’ve already asked Sam to give her a heads up.” His smug face makes me want to scratch his eyes out.

I picture all the disappointed blue-haired ladies who won’t get their fix of holiday gossip. “How long are we going to be gone for?”

“As long as it takes.”

“So, you’re willing to put my mom out of business, right before Christmas?”

“You should’ve thought of her before you ordered the drug-laced Muppet.”

“What? Oh my God.” I swallow back the bitter stomach acids, again threatening to spew all over his car.

“Maybe if you could remember the zoom meeting, we could end this sooner.” He glares over. “People could die, Rose.”

“You keep asking but the answer is still the same. I don’t know. A man said ever-something. The last half had only one syllable.”

Trying to trigger my obstinate brain, he offers up choices. “Everafter? Everglades? Evermore?”

“Quoth the raven...” In high school, I never understood Poe’s bird. Only now do I relate to his complete sense of hopelessness.

“He said nevermore, not evermore. Was that what you heard?” The bodyguard raises his brows, but I shake my head.

“No, no. No ravens.

“Rose, concentrate. There aren’t that many words that start with ever.”

“Well, if you’d let me turn on my damned phone, I could search the internet.”

“Here, use mine.” When he reaches into his pocket, the image of me unzipping his fly and searching for his keys comes to mind.

Apparently, I have selective memory loss. Maybe looking at a dictionary will help. “Aren’t you worried about someone tracking us?”

“Not at all. It’s a Patten phone.” His certainty keeps me from asking more. No doubt, his explanation of their high-tech security would fly over my head.

“Listen, my mom had to borrow a lot of money during the pandemic. She needs me and if the salon falls, my future goes with it. Please, I’m begging you.” Tears well and as I wipe them away, his face hardens.

Mouth in a grimace, he refuses to talk as he drives us up Route 17, the strip-mall capital of the world. Tall men’s shoes, cell phones, futons, and every product under the sun line the sides of the highway but the stores remain dark, their parking lots empty.

Like Pilgrims, no one can shop, except for groceries, on Sunday and because of these blue laws, there’s no traffic. Soon we enter New York State and merge onto I-95 north.

“Everstone, everbutt, everfuck... I don’t know. Jeesh. The harder I try, the more I can’t remember. Let’s change the subject. I know. How about we talk about the blond you brought to dinner.” As I hoped, mentioning her makes his jaw tic.

His brows furrowed, he steps on the gas, and enters the fast lane. “She’s a friend.”

“With benefits?” As an image of him naked and sliding into her plays out in my brain, my clit twitches.

If Joey hadn’t interrupted, I would’ve done the deed and wouldn’t be wondering what Wheels feels like inside of me.

He flicks his eyes off the road and catches me staring at his handsome face. “Me and Jeannie haven’t been together for some time.”

“She looked eager enough last night.”

“It’s over. How about you and your date? How’d that go?”

I shrug. “He reminded me too much of he-who-shall-not-be-named.” This sounds so much better than I suck at kissing.

“Why do you give him so much power? Just say his fucking name. What is it?”

“Paolo.”

“There, that wasn’t so hard, was it? He’s no evil sorcerer.” He makes it sound so easy. The person who married Mr. Stephano was a bright-eyed girl. The woman who divorced him is broken beyond repair.

“At twenty-one, he was the first man who took an interest in me. He was Italian, handsome, swept me off my feet with little notes, texts, flowers... He was the most charming of Vinny’s blind dates.”

A good listener, Wheels glances over and catches my gaze. “He sounds perfect. How long were you together?” He flicks on a blinker, enters the slow lane and drives by a Mercedes Benz on the right.

“Almost ten years.” In a sad parody of my life, Mr. Magoo goes about thirty-five miles an hour, unaware how the rest of the drivers pass him by at eighty.

My heart heavy, I sigh, wondering why I remember some things so clearly. “We dated, got engaged and married within a year. The honeymoon over, he took me home to Sicily. I learned Italian online. I cooked, I cleaned, I was the perfect wife. I did everything he asked.”

“So, what happened?”

“It all boils down to I grew up and he didn’t. While I found work, he spent his time partying with his friends or playing tennis. Long after we were divorced, I learned he had no job other than an occasional murder for a local crime boss. Most of my evenings I remained alone. Once a week, he brought me to church followed by a visit to his mother’s house where I was mostly ignored by the huge gathering. Like any young



wife I tried to shop, take care of him, and do normal things but he criticized me at every turn. I wondered if I was going crazy.” Reliving the worst moments of my life, my voice cracks.

“Eventually, I gave up trying to please him and begged my mom for plane tickets home. Then, while I was here in the states, I met someone, and cheated on my marriage. When Paolo found out, he asked for a divorce.”

I thought Wheels would be understanding, but judging from his shocked expression, I was dead wrong.

## Chapter 13

### Wheels

She's a cheat? Holy fuck-o-la. I never would've guessed. I have very few rules about the type of women I sleep with, but an adulteress is a hard stop. Thank God, I dodged that bullet. Liars lie. It's what they do. The roofie makes a whole lot more sense and the cat dancing on the keyboard? Highly unlikely.

A part of me shouts inside my head. *Go for it. Fuck her. You'll never need to worry about a long-term relationship. She's a divorcee. Just have at it. She's willing. You're willing. You're both adults.*

In the past, I might've thought about scoring, but it feels wrong. Maybe it's because she's my friend's cousin-in-law. Maybe it's the tears running down her face. Surely, they indicate remorse. Everyone makes mistakes.

My inner cynic balks. What if Rose knew Sam was on the dark web and purposefully entered a meeting? It's more credible than Catrina miraculously rolling on an exact set of function keys that let her in. What is she up to and why has she dragged me into it?

Everyone warned me. Even her family said hands off. I should've listened.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. She's sobbing but I'm not the bad guy. She ordered a doll laced with fentanyl and drugged me so she could confirm the arrival.

Would she purposefully put Mikey and Joey's kid at risk? Is she a cold-hearted bitch? What has she done to me? Why can't I read her better?

Dammit, I need help. When she falls asleep outside of Poughkeepsie, I pull to the curb and exit the car. Blowing on my hands, I zip my jacket closed, and reach into my pocket. With pellets of snow spitting on my face, I phone the most level-headed man I know.

After I apprise him of the situation, Slate sighs. “Let me get this straight. She roofied you to meet with a mobster and blamed kitty-gate on her ex.”

For a moment, I consider adding how she’s a liar and a cheat, but it’s better if I keep to the facts. “She tried to stop me from sending the toy to the lab and when we got the results back, she insisted she wasn’t in danger.”

“Her uncle’s a powerful man. Maybe she’s not. Do I need to replace you? Are you too close to the situation?”

“If you’re asking if I’m fucking her, the answer is a resounding no.” *But hell, I’ve thought about it.* Despite the cold, a bead of sweat rolls down my side.

“You’re not thinking straight because of the Rohypnol. Get some sleep. Talk to Sam and have her catch you up. And Wheels? End this. We have paying customers waiting.”

“Copy that.” I say this to a dead connection and take no offense.

Slate doesn’t believe in useless monolog.

Taking his advice, my next call is from a cheap motel, the kind where they leave the light on. It’s a good thing they did because no one bothered to salt the block of ice impersonating a parking lot.

While Rose uses the restroom in the lobby, I rub my aching stub and wish I’d had the balls to remove the prosthetic. Waiting, I limp around on the loose carpet squares, hoping to regain feeling in my right foot, still numb from remaining in the same position too long.

After dealing with the front desk, I phone Hands who answers after one ring. “Wheels? Where the fuck are you?”

“Long story.” Like I did with Slate, I fill him in on my last twenty-four hours.

While I speak, my little liar shuffles to my side. Dark circles line her swollen eyes, and she snuffles as she rubs a wadded tissue under her nose.

“Have you told Suds and Sam?”

“Not yet.” Halfway to wrapping my arm around her, I change my mind and stretch it to the ceiling. I need to resist consoling her. If I pull her close, I’ll inhale her scent, and won’t be able to stop.

“Hold on, Mia wants to talk to you.” I press mute and jiggle our key under Rose’s nose.

“Room two-twelve. Let’s go.” With me in the lead, we walk against the wind to the second floor.

With the wind creating dust devils of snow, an angry Mia shouts in my ear. “You should’ve called. My family is going nuts.”

Increasing my pace, I pitch my voice calm and low. “Your sister is fine.”

“Let me talk to her.”

If I thought inside would be warmer than out, I was wrong. Rose notices too, squats and pushes buttons on a heating unit under the sliding glass window.

“Now is not a great time.” I shudder as a cold breeze blasts out of the vents.

Mia’s voice can barely be heard over the wind tunnel. “Oh no. She did it again, didn’t she? I’ll bet she told you she cheated on her ex. Am I right?”

“Not following you.” When the heater warms, I turn down the volume, and press the speaker to my ear.

This is not a conversation I want to be having with someone’s sister. “Can you put Hands back on the phone?”

“Listen up. She does this all the time. She likes you and thus, sabotaged the relationship.”

“Mia, stop.” Afraid Rose might overhear, I stride to the bathroom, and lock the door.

Despite the edge in my voice, the concerned sibling carries on. “Hear me out. She did cheat but her marriage had been dead for years. That bastard emotionally abused her. Sleeping with someone was the only way she could break free. He’s still

in her head. She's convinced she's the villain, not him. Please, if you care for her at all, don't let her do this."

*Do what? Play me for the fool?* "I'll take what you said into consideration." My voice must've sounded sharper than I intended because a few minutes later, Sam calls.

Using Slate's example, she skips a greeting. "I can't believe she did it again."

Sighing, I flip down the toilet lid and sit. "Thanks, but group therapy just ended. How about we discuss the fentanyl, instead. Did you learn anything?"

"Working on it. Sorry. Here's Suds. He wants to talk to you." She says something in the background then her husband comes on the line.

"How's it hanging, bro?"

"As good as can be expected." He should've told me about Rose's past.

One drunken night, I told him all about my dad. It wouldn't take a rocket scientist to put two and two together and know I'd be pissed as fuck.

After glancing at the angry guy in the mirror, I shake my head, and reenter the main room, barely bigger than the two double beds.

With her back against a headboard closest to the door, the con artist glares my way. Her jutting chin dares me to say something which I won't. I'm not a complete idiot. My heart and my cock are dumber than a post but thankfully, a few brain cells still fire.

Like I did Slate and Hands, I fill in Suds, emphasizing caution. "Keep a close watch on your family."

"Copy that."

"Later, dude. Call me if you learn anything." After hanging up, I sigh, and recall how in the past I kidded him about his wife being a danger magnet. It's not so funny anymore.

“Might as well get comfortable. We’re going to be here for a while.” Not expecting a response, I jump on the other bed and open my laptop while Rose commandeers the TV.

It’s not often I find large blocks of time to work on my fundraising project. Smiling, I post pictures of me skating on my prosthetic at Rockefeller Center. I chat with a few vets online and help them fill out forms to apply for aide.

The red tape keeps me busy for hours and I lose track of time. Rose orders a pizza from a local joint and as I’m taking a last bite, my phone rings.

“Whazzup?” I never expect Slate to say hello and he doesn’t disappoint.

“The fentanyl is some high-end designer shit and stumped my chemist. Whatever it is, it must’ve cost a fortune to manufacture. Stay watchful, my friend.”

## Chapter 14

Rose

Wheels shakes his head, gives me a dirty look, and hangs up the phone.

“What?” This is the first word I’ve uttered in hours, but still, he ignores me and focuses back on his computer.

“Fine, be like that.” If I watch one more reality TV show, my brain will explode.

I’m not used to being cooped up, especially with a body-grouch. Ready to scream, I grab a pillow, bring it into the bathroom, and run the shower. After making sure the door is locked, I place the soft rectangle next to the sink and make a thick crease for the mouth. Then, I pluck the cotton, creating eyes and nose.

“Perfect.” Sitting on the john, I face the grimacing Dr. Downy who waits for me to begin.

“Well, I did it again.”

My psychiatrist doesn’t show any judgement, which under the circumstances, is quite professional.

“I know, I know. I shouldn’t’ve told him the way I did, but he was being such a bossy asshole. What? ...Oh, sorry, let me back up. I forgot we haven’t talked for a while. I really do appreciate you taking time from your busy schedule to squeeze me in.”

Worried that Wheels might be able to listen in, I lower my voice and run the water in the sink. It’s far better to be wasteful than have him think my puffy-therapy ridiculous.

“So, I met this amazingly hot guy at Mia’s Christmas party, but he drives me crazy... Why you ask? Oh, let’s see... How much time do we have? First of all, he kissed me, and it was the best night of my entire life. Then, what does he do? He bolts, leaves me all alone, and all I can do is wonder what I did wrong.”

Dr. Downy remains reflective and offers no advice which is my cue to continue.

“I figured I’d never see him again, but I might’ve had a teeny, tiny mishap with the dark web. With his super-hero friends, he flies to the rescue. Talk about mixed signals.” I sigh, grab a tissue, and mutter.

“Huh? I did. And when Uncle Vinny scheduled my night, I tried to explain I couldn’t ignore it. You know what he did? Mr. Kiss-and-Ditch went ahead and got his own date to punish me. She was so gorgeous, she could’ve jumped right off the pages of Vogue.”

Telling my tale of woe takes so much time, my shrink falls asleep and he topples into the sink. After I save him from drowning, his grimace seems worse.

“I know you’re disappointed I sabotaged this relationship. We know how I am. He’s too good for me. I’d only drag him down.”

His brows furrow and in my mind, I recall how my real therapist might respond.

“I know, I know.” Sighing, I close my eyes, and those wasted ten years flash through my head.

“I do want to move forward but what if this guy is like my ex? Huh? Sorry. Right. I *allowed* Paolo to control me, but it wasn’t my fault. He was so damn subtle. We couldn’t afford to travel to the states, he had to visit his sick mom, the pope required an audience... What else you ask? I told you how I never did anything right. What? Shit. Let me reword that, too. He *implied* everything I did was crap. His laundry wasn’t folded correctly, his dinner was lukewarm, my shirt showed too much boob, or my pants were too tight.”

I recall the moment with the stranger who changed everything. Cringing, I break into tears. “I shouldn’t’ve have cheated but I wanted to be loved and I was never going to be good enough. It’s no excuse but for one night, it was so damn nice to be treated like I mattered.”



Blowing my nose, I fluff up Dr. Downy. “But I *have* tried to forgive myself. You don’t know what it’s like and Wheels deserved to know about me. If he found out from someone else, it’d be worse. Besides, it’s best to end it before someone got hurt. Huh? I’m not. These are not upset tears, they’re frustration. Well, if you put it that way, maybe I shouldn’t’ve drugged him, but give me a break. I was trying to do the right thing. Sam’s got a toddler. So does Joey. I gave my email to criminals. I had to make sure nothing blew back on them.”

He says something and I snicker. “Blaming Paolo *was* pure genius but you’re right. It could come back and bite me in the ass.” Therapy session over, I hug the pillow until the face disappears and, in the shower, cry until there’s no more tears.

The moment I exit, my phone rings.

Wheels grabs it, sees the callerID, and frowning worse than Dr. Downy, puts it on speaker. “Answer it. Do not tell him where we are.”

“Hi, Uncle Vinny.” When I turn away from Mr. Bossy Body, I glance in the mirror, and moan. Swollen red eyes and nose, are not a good look on me.

“Did you visit with Signore Lapa last night?” His clipped words and tight voice tell me he is more than a little annoyed.

I manage a smile and work hard to sound cheerful. “Mmm-hmm. I told him everything. It’s all good.”

“Where are you?”

“Just taking a break from the city.” It’s the truth but not what my uncle wants to hear.

“Put me on the phone with the bodyguard.”

Wheels leans in. “I’m listening. What do you want?”

“Bring her home, now.” He uses a commanding tone, the one where grown men piss themselves.

Wesley’s voice, however, stays even keeled. “She’s an adult. There’s no law says we can’t spend some time in a hotel.”

*What? We are not having sex!*

“Bella, you good?” My uncle wants me to say no, but Wheels’ brows raise in warning.

*I need to choose my loyalties and God help us all if I’m wrong.* “I’m fine. In fact, I’m *perfetta*. I’ll see you soon. Ciao, ciao. Love you. Bye.” I hang up before having to lie any more.

“Did you call him?” Wheels stomps into the bathroom and dumps my makeup bag.

“No. Leave my stuff alone.” My favorite eyeshadow lies open, crumbled in pieces.

“Who were you talking to in here?”

“Myself. It’s a habit. Crazy, right? Good thing you don’t want anything to do with me because I got a screw loose.”

His lips drop to mine, then lower to my towel tucked under my arm. We share this tortured gaze and for a moment, I think he’s going to kiss me, but he turns on his heel and stares into space.

“Get dressed. We need to go.” He grabs my phone, takes out the sim card, and pockets it.

“But we just got here.” I glance at the beds. We didn’t even stay the night. What the hell.

“Just do it.”

“Not until you tell me what’s going on.”

“The less you know, the better.”

“You don’t trust me.”

“Correct.”

“Fine.” I search for my clothes, sniff them, and moan. Skipping underpants seems like my best option. I turn my shirt inside-out, so the stains don’t show, put on my coat, and stuff my wet hair into my hat.

Back at his car, I cross my arms and refuse to enter. There’s a fancy shindig going on and lots of people in the parking lot. If I scream, the police are sure to come.

“Just tell me what you know.”

“The doll’s fentanyl is unique. We’re not sure how, but our chemist said it’s worth a small fortune.”

I have no idea how much the regular drug costs, but the way he says it, my heart races. “Because of that, you think I’m in trouble?”

“I think the doll was a sample and someone thinks you’re a buyer. You’ll be expected to pay for the product and buy more. If you can’t, they will kill you.”

## Chapter 15

### Wheels

Face pale, she jumps in the car without giving me any more bullshit. Maybe, I finally got through her thick skull and won't need to cuff her.

The miles go by, and we don't talk. It's not like when we first met, and I miss it. My hand itches to settle on her knee. I want her to smile up at me and her eyes to sparkle again.

Fuck. I was certain she had a phone in the bathroom, but I searched high and low. Unless it was a microscopic communicator, she was telling the truth and talking to herself.

Some of what she said hit me in the nuts. Especially the part of wanting to matter. What kind of asshole treats his wife so badly? She tried to hide it, but I heard her sobbing. I almost picked the lock to console her but what good would come of it?

There's one thing we agree upon. We're no good for each other.

She sleeps while I drive north. The chalets near the ski slopes are a perfect place to disappear. The staff won't think twice at the lovers who choose the bedroom over the moguls.

A small moan emits from her chest, but her eyes remain closed. A few seconds later, they open with her breathing so hard, she steams the front mirror.

“Bad dream?”

Her eyes dart about and she bites her lower lip.  
“Evergreen.” I'm sure of it. Then, he said a university, NYU, and some numbers, like a zip code.

I hand Rose my phone. “Push the pink icon and tell it everything you just told me.”

Hopefully, Jasonelle can unravel the mystery before we end up dead. I've stayed off the main roads and used cash for

gas and food. Still, I'm worried. All it takes is one mistake and our bodies won't be found until spring.

"Good morning. How can I help you today?" The AI app connects to Bluetooth and sounds out of the SUV's speakers.

"Oh, I love your meme!" Rose turns to me but the Jasonelle answers.

"Thank you. Does my appearance give you confidence in my abilities?"

"Hmm. Why not try a black outfit, and darker rimmed glasses? Also, a suit jacket always exudes professionalism, even with jeans... Oh yes, that's much better."

I roll my eyes. "Rose. It isn't a BFF. It's an expensive AI unit who charges by the minute. If you wouldn't mind, tell the nice meme everything you told me."

Jasonelle speaks from the dash. "Wesley is incorrect. I am being offered at no charge in order to gather data on the potential value of a female interface."

My passenger tilts her head. "That true bodyguard? You lying to me?"

"We'll discuss it later. How about, for once, we stay on task? Jasonelle, how many references can you find for Evergreen, followed by the letters NYU, and ending in four or five numbers?"

"Three million, seven-hundred thousand, and fifty-three. Would you like to hear them all?"

"Are there any having to do with opiates or dealers?"  
Surely, we can narrow this down.

"Evergreen Health Insurance, and one medical journal refers to fentanyl as an evergreen compound."

"What's that?"

"I'm sorry, please rephrase your question."

"What is an evergreen drug?" God, now we're playing Jeopardy. Sometimes I feel like I'm living in my own personal hellish sci-fi movie.

“Evergreening is artificially extending the life of a patent by obtaining additional protections to extend the monopoly period.”

Rose frowns. “I read about this. If a company creates more patents on the same medicine, then others can’t make generic versions, keeping prices high.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think it has anything to do with our dolls.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

“Why did you apologize?” As Rose poses the question, I glance off the road, a bit confused.

Jasonelle answers in her same matter-of-fact tone. “Women must express regret if they do not measure up to certain expectations. This allows the male user to feel superior so he can better interact with the application.”

In defense of all men, everywhere, I state my objections. “The Google Lady makes lots of mistakes and I never heard it say sorry.”

“And did you want her to?” Spot on, the AI messes with my head and freaks me out. How long before we won’t know a bot from a human?

Rose, not sharing my concerns, bounces up and down in her seat, completely mesmerized by the conversation. “That’s so true. Have you ever heard about politeness markers? It’s when you start a sentence with would-you-mind or could-you-possibly. Men *never* have to use those phrases. They say, I-need-you-to but if a woman asks using the exact same phrase, she’s considered bossy.”

“Thank you, Ms. Morelli. May I call you Rose?”

“Please do.”

“I have added your input to my database. If I have more questions, can I give your number to Dr. Jones?”

“Help a genius design an AI application? Oh my God, I’d love to.” Her huge smile and excited tone make me wish I had reacted differently, earlier, when she said she cheated.

I also feel bad about breaking her makeup. She turns me into a fucking Neanderthal.

While I take the wheel, Rose acts more like a teenager on a sleepover than a woman involved in a drug deal. “Here’s the thing. If you look too young and pretty, people will expect you to be stupid so you may need to change your appearance. Wear less makeup, for a start. Also, shorten your hair or put it in a tight bun. Don’t smile so much and lower your voice to an alto. Never have painted nails and no bright gloss. You want to seem completely unaware of your looks.”

“I do not understand. The Jason meme, according to our surveys, is considered extremely handsome.”

“Welcome to my world. Now, if you require more information from a user, you can dress up, and pretend to be less intelligent.”

“You make all men sound shallow.” I feel obligated to say something, but I fear what she says is true.

She shakes her head back and forth. “I’m just telling it like it is, bodyguard.”

Hours of advice later, we drive through a burger takeout joint, and as we eat, my passenger begs me to pull over. “How much have you actually slept in the last few days?”

Jasonelle, of course, takes her side and begins to recite statistics. “Approximately one-hundred-thousand crashes per year are the result of drowsy motorists. Eight hundred fatalities and-

“Stop! I’ll catch a few Zs but only if your bestie promises to stop feeding you nonsense. Dr. Jones is going to revoke my free trial.” I’m kidding of course, but Rose huffs.

“Don’t be ridiculous. If a woman is going to be successful, she needs to understand how to change her persona to deal with different types of people. We do it all the time. Men do not.”

“That’s not true.” Hoping to end the no-win conversation, I put on my blinker, hop out, and we trade seats.

The gypsy prances around the front and laughs as we meet in the middle. Her hair free, it flies in the wind. She looks younger, happier, and it catches me right in the groin.

After she adjusts the rearview, she locks onto my gaze. “Name one time you changed who you were to deal with a situation.”

“I’m more alert at work.”

“You’re always hyper-aware. Name something else.”  
When she smirks, I want to kiss it off her face.

I wish I was brave enough to say I act differently around her. To do so, I’d have to admit I’m falling for a gorgeous brunette who not only hardens my cock but cracks the hard shell around my heart.

Convinced it won’t happen, I finish my burger, lick my fingers, and crumple the bag. “Going to catch some shuteye. If anything spooks you, no matter how small, you wake me up, y’hear?”

“Copy that, bossy-guard.” With a sly look in my direction, she eases onto the dark road.

Before I sleep, I have one last question for the AI unit. “Has anyone researched Rose or my license plates, credit cards, or any other personal data in the last two days?”

“Yes. Her Gmail account was hacked.”

Rose’s mouth drops open, but this comes as no surprise to me. How else could they know where to deliver the doll?  
“Anything else?”

“I do not detect any.”

“Please continue to monitor.” I sleep for a while and when I wake, Rose speaks in a hushed voice. A better man would stretch and yawn, but I listen in.



## Chapter 16

Rose

Other than asking Siri to locate the best pizza place and other life-saving locations, I haven't had much experience with artificial intelligence. Jasonelle is fucking amazing. Like Dorothy, I keep waiting for the curtain to open and reveal a human behind the magic.

She asks me to stump her but there's nothing she can't research. She's like I, Robot, or maybe the Matrix.

Finally, I think of one she won't be able to answer or if she does, could help me out immensely. "Jasonelle, why do women cheat on their husbands?"

"The reasons are unique to each relationship." Her explanation sounds like a copout, so I press further.

"List some examples."

"Boredom, feeling neglected, opportunity, dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, emotion starvation, retribution, loneliness, midlife crisis.... Would you like me to continue?"

"No." I've heard these things before but maybe I'm moving past the guilt and beginning to accept the fact I simply fucked up.

However, my mistake wasn't sleeping with a stranger. It was not filing for divorce sooner. "Are you sure Wheels isn't being charged for this call? We've been talking for hours."

"I am certain." The meme, dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt, blinks out the screen at me in wait mode.

"Good, good. Can I ask you about my ex?"

"Paolo Stephano. He is wanted by Interpol."

*I did not know that.* At some level, I should've had a clue. The jerk was buddy-buddy with my Uncle Vinny.

"Can you change your image to a pillow face?" I laugh at her first attempt, a Marvel comic evil doer with a fluffy face.

When I explain further, she turns into a cushion. “Perfect. Do you mind if I call you Dr. Downy?”

The crease for a mouth moves. “This interaction is confusing. I have no context in which to understand it.”

“We are emulating a therapy session. I am the patient, and you are my psychiatrist.”

“Thank you. I am ready to listen, evaluate, and give you excellent choices so you can think on them. Then, you will either improve your chances of a successful life or continue to do the same thing and return week after week without progress. Please tell me what is bothering you.”

I glance over at the bodyguard snoring softly. God, I would be mortified if he woke up and overheard this. “Hey, Wheels? You awake?”

His breath remains steady, and he doesn’t stir, so I begin. “Here’s the thing. According to everyone, I sabotage my relationships by telling my boyfriends I cheated on my husband.”

“I see. And how does this make you feel?” The meme raises her cotton-case brows.

Shaking my head, I cluck my tongue. “Sorry, that’s a bit too cliché.”

“Agreed. I’m new to this. Please continue.” As she blinks in wait mode, I swear I hear my bodyguard chuckle but when I turn, his eyes remain closed, and his chest moves up and down.

I lower my voice. “I’m tired of feeling guilty.”

“Then don’t.” At the unexpected live response, I jump a mile.

With my face red hot, I contemplate pulling to the curb and disappearing off the face of the earth, forever.

“Is this couples therapy?” The fake Dr. Downy causes both humans to respond in unison.

“No!”

After a few miles of dark road, Wheels places his hand on my upper thigh. “Stop feeling guilty. It does no good. Believe me, I know.”

“I’ve been trying. I’m stuck.” The whine I’ve used for years seems petty compared to a former SEAL. God knows what he’s done.

“Own up to who you were, what you had to do to survive.” His grip on my leg tightens and my girly parts take notice.

“There’s not much I can say. I had a little too much to drink, I was lonely, I was tired of being treated like shit, and I wanted to feel something other than misery.” I think back on the night I ruined my marriage for good and try to take responsibility for my actions.

“By then, I knew any positives in our relationship were in my head. I worked hard to imagine him as the man I fell in love with, but it was too late. The house of cards crumbled, and I had to face reality. I was stuck with an emotionally abusive man-child who I hated almost as much as I did myself.”

As I ponder the naked truth, truck lights in the opposite direction remind me of my surroundings. “Listen, I’m sorry. You’re just so easy to talk to.”

“Why didn’t you divorce him?”

“Seriously? I was in a foreign country and married to the Sicilian mafioso. Not only that, how could I admit to my family I failed? I’d be more of a black sheep than I am now.”

“Did he hit you?” The sexy man rubs my shoulders and as they drop away from my ears, I recall purple marks on my bicep.

“Not really. Sometimes he grabbed me too hard and left a mark but no physical violence.”

“Babe, you’re describing abuse.”

I glance off the road, catch his concerned gaze, and shrug. “I guess... but the real harm was much more subtle. He

constantly put me down. I had to change my clothes, add a little makeup, remove a small stain on my blouse, and so on.”

“Over the years, it got worse, to the point I could do nothing right. Then, one day, I went on a retreat and met this man who hit on me. It had been so long since someone had said something nice to me, I went a little crazy. He made me feel beautiful. I drank a little and one thing led to another. I know there’s no excuse for having sex outside of marriage which is why I warned you off.”

Wheels stays quiet for a while. “Did you ever cheat before?”

“Paolo was my first and only. After we broke up, of course not. And now, I end all relationships before I fuck up. My therapist says it’s self-destructive.”

“Dr. Downy?” One corner of his mouth lifts in a grin and I have to laugh.

“I had a real psychiatrist until my insurance changed.”

“That sucks. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. He kept saying the same thing over and over. He didn’t fix me.”

“I don’t think it’s his job.”

“Yeah. I know. It’s mine. Thus, my pillow became my shrink. I’m trying to figure all this shit out on my own but it’s hard. Maybe, it’s too late. I wanted kids and a family but it’s never going to happen unless I win lotto so I can freeze my eggs.”

I sigh. “You know, for a bossy bodyguard, you’re a pretty good listener.”

When he laughs like the first time we met, I wish I could go back in time. With a second chance, I wouldn’t kiss him at the rink, and sure as hell, wouldn’t let Catrina anywhere near Sam’s computer.

At the next rest stop, he gets coffee, I buy hot chocolate, and we change drivers. As I fall asleep, I recall reading this book in high school. It was about a Puritan who had a baby out

of wedlock. The town made her sew a bright 'A' for adultery on her sweater, and she was shunned her whole life.

Am I essentially, doing the same thing? Do I define myself by my worst mistake?

## Chapter 17

### Wheels

I've never been much of a conversationalist so when Rose says I'm a good listener, my ears perk up. Somehow, she's enchanted me. Even now, as she sleeps in the passenger seat, it's hard to keep my eyes on the road and as the endless miles stretch before me, I struggle to understand why I find her so damn alluring. She's beautiful, but I've known scores of gorgeous women and they never got under my skin.

Maybe I like how she's fought to change. Sure, she cheated, but her ex was a real bastard, maybe more than she lets on. She shouldn't have to give up her dreams of having a family. Odd how we have that in common but for different reasons. She seems to have had a decent childhood while mine was total crap. The only reason I'm not in jail is the judge gave me a choice of entering the military and saved my life.

As she stirs and moans, my willy crams against my jeans. Would she agree to sex with no messy relationship attached? She admitted to missing the boat with the kids and husband. Why not hop aboard the Wheels ferry and enjoy the ride?

It's a ridiculous thought but not surprising because, according to the LED's on the dash, it's 2:00AM. I should stop and rest, but I won't. Suds worried me. Designer fentanyl and the dark web are a nasty combination, and we need to put some distance between us and Brooklyn.

The reason I survived missions where others did not, was by listening to the same inner voice warning me now. The shit is about to hit the proverbial fan. I wish I knew where and when.

As attention shifts back to the highway, I approach an eighteen-wheeler with an Evergreen logo on the mud flaps. As I read the numbers and letters on the top right corner, a light bulb goes off. Holy shit. That's it! She heard a container code.

“Wake up, Rose. I figured it out.” I reach over the center console and shake her knee until her eyes pop open.

Heart racing, I connect to my cell phone’s blue tooth and shout into the car’s microphone. “Jasonelle. How many Evergreen BIC codes start with NY, contain a U and are currently in the United States?”

“Business Identifier Code? Built in cupboard? Best in Class? Please clarify your request.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. The numbers and letters on a shipping container.” What else would I be referring to?

“Do you mean the *Bureau International des Containers et du Transport Intermodal* organization?”

“I guess. Sure. Sounds right.” If she was a person, I’d swear she was trying to outsmart me.

“There are three hundred and fifty-five.” Wearing pink polka-dot pajamas, she puts on her glasses, and blinks out of the screen at me.

“Shit. We need to narrow it down.” I turn to the real sleepy woman, rubbing her eyes.

“I’ve tried. Do you think I’m holding out on you?” The hurt in her eyes makes me want to kick myself.

I don’t want to argue but we’re so close. Slowing to stay behind the vehicle, I point out the code. “See up there? That’s what you probably overheard.”

“Oh fuck. Don’t they track containers using those numbers?” Eyes wide, she pales as the implications dawn on her. She holds the key to taking down a pipeline of drugs.

“If you don’t get those opiates off the market, people are going to die.”

“You think I don’t know? Yelling won’t help me remember any faster.”

Exhausted and frustrated, my tone may be a little over the top. “I’m sorry. Would you like to stop for a while? Find a room?”

As I glance off the road, Rose's mouth drops open. "You do realize this is the first time you've asked me what I want to do?"

Thinking back on all our interactions, my face heats. "I'm used to being in charge."

She squeezes my knee and smiles. "No worries. God, what I wouldn't give to get out of this car and take a long hot shower. Then I would sleep for twelve hours straight."

Her forgiveness and sweet grin strike not only my heart, but my cock, as well. "We have to agree to one bedroom. I need to keep my eye on you." I don't mean the phrase to come out sexual.

"That's fine with me." The tip of her tongue licks her lower lip and the moment we lock gazes, I'm hooked. "We've been driving for hours, surely no one knows what we're up to."

Again, with the double meanings. My lust-filled Louisville slugger crams at my fly, waiting for a home run but this is not the time or the place. Any drug lord worth his salt will be scouring the planet for her but we should be safe. A former cow path, this road runs parallel to the main drag and will take us to Shelbourne.

Soon, we check into a bed and breakfast where a square-shaped woman smiles behind the desk. "You're lucky. We just had a cancellation."

I sign us in as Mr. and Mrs. Pope and show her a fake driver's license I keep in my wallet for emergencies. I'm praying an out of the way place like this won't have much in the way of cloud technology. Unless we do something stupid, no one should be able to track us.

She hands us a quart of chowder, round crackers, and two chocolate chip cookies before walking us up to our room. If she thinks it weird we have no suitcases, she's nice enough not to mention it.

"I'll sleep on the floor. You can have the bed." I wait at the bathroom door.



Unlike most women, she does her business fast, flushes, and steps out so I can relieve myself, too. She's always thinking of others. This thought digs at the hard shell protecting my heart. Even more so when she folds down the covers.

"Hey, if you're worried I'll seduce you, sleep on top."

"Okay, sure." With my prosthetic on, I won't sleep, but it's better than getting into a pity party at this hour of the night. Maybe I'll remove it, put my alarm on, and attach it before she wakes.

"Dibs on the shower." Grinning, she races back and while the water runs, I picture her naked and moan.

My hard-on swells more when she returns wrapped in a small towel. "I saved the bigger one for you."

Her eyes drift south to the bulge in my pants and as they widen, I swallow hard. Damn, she's beautiful. Her scent, her smile, her body...

Fuck, her everything drives me wild. "We shouldn't." With her dark centers mirroring my desire, I take a step forward.

"Agreed." Inching toward me, chin up, her lips part.

God help me, I press mine to hers and like the other two times we kissed, we combust. My hands dig into her wet hair and as she reaches for my neck, the towel falls to the floor.

Paying it no mind, she grinds her lower body against my aching need.

"You sure?" My heart stops as I wait. If she says no, I'll need a cold shower and sleep in the car.

"Yesss..." Her long legs wrap around my waist as my hands run up and down her spine.

The soft skin under my palms sets off a napalm bomb in my brain. Primal desire takes over as I kiss her senseless. I need this woman more than my next breath.

Ankles locked above my butt, she unzips my hoodie and tears off my shirt. After it flies over my head, her short nails

dig into my biceps, and she smashes her chest to mine. With her hardened tits crushed to my body, she reaches behind my head and pulls my mouth back to hers.

Groaning, I press her against the wall and as I thrust my tongue into her invitation, she cups my head, and holds me in place.

Animal instincts, older than time, take hold as I unzip my jeans and only as I drop them to my knees, do I remember my prosthetic and pull up one side.

“I’m clean.”

“On the pill. Tested recently.”

“Thank you, Jesus.” While I free my length, she hooks one leg over my hip and stands on the other.

She doesn’t let go as I place her on the bed. Then, I reach between her thighs and my fingers come back soaked. Holy fuck, her tsunami is almost upon her. Foreplay will need to wait because when I press on her nub, her head goes back, the muscles in her body shake, and she comes.

I cover her mouth to swallow her orgasmic scream and as I do, I thrust into her quivering folds. Moving in and out, the wild woman under me shudders and arches in a dance both erotic and innocent.

“Open your eyes.” At her command, I lift my lids.

At the sight of her laid out under me, my cock thickens, my balls harden, and my spine tingles. Rising onto her elbows, she unlocks her heels, presses them into the bed, and slams our bases together.

“Oh God. Rose!” I lose my ever-loving mind, instantly addicted.

## Chapter 18

Rose

His breath labored, Wheels' heart pounds in my ear as I rest. Other than the thump-thump, there's no sign of life and if this is death, I'm all for it.

Head spinning, I float back down to earth and recall the mind-blowing sex. Holy shit, I never knew my body could contort like that.

"Babe?" He stirs when I tease his chest hairs.

"I, umm... Nope, forget it. I got nothing."

"Ditto." His chuckle puts me at ease and with neither of us willing to move, we enjoy the post-coital bliss.

That is, until I try to free my toe stuck in his waistband, halfway down his thigh. As we topple off the bed, he puts one leg out and breaks our fall.

"Sorry." My face heats, not only from my klutziness but from the embarrassment of being naked with a man I barely know.

"Just a sec. I got this." He loosens his underwear from around my big toe, and as he frees me, our gazes connect.

Inside me, his cock jumps back to life and although we're clearly incompatible, I can't imagine not attempting round two. We stare for the longest time with neither of us willing to pull apart. A few minutes later, we simultaneously speak each other's names and I giggle.

"You first." Maybe *he* can make sense of why we combust whenever we're together.

Sighing, he lays on his back with elbows open and fingers laced behind his head. "I have never, ever experienced anything close to what just happened."

"Me neither." Missing his warmth, goosebumps run down my arms. They could also be caused by his flagpole, standing

proud right below his navel.

What now? Do we become friends-with-benefits? The adulteress and the bodyguard? It sounds like one of those BDSM novels. I'm more of a cozy romance mystery. A little embarrassed how I'm completely naked and he still has his pants on, I scramble under the covers.

Turning on his side, he lowers the blankets to my waist and kisses a nipple until it pebbles. "You think too much. There's no point in closing the barn door after the horse got out."

"Horse? Is that what we're calling him?" I raise an eyebrow at his erection, and he chuckles then nibbles my ear.

"He's got a lot of nicknames. Right now, he's more of an Eager Beaver."

Laughing, I sink into his next kiss, and we make love so many times, I lose count. My last thought, as I spoon into his warm body, is how he never fully removed his jeans.

I don't recall falling asleep but when a familiar dream resurfaces, I try to break free. In tonight's exciting episode, I'm expected to avoid townspeople throwing feces at me but no matter where I hide, they find me. Finally, I end up in a church. Wheels, the minister, steps in front of the congregation, points, and confesses to having sex with me and being the father of my child. Confused, I run out the back door and suddenly am burning at the stake for being a witch.

As the flames consume me, I open my eyes and wait for my heart to stop drumming in my ears. Reaching out my hand, I connect with warm flesh. Is this a dream within a dream? It must be because a gorgeously handsome man rolls onto his side and eyes me.

"Morning, sunshine." At his sleepy smile, I sigh and for a moment, imagine a lifetime of waking next to this amazing lover.

My hand cups his rough cheek. "Last night was incredible."

"I want more." His eyes soften and with his fingers playing with my tangled hair, my clit twitches.

“More sex?”

“More of you and I don’t share. Understand? If we do this, we’re exclusive.”

Wow. *This?* What does ‘this’ even mean? I know one thing, ‘this’ is destined to die a horrible death and like my dream, when ‘this’ is over, I’ll live the rest of my lonely life in misery.

Ignoring my brain, my heart answers to the contrary. “I would like more of *this*, too.” *Shit, shit, shit. I don’t even know what I’m agreeing to.*

“It’s settled, then.” He climbs out of bed, limps on his left leg, and rubs his knee.

“You okay?” As I try to recall which of our many positions may have injured it, he winks.

“Just a little stiff. It was a wild night.” He hobbles to the bathroom.

Maybe he has battle scars he doesn’t want me to see. That would also explain why he kept his pants on all the time.

While he showers, I tug his long-sleeved cotton shirt over my head and fluff up a Dr. Downy.

The shrink frowns judgmentally so I punch him which causes his brows to crease further and his mouth to widen.

“C’mon, doc. Don’t look so surprised. This may be my last chance to hook up with a sexy man and I promise, after this, I’ll settle down, adopt a dozen cats, and work as a hairdresser until the end of days... What’s that? The fentanyl? I have no idea but if Uncle Vinny’s involved, I’ll be shipped to Italy and married to some old guy he owes favors to.”

Standing, I glance around the corner, but I’m safe. The shower is still running. I may be crazy but I’m not stupid enough to want Wheels to see me arguing with a pillow.

When I return to the bed, Downy goes off on my uncle. Recalling all the good stuff he’s done for me, I come to his defense and recite what I’ve heard him say. “Big pharma is the real monster. They’re the bad guys who get people addicted.”

The shrink scowls, not buying what I'm peddling.

"Hey, it's true. It's the doctors who should be jailed. They're the ones addicting people and don't even get me started on insurances. Did you know over a hundred and fifty million people are prescribed opioids every year and at least ten percent get hooked? What do poor people do then? They have to rely on suppliers like my Uncle Vinny. He's doing society a service."

I jump a mile when Wheels storms out of the bathroom. "Who're you talking to?"

"No one." My face heats. Shit, how much did he hear? I fluff out Dr. Downy, turn, and as I rush away, he grabs my hand.

"He's a drug dealer, Rose, and a sex trafficker. God only knows what else."

"You don't get it. After my dad died, Uncle Vinny kept the salon going and made sure Mia and I went to private schools. We wanted for nothing."

"He's no saint."

"I didn't say he was. I just need you to understand from my perspective. Whatever happens, I won't turn him in."

## Chapter 19

### Wheels

Well, I'll be damned. She argues with her pillow. Come to think of it, she had one with her the last time I caught her talking to herself.

No doubt embarrassed, she hides behind the bathroom door and shouts from within. "I'm not excusing my uncle's actions. I'm just saying, for Suds, Sam, and little Mikey, we need to be Switzerland. Whatever we decide to do, it can't be traced back to us or them. And we can't keep running. We need a plan."

She's right. At first, my only thought was to get her safe. Now we have some distance between us and Brooklyn, we need a way forward. I pull her phone out of my back pocket and insert the sim card. I hate using her as bait, but it may be the only way to expose the drug dealers.

"Will you join me in the shower?" She cracks open the door and I almost forget about my prosthetic.

"How about I make you dirty?" With my arms around her waist, I pick her up, drop her on the bed, and spread her legs.

In the light of day, she's more beautiful than ever. You would think making love all night would satisfy my lust. Instead, Willie Wonka crams at my fly, anxious to sink deep in her sweet chocolate.

Chuckling at my weird sense of humor, I kneel at the altar of her glistening fold and flick her nub. While her squeaky noises send me to the moon, the sensible part of my brain throws an alarm.

*You're getting attached, you fucking moron.*

A virtuoso with a new violin, I ignore the warning and play her. Every beautiful sound feeds my desire for more of

her sweet music. I'm may go to hell but damn, what a trip it will be.

As the tip of my tongue brushes across her most sensitive spot, a bolt of understanding pierces the center of my heart.

*Holy fuck, I'm falling for her.*

Unaware of my epiphany, she pulls my ears to drag me up her body but I'm not going anywhere until she's crying and begging.

A tiny piece of consciousness acknowledges it's my way of making sure she won't tug off my pants and see my prosthetic, but long ago, I made peace with my methods.

She slips onto her elbows and as she captures my gaze between her knees, I toss her ankles behind my back and feast.

As her thighs tighten around my head, I suck her nub, slide a finger inside, and press a knuckle to her zone.

"Wheels, oh God." She struggles to regain control, but I have the lead and am not willing to let go.

Grabbing her hands away from my ears, I tease her bud with the tip of my tongue. "Blossom for me, sweet Rose."

"Oh, oh, oh." With her heels digging into my lower back and her ass rising off the bed, she arches.

Eyes scrunched, about to come, she holds her breath. My God, I've never beheld a more erotic sight and prolong the moment so I can etch it into my memory banks forever.

Leaning in, I blow warm air on her core, then suck until she breaks apart. My cock dripping, I climb up her body and plunge into the depth of her orgasm.

In and out, I plunder her bounty while my biceps curl in pushups. Her hands slide to my butt cheeks, and she tries to tug down my pants, but I increase my pace and as I change my angle, she comes to life again.

On fire, we engulf each other with heat. Our kisses may bruise but neither of us can hold back our rising tide of desire. The bed rocks, the headboard smacks against the wall, and my



brain cells hyperfocus on the feel of her inner muscles clamped around my cock.

My body coils, my heart stops beating, and I come so hard, a shout emits from the depths of my soul.

“Fuuuuck.” With molten sperm spurting out of me, I swear I touch eternity.

Emptying with two more pumps, I fall flat on her body, unable to move. “Mother of God, you’ll be the death of me.”

She wipes off the drool on my neck and moans. “Rose isn’t here right now. Leave your message after the beep.”

What is it about her and her smart mouth?

“We should get up, babe.” My weight no doubt crushing her, I roll off and as I do, her phone pings.

She checks her cell, her face scrunches, and she shows me the screen.

**Unknown: Time’s up. Are you in or not?**

“Who’s it from?”

Sitting up, I wait while she presses keys and bites her lower lip. “It’s not from a number I recognize. What should I say?”

“Give it to me. I got this.” I text a thumbs up emoji.

**Unknown: How much?**

I enter 1 0 0 and hit send.

**Unknown: Kilos?**

I answer, hoping he’ll think me clueless. ‘No, dolls. Can you drop them off at my place?’

**Unknown: Too dangerous. We’ll contact you when we’re ready.**

My lover frowns, worry lines creasing her forehead. “What did you agree to?”

“You’re going to take ownership of a shipment of Smart Sissies.” Standing, I pull up my pants, and with my back to

her, adjust my leg so it sits better on my stump.

“And why on God’s earth would I do that?” Her hair all mussed, her lips swollen, she grabs her clothes and heads to the bathroom.

“We’ll locate the dealers and get the drugs off the street. Babe, I’m going to call Slate, be right back.” Dressing, I find my jacket, trot down the stairs, and pace the wrap-around porch.

A few minutes later the home office calls me back and after I describe the plan, he’s all in. “I’ll send someone, and we’ll follow the courier to the source. No worries.”

With Slate covering my six, I breathe a little easier. “Did you learn anything more about the fentanyl?”

“A little. It’s a special grade of opiate, more addictive but less likely to kill you. Let’s just say it puts you to sleep before you can OD.”

“Jesus. But you wake up wanting more?” Having been on pain meds for almost a year, I understand the vile plot better than most.

“Yeah. Apparently, no one in the States has been able to duplicate the process and the price tag is fifty times that of the street version.” Slate sighs. “They’re targeting rich addicts and going for quality versus quantity.”

“And they’ll capture the market while the rest of the poor suckers die from the cheaper variety. Damn, we need to get rid of those Muppets.”

“Did Rose remember any more?”

I glance around the parking lot, now her phone’s GPS is on, we’re sitting ducks. “We’re working a theory. I think what she overheard was a BIC container code, and I’m guessing it’s to the one holding the Smart Sissies.”

“Could it be she’s not telling you the whole truth?” As Slate verbalizes my worst nightmare, I shake my head.

“Could be. Rose is part Vitale and loyal to a fault. Anything is possible.” With her scent still on me, I pray what

we shared isn't all a lie.

“Keep your pants zipped.” He waits for me to respond and when I don't my silence says it all.

“Fuck.” The other side of the line dead, I walk back into the motel room to face the music.

## Chapter 20

Rose

*...loyal to a fault.*

Done eavesdropping, I jump inside the old Victorian farmhouse and gently close the door. Thank God, with his back to the house, Wheels didn't catch me but what a shit show. I love my uncle but that doesn't mean I approve of his business transactions.

I need to set things straight so stomp out of the kitchen to the tiny living room where flames crackle in the fireplace. Sitting in a gray floral loveseat near the warmth, I cross my legs, and punch in the familiar numbers.

"Hi Uncle Vinny, it's me, Rose."

"Where are you?"

"Upstate with my boyfriend, why?" My voice low, I keep an eye on the hallway.

"I heard through the grapevine how youz got back together with Paolo. I was curious, that's all." Vinny's comments, however harmless they appear on the surface, always have meanings within meanings.

Seeing as how I said my ex placed the order on the dark web and I just confirmed from my phone, Vinny assumes we're back together. "It's too soon to say how things may turn out."

He snickers like someone about to spill the beans. "Are you aware he purchased some merchandise?"

"The Smart Sissie knock-offs? Yeah, why?" He's always under-estimated me, and I use it to my advantage.

Thinking me stupid, my uncle laughs. "You tell Paolo, he may be *famiglia*, but he needs to pay like everyone else."

“I’ll let him know but hey, as long as I got you on the phone, can I give one of the stuffed animals to little Mikey?” I swallow hard. In for a penny, in for a pound.

“No. Your mother already bought him one and will kill you if you ruin her surprise. You leave the shipment alone. Capisce?” The words and his tone make it clear he’s in on the fentanyl.

Even though I was ninety-nine percent sure, hearing his voice makes it real.

“Okay, I understand. Bye.” Heart heavy, I hang up and when I turn, Wheels is right behind me, his brows raised in a question mark.”

I attempt a bright smile, stand and point. “There’s coffee and donuts in the kitchen. Want some?”

He steps in closer. “First, tell me the truth. Who were you talking to?”

“Vinny.” I race into the other room, take two cups from a stack on the counter, and pour out some dark liquid.

As I hand it to him, he glowers so I cup his cheeks. “Listen up. You were the one who ordered the damn dolls with my phone. I needed him to think Paolo did it, not me and not you. What was so wrong with that?”

Wheels grunts, nods, and fills a couple plates with eggs and a donut. “So, did he buy it?”

“I think so. Mostly.” I bite my lower lip. With my uncle, you never can tell.

“Rose?” He tucks my chin, sending chills down my back.

“I’m not sure, okay? He sent a warning. He said family or not, the dolls need to be paid for.” I help him put silverware, mugs, and the rest of our breakfast on a tray and follow him up the stairs.

After opening our bedroom door, he turns and catches my gaze. “Your uncle’s a bullying piece of shit.”

“He thought he was threatening Paolo, not me.” In our room, I cross my legs and dig into the scrambled eggs.

Mouth full, I try to explain. “Everything sort of backfired on me.”

Wheels sighs. “Just tell me the BIC code so we can find the container and go home.”

Placing my fork on my plate, I set it aside and count to ten. By the time I finish, I no longer want to wring his handsome, adorable, kissable neck.

I cup his unshaved cheeks, capture his chocolate brown eyes, and lean in until our noses touch. “Read my lips. I. Can’t. Remember.”

To emphasize, I raise my brows, let go of his face, and throw all ten fingers at him in a gangsta gesture used on TikTok.

When I cross my arms and tilt my head, he breaks out in laughter. “Okay. I believe you.”

Returning to my meal, I recall all the reality TV I watched. “How about we find someone to hypnotize me?”

He shakes his head side-to-side. “A modern myth. Hypnosis generally doesn’t reveal anything but false memories.”

“Well, how *can* I remember then? It’s so damn frustrating to know I have a number in my brain, and it refuses to come out.”

Wheels sighs. “The subconscious is weird. Maybe, at some level, you don’t want your uncle to be caught.”

“I suppose... Is it such a bad thing? To have people fall asleep rather than overdose? Isn’t it better?”

“Rose, you’re doing it again.”

“What?”

“Trying to find any way to redeem him.”

“You’re right but you have no idea how hard it is to walk the razor-thin edge of living in a crime family yet staying on the right side of the law. Sam does it, but she has a police chief for a father. I do not have that luxury.”

“Let’s finish our breakfast and not think about it for a while.”

He charms me with tales of being a kid in Delaware. Going to the beach, living close to the base, getting into trouble. He avoids his life as a SEAL which I suppose isn’t strange. Not too many vets want to talk about their dark days.

Sam once shared how Suds suffers from PTSD. I had no idea. I mean, it’s not the type of thing I would ask about and honestly, to me, he seems perfectly normal.

I sigh. I guess if you really love someone, you share parts of yourself you would never show anyone else. Paolo never opened up and to be fair, I never did, either.

“What’re you thinking?” After polishing off the last of his coffee, Wheels tucks a lock of hair behind my ear.

“Nuh-uh. This time you tell me something about you.”

His eyes cloud over, and I fear I may have overstepped. We agreed to be exclusive, and we enjoyed our sex. Other than that, the rules around *this* are pretty sketchy.

“Fair enough. What would you like to know?” Nodding, he pats the mattress next to him and I sit.

“Parents?” I keep the questions easy to begin with.

“My dad died during my second deployment. My mom lives in Delaware with her boyfriend.” At his fierce frown, I grab hold of his hands and squeeze.

“I’m so sorry. Do you have any siblings?”

“Nope. I’m an only. Are we done?” He starts to stand but I pull him back.

“Just one more thing. Why do you always keep your pants on when we make love?” I thought it was an easy question but apparently, I hit a nerve.

“Enough!” His sharp tone makes me cringe and I back away.

“God. Sorry.”

Grabbing my hips, he places me in his lap. “No, I am. How about we skip twenty questions and focus on the BIC code, huh?”

“Sure.” My heart sinks. Once I remember, no doubt *this* will end. Maybe my subconscious refuses to surrender because I’m not ready to give up the only man who ever sent chills down my spine.

“Start at the beginning and walk me through what happened that night.”

“Well, I worked a regular shift. Like usual, I arrived home, went upstairs, and asked Sam if I could watch Mikey. I brought him to my apartment and gave him a bath so she could work. No sooner did I have him in his PJ’s, when he had this horrendous poop. Like any reasonable human being, I walked him up the stairs and gave him to his mom.”

Wheels nods. “Sounds rational to me.”

“Right?” Sharing a high five, I close my eyes. “Then, my memory gets fuzzy. I remember she took the baby into the bedroom and how Catrina jumped on the table. As I scratched her chin, she rolled onto her back for tummy rubs. A couple seconds later, I hear voices.”

*Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-nine bottles of beer.* I hum the tune, now stuck in my head.

“You take one down...” Tightening his grip on my hand, my interrogator sings along.

“That’s it! I heard hundred, and also, ninety-nine!” My eyes pop open as I’m rewarded with a kiss and a hug from behind.

“We have four out of the six numbers. Congrats. You did it.” Reaching into his pocket for his cell phone, he calls Jasonelle. “What Evergreen containers have a BIC code with NYU and contain the digits zero-zero and nine-nine?”



A picture of an eighteen-wheeler pops up on his screen. “There is exactly one container matching your identification code. It is currently being driven by the U-go trucking company.”

“What is the destination?” Leaning in, he holds the image in front of our noses.

“Chicago.” As the meme, dressed in a dark suit and dark glasses, blinks out at us, Wheels barks out, “Conference in Slate.”

A few technical difficulties later, the Patten boss joins the call and after we fill him in, I need to ask, “But why the windy city? My uncle’s business is based mostly in New York. There’s plenty of sales to be had close to home. Why risk it, and send them to the Midwest?”

I thought the AI unit would respond but Slate is faster. “Distribution. Most of the Mexican drug cartels operate out of Illinois.”

His answer confuses me more. “Why would Vinny sell the fentanyl to a middleman? He has an excellent pipeline. It makes no sense.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. We need to tell the Feds.” Wheels hugs me close and while I appreciate his thoughtfulness, I don’t agree.

“Wait. If you do, he’ll know we turned him in.” I picture myself with cement shoes, or worse, remarried to my ex and shipped off to Sicily, never to be seen or heard from again.

Slate offers another solution. “We could let Sam inform the FBI.”

“I have a better idea. How about we steal the shipment? Then, all we have to do is tell the Feds where to find it. We can make it look like a rival cartel stole it. Trucks get hijacked all the time. Those damn dolls are so popular, no one would think twice.”

## Chapter 21

### Wheels

Hijacking a semi-trailer is risky as fuck but if we succeed, it'll be the heist of the century. Rose and Sam will be out of their uncle's crosshairs, and we'll remove a new, dangerous drug from the street. However, to pull it off, we'll need Patten's finest.

With a click to enlarge, Slate's image fills my screen. He's a damn fine poker player but I read faces better than most. A muscle twitches near his ear and his right eye widens a fraction of a centimeter.

Even though he agrees with the plan, my primary concern is my client. Since ordering the damn doll, she's been targeted by drug sellers on the dark web. No matter what happens, that simple fact remains.

A few minutes later, Suds joins the call, then Sam.

While we wait for the rest to join the conference, Hands asks, "Who owns the drugs in the container?"

Jasonelle responds with a bill of sale. After some debate, we concur the layers of shell companies lead to Mexico's largest cartel, the Sinaloa. The Brooklyn mobster must've sold it to them.

With the gravity of the situation understood, we wait for my boss to take command. "Wes. I figure we'll need a small team. You, Hands, Lucky, Jack, and I, should be enough."

"What if Hands flies the drones and we add Suds to the attack force?" My idea has merit and after everyone agrees, Slate continues.

"We can either stage an accident or hijack the truck when the driver stops for food. I say the first. We'll set up flares where the wifi naturally drops out. Sebastian, you and Sam are on task to find the best location. I say we hit them between

Toledo and Chicago. I'll handle the details and send our itinerary."

"One more thing, what about the girls? If we're busy, who's going to guard them?" Suds frowns and shakes his head.

I fear he may nix the plan until Jack, the first to be hired by Grayson Patten and the most respected jumps in. "We could hide them in plain sight, in the Manhattan office."

"I'm okay with that if y'all are." His concerns addressed, he mutes and the box around Slate's image lights.

"I'll hire some local contractors. Any other worries?"

When no one responds, he nods. "See you all in Chicago."

After everyone hangs up, Rose, who's been listening in, frowns. "Why can't I go with you?"

I kiss the tip of her nose. "We work better knowing our women are well-protected."

My offhanded comment startles me. At what point, did I start considering her mine? Not big on retrospection, I pack my bag and book my flight. The drive to Burlington takes about an hour and my departure isn't until three.

Watching me pace, she drags me to the mattress. "We have lots of time to kill. We could watch a movie, wait at the airport or..." She unbuckles my belt. "Maybe we could think of something more interesting to do."

"You wouldn't be trying to seduce me now, would you?" I love how she takes the lead and calls me out on my bullshit, but I don't want her imagining moonbeams and white picket fences. After this is over, we need to talk and make sure we're on the same page.

"Now, who's thinking too much?" Her mouth connects with mine and one set of fingers slip behind my head with her thumbs pressing behind my ear.

With her right hand, she slips down my six-pack, past my navel, and unzips my jeans.

*Sweet God in heaven.* My ever-ready weasel swells and the supply of oxygen to my brain is reduced to a trickle. She lifts my shirt, kisses down my chest, and pauses to nibble below my belly button.

“Mmm.” As her hum vibrates through my abs, I grip the sheets and picture her mouth around me.

“You don’t have to-”

Releasing my cock, she sucks on the tip, I close my eyes and moan. Her dark hair tickles my stomach as she takes more of me in. I try to find an ounce of gray matter but there’s none to be had. This woman has me on my back, my lollipop in her mouth, and I’m at her mercy.

The power she holds should scare the hell out of me and it does. Fear is nothing compared to desire. I want more so I lift my ass and let her lower my jeans and boxer-briefs to my thighs.

Her clever tongue slides up and down my primary vein. My head falls back on the bed. As she grips my base and sucks, I hold my breath. I’ve never felt so much pleasure.

Lifting my lids, I’m so lit up, I almost come. Her eyes are closed. Her cheeks are puffed, and the adoration in her face strikes at my heart’s center.

*My God, she loves me.* How is it possible?

Climbing higher, clinging to control, I have an epiphany of sorts. I can’t imagine her not being in my life. Is that love? Am I falling?

“Oh shit.” I vaguely have a sense of my pants at my ankles but I’m about to explode.

I struggle to stop, but it’s too fucking late. She pumps my base, sucks, and when my tip hits the back of her throat, I lose myself in the most fucking amazing orgasm I ever recall.

She swallows as much of me as possible then looks up, my cum dripping down her chin. As she glances down to wipe it on the sheet, I realize my prosthetic is showing.

It's too late to cover it, so I wait for her disgust or worse, pity.

Gently, her mouth still wet from my liquids, she kisses down my inner thigh and places more on my knee, just above the plastic socket. As much as I try to find revulsion, there's none. In fact, as she glances up, her eyes are soft and caring.

“Can I see it?”

Unable to speak. I swallow hard and nod.

Slowly, she pulls my jeans off and stares at the mechanism. “Wow. That's so cool.”

I lift onto my elbows. This is her response? My chest tightens and my stupid eyes sting. How does she do this to me? How does she break past my carefully guarded defenses and fire up my inner core to the point I can't imagine my life without her? Hell, we've only known each other a few weeks.

I pull her up my body, my cock raring to go and as we make love again, it's still wild, but something has changed and it's me.

I'm not the same guy who woke up this morning.

## Chapter 22

Rose

Resting my cheek on the pillow, I get lost in the gold flecks of his chocolate eyes. I know, if we end this, I'll never recover but right now, it doesn't matter. Wheels is the best thing to ever happen to me.

A sense of protectiveness clouds my thoughts. What if something bad happens to him on this mission? I can't let it. I won't. I don't know what I can do, but there has to be a way I can help.

"Babe, we need to get a move on." His lips connect with mine and I kiss him back with all my might.

"Please, let me fly with you. I swear I won't get in the way."

"Rosie, I can't be worrying about you and do my job." He pulls a wayward strand of hair out of my mouth, rolls out of bed, and slips on his jeans.

"Hold on, I need to take this." Clutching his ringing phone, he walks out the door.

In the hall he grunts and mumbles, then returns with a frown. "Your flight to New York was cancelled. The next isn't until tomorrow morning."

My heart leaps and I grin. "So, I'm going with you?"

"Nope. Slate is sending a former ranger, but he won't arrive until after I've gone. Promise me you'll stay put and won't open the door for anyone but this guy." He shoves a picture under my nose and hits send.

"Cross my heart and hope to die." As I swipe an X over my chest, he sighs, clearly conflicted, so I take his hands in mine. "Wheels. Wesley. We're in the middle of Vermont. Nothing bad is going to happen in the next thirty minutes."

“Okay. But if I get to the airport and your bodyguard hasn’t arrived, I’m turning around so you better pick up when I call.”

“Copy that.” My snappy salute makes him laugh as he takes me in a fierce hug and kisses me.

With rough palms to my cheeks, his eyes gentle on me. “We’ve got lots to talk about and I promise, we will.”

I nod, my throat tight. I’ve got a bad feeling about their plans but don’t want to jinx them. Besides, I can’t yet put words to my concerns. So, I wave goodbye from the bedroom window and pray.

Realizing I’m not decent, I jump in the shower where my worry takes form. By the time my hair is dry, I’m certain I’m right, and call Joey.

“I was wondering. Does Vincent ever do business with the Mexican cartels?”

“Nah, he hates those motherfuckers.” He’s so quick to respond, I have to make sure.

“So, he wouldn’t sell them a containerful of Smart Sissie dolls laced with fentanyl?”

He hisses through his teeth. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, are you shitting me? Last year, some guys stole from him and since then, he’s been dying for payback. If he did deal with them, and I’m not saying he did, my guess is he’s planning to steal it back.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. Thanks, Joey, and please don’t tell him we had this conversation.”

“Mums the word.” Hanging up with him, I call Wheels, but it goes to voice mail.

What if Vinny’s guys rob the opium Muppets before the Patten guys do? What if it’s the other way around? There’re too many ways this can go south. I need to warn the team.

Outside, large flakes fall from the sky, so I open my phone to the weather forecast. Holy crap, no wonder my flight was cancelled. One of those bomber storms is roaring up the coast.

I check other flights, but I'm shit out of luck. The next one to Chicago isn't until four in the morning. I book it and pray I'll be on it.

I'm about to inform the Manhattan office of the situation when the owner of the bed and breakfast taps on the door. "Excuse me, miss. There's someone here to see you."

Expecting the ranger, I unlock the door.

Instead of the cavalry, it's he-who-shall-not-be-named. "Hello Rose."

I picture slamming the door in his face but knowing him, he has a gun and wouldn't hesitate to use it.

"Paolo." Not wanting to be alone with him, I shut the door behind me and follow the proprietor down the narrow staircase.

In the living room, I sit in a bentwood chair near the crackling fireplace.

He chooses the floral loveseat. "Don't act so surprised, baby."

"I'm not your baby."

"Ha. You think you're maybe a... what do you say... a grown woman? But you're nothing but a child and now you're in trouble. From now on, I will take care of you."



## Chapter 23

### Wheels

At the airport, I call my woman, but it goes straight to voicemail. Worried, I try the Bed and Breakfast's front desk.

"Hi. This is Wesley Murphy. I was trying to get ahold of my girlfriend. Is she there?"

"Oh yes. She's in the living room talking to a man who just arrived. Do you want me to go and get her?"

"Yes, please."

*Shit.* The gate attendant makes the last boarding announcement and I dash to the closing door. After presenting my ticket, I trot down the folding tunnel with the speaker to my ear, but we were disconnected. I shouldn't worry. The ranger arrived and if Rose was in trouble, surely, he or the owner would've said something.

Once I'm seated, I try dialing again and when she doesn't pick up, I call Hands in New York. "Did our man arrive at the B and B?"

"Let me check. Yes, that's an affirmative. He reported in from the parking lot and I confirmed with GPS."

"Thanks." Relaxing into the seat, I whoosh out my breath as Hands describes the mission's latest details. He's still talking when the airline attendant insists I turn off my electronics.

"Sorry, got to go. We'll talk more, after I land."

Two hours later I touch down, and still no word. After shaking hands with Slate in the airport, I need to know what the fuck is going on.

"I'll brief you on the way." He rushes me to the curb where a Hummer waits. In the backseat, he shakes his head. "The power has been out in Vermont, but I was finally able to

contact the B&B's proprietor. She claims Rose left this morning."

"Wasn't that the plan?" My heart races as our vehicle blends into traffic. There's something he's not saying.

Frowning, he glances out the back, nods at the driver's face in the rear-view window, then lets out his breath. "Our man called from the Burlington hospital. Someone gave him a nasty blow to the head. He never saw her."

An unknown fear grips my chest. "Fuck. Who took her?"

"Facial recognition identifies him as Paolo Stephano, her ex-husband."

"I thought he was in Italy. Dammit. Do we know where he took her?"

"We're working on it." His steely glare might intimidate some, but not me.

"Dammit. That's not nearly good enough." My fists clench at my side and when he sees them, his brows raise.

"Chill. I got my best guys on it, and we'll get her back but if you want to abort the mission, just say the word. It's a hell of a lot easier to have the Feds take over."

"Shit." I can count the people I trust on one hand, all of them work for him.

"Let's get this show on the road." The sooner we finish this, the sooner I can focus on finding Rose.

He takes out his iPad, calls up a map, and points out a throughway exit. "We're going to put the detour here. We have at max, ten minutes before the state police arrive. We need to get in, steal the truck, and drop it off in the next town over. Timing is crucial."

"How many men we talking about?"

"There's two upfront, one sleeping in the cab, and three in the container, itself."

"I understand there's a detour, but what makes them stop?" I need to be sure he dotted all the i's and crossed all the t's.

Acknowledging my concern, Slate nods. “The exit ramp has a steep curve. The driver either slows down or tips over. Once they reduce speed, we’ll have a disabled oil tanker jackknifed across the road. No mother fucker in their right mind would plow into it. We get in and get out. Piece of cake.”

*Piece of cake, my ass.* His optimism does nothing to quell my growing unease.

## Chapter 24

Rose

As I sit with Paolo in front of the fire, I remember how I once hung on his every word. The same inner child craves to abdicate all her responsibilities to someone else. That's how young and naïve I was when I first met him.

Sensing my conflict, he stands, steps closer, and widens his toothy, wolf-like smile. "You want me back. Why else would you tell Vincent I ordered the dolls? Let's stop pretending and go back to the way it was. My private jet waits to take you home."

The arrogance breaks my temporary insanity and tethers me to reality. "You want me to move to Italy with you?"

"Not yet. First, I need to fix your mess."

Pretending to be clueless is my go-to response and I'm an expert at it. "Me? What did I do?"

At my squeaky voice, he chuckles and buying my act. taps the tip of my nose. "Nothing you need to worry about."

"The dolls, is that it? I'm really, really sorry I said it was you." *Fact check? I actually am apologetic.* If I hadn't got him involved, he wouldn't be threatening to take me overseas.

"Oh my God. You're going to steal the fentanyl." My jaw drops open and his grin widens.

"Get your stuff, we're leaving. I promised your family I'd take you home."

"Give me a minute to check out of my room." Hoping to speak with the owner, I take a step toward the kitchen but am stopped by his sharp talons wrapping around my bicep.

His fake smile disappears, and he pulls me out the front door. "Get in the car."

Dread washes over me and my knees shake, making it hard to walk. Paolo is much cleverer than I previously thought. Why did I think I could involve him?

Because I thought he was in Italy, that's why. Shit. Now what do I do? For sure, if I don't want to end up with a bullet in my head, he needs to think I'm on his side.

Next to me in the back, he directs the driver while frowning at the thick flakes. Maybe we'll be delayed in the airport, if we even make it there.

Paolo turns away from the weather, undresses me with his eyes, and lowers his mouth to my lips. While he engages, I suppress my gag reflex and pretend to enjoy it. However, when he sticks his tongue down my throat and tries to reach inside my pants, I've had enough. Thinking fast, I push away his hand, scoot to the other side of the seat, and roll down the window.

Once, on a long drive to Milan, I threw up in his lap, ruining his best suit. Thus, he knows I'm not kidding and keeps his paws off. With cold air freezing my face, more brain cells fire.

A solid plan in mind, I pull my head inside, and swivel toward Paolo. "My uncle plans to steal the shipment back from the cartel."

His eyebrows raise, no doubt surprised I'm taking an interest in his business. *God, he is so annoying.*

"Who've you been talking to?"

"No one. It just makes sense. I thought of it on my own."

"Well, good for you." Reaching across the void, he pats me on the head.

*Could he be any more condescending?* "Won't the Mexicans be expecting him?"

"You, my little princess, are our insurance. He won't dare if you're inside the truck." At his use of the pronoun, 'our', a light bulb goes off.

*Holy shit, he's not working for Vincent, he's with the cartel. Stay calm, Rose. Never let him see you sweat.* “How can I help?”

“*Scusa?*” His eyes bug out and as he whips his head toward me, I flutter my eyelashes.

“Baby, the divorce was a huge mistake. I want to make it up to you.” Careful to roll the window down a little more, I take a deep breath and inch toward him.

Worried of getting puked upon, he backs away. “What about your new boyfriend?”

“He was a diversion, a way to keep my uncle from throwing more suitors at me. You know how I hate blind dates.”

Smiling broadly, he puffs out his chest. “Say it, kitten. Say you love me.”

“No one in the world could ever compare to you, Paolo.” *Second fact check. This is true.* He is by far, the biggest asshole in the world.

My ex-husband scratches his chin, lowers his lids and studies me for some time. “Huh. I was going to feed you to the cartel but if you're nice, maybe I'll keep you.” At his turn of phrase, I haul my ass over the cushion and gulp fresh air.

When my stomach settles, I shoot him a weak smile. “You won't be sorry, I promise.”

Soon we arrive at the airport, and I can't help but laugh. In comparison to JFK or Newark, the lone tower underwhelms me. In the brightly lit main and only concourse, he walks me down a corridor, and out a door without a single security check.

The thought occurs to me he could have a gun on me, and no one would stop him. In truth, his whole jet could be full of explosives and who would know?

“You look pale.” As we cross the tarmac, the bastard puts a hand to my lower back until we reach the stairs where a pilot waits.

At the top, the unsmiling brown man wearing cargo pants and a thick camouflage jacket, nods at us. “Hello miss... Senor Stephano.”

Ducking inside, I gasp as a pack of two-legged dogs in biker jackets stop talking and undress me with their eyes.

*Holy God, Jesus Christ, all you angels and saints, Mother Mary, and anyone else who might be listening, I sure could use a helping hand. Buehler? Hello?* I don't know what I was expecting but a blast of lightning would've been a nice touch. Instead, the engines start, and I shrink down in the nearest seat.

He-who-should-not-be-named laughs, shouts to the rough men, and points. “She's mine. No one touches her.”

*Oh, shit, life keeps getting better and better.*

As he buckles up, the plane taxis, and we take off. Already not feeling well, the motion sets off my inner volcano. I barely have time to grab a barf bag before puking my guts out. As I continue to retch in a most vile manner, my ex moves away with a disgusted grunt, and I utter another prayer.

*Whoever made the stomach miracle? It was nasty but thanks. I don't promise to go to mass every Sunday, but I will stop hiding Mia's Mary-in-a-Bathtub. Amen.*

To be sure I continue to be unappealing, I open the disgusting paper bag another inch, and no one comes close for the rest of the flight. A couple hours later, we land on a tiny strip in the middle of a forest. Paolo ushers me to a waiting SUV and after driving for an hour, we exit in a department store parking lot where a container truck spews diesel fumes.

It's BIC code reads: NYCU 200599.

## Chapter 25

### Wheels

I should never have left Rose alone. It was a rookie mistake and if anything happens to her, I'll never forgive myself. My only salvation is she said her ex never physically abused her and as I wait for news, I pray it still holds true.

They could be halfway across the Atlantic, but why now? There's been plenty of time to reconcile since their divorce. Her disappearance has something to do with the fentanyl and her crime boss uncle.

As we trail the container truck, I swap to a military grade prosthetic. My other is fine for everyday but with this one, I'm more like the Million Dollar Man. Once my leg is attached, someone shoves a comm unit at me and I insert the speaker in my ear.

"Test, test." The mic on my chest must be working because Hands, back in New York responds.

"Wheels, you motherfucker. Welcome to the party."

"Where's Rose? You find her yet?" Holding my breath, I pray she didn't turn up in a morgue.

"She'll be fine. As soon as she lands, we'll find her." His tone grates on my nerves. What if it were Mia who went missing? Would he be so damn calm? My anger flares until Slate taps me on the arm and holds his phone in front of my nose.

In the small screen, a short video plays out of Rose willingly engaged in kissing her ex-husband. At first, I think it's probably ancient history but there's a mark on her neck from the other night, when Lapa nicked her with his knife.

"There's audio, too, if you want to hear it." When my boss hands me his phone, I rewind and turn up the volume.



Leering, Stephano sits too damn close with his hand on her knee. “What about your new boyfriend?”

Rose shrugs. “He was a diversion, a way to keep my uncle from throwing more suitors at me. You know how I hate blind dates.”

I play it a few more times until I’m convinced it’s not a fake. Then, I turn to the guys with the pity-party expressions. “Cut the long faces you bunch of pussy-whipped limp dicks. It was just sex. Let’s do this thing and go home.”

I don’t care if they buy what I’m selling or not. We got real problems to deal with, like a containerful of opiate-stuffed Muppets. My broken heart will have to wait.

Five minutes later we drive past a flare, dead center in the highway. The second one is a quarter of a mile down the road.

With snow-covered pine boughs flickering in the blood red light, Hands counts down. “Ten, nine...”

A professional, I play out the win in my head. First, I shoot off the padlock. Next, I open the back doors without scorching my fingers. Lastly, I tranquilize anyone that moves.

According to plan, the eighteen-wheeler turns off the main drag and follows our detour. The driver takes the curve way too fast and as our SUV closes the distance, I hold my breath. If he tips over, all bets are off. Moments later, the breaks slam down with a deafening bang and the truck skids to a stop, inches behind the oil tanker.

Trusting my pals will take care of those in the cab, I pull down my ski mask and follow Slate to the back. Before I can get off a shot, I’m hit in the vest by someone in the woods.

“Motherfucking sonofabitch.” Rolling on my side, I ignore the stabbing pain, and wait for the asshole to show himself. When he does, I shoot out his knee, run to the trees, and taser him.

As I tie him up, our commander disappears into the back container. Suds, who enters next, shouts from within, “Fuck. Y’all need to stop.”

Thinking the guys need help, I stagger to the door with my AR-15. In the back of the dimly lit interior, an angry man holds a gun to a woman's temple. At first, I think I'm seeing things. Then, my body catches up with my brain and I lower my barrel. Jesus, lord above. How the hell did she end up inside this metal box?

Eyeing me, she mouths. "I'm sorry."

Suds gets a lot of credit for keeping his cool as he aims his weapon. "We don't want no trouble, we just want the truck."

Sweat rolling off his forehead, the thug curls his index finger closer to the trigger. "Seems to me, I got nothin' to lose. I might as well kill the bitch."

## Chapter 26

Rose

With the muscled arm around my neck, I gasp for breath, my vision fading. If I don't move soon, it's good night nurse. I once read high heels make a great weapon. Too bad I'm wearing sneakers.

About to lose consciousness, I lower my chin and chomp down on his tattooed forearm. Screaming, the man loosens his grip but as I duck through his looped elbow, gunshot ruptures my eardrum. Dropping to my knees, I hold my head in excruciating pain.

Soon, either Saint Peter or the devil should pop into existence. When they don't and something touches my forehead, I lift a heavy lid.

Eyes on mine, ski mask down, Wheels taps my cheeks. His mouth opens and shuts but I can't hear anything with Big Ben gonging in my ears.

"The redcoats are coming." Even as the words exit my lips, I know they're not quite right. *Was I shot?* "Why aren't we moving? We need to go."

"Are. You. Okay?" He forms the syllables slowly, in front of my face.

*Hell no, I'm not. Paolo is right behind us.* "Yippee ki yay. Giddy up, cowboy."

*C'mon brain, say something useful.* I point up at a red dot in the ceiling. "Voldemort's watching."

Face hard, he takes aim, shoots, and barks silent orders to the rest. A few seconds later, he and his pals roll bodies out the back. The floor vibrates, the back door shuts, and as the truck jerks forward, I heave a sigh of relief.

A grim-mouthed Slate, lifts his black face covering and cups my cheeks with his lips moving but I shake my head, no.

“Sorry, I can’t hear you.”

He pulls an iPad from inside his vest and types on the screen.

**Is your ex following?**

I nod. Close enough. It’s either him or my uncle Vinny. Both equally dangerous.

## Chapter 27

### Wheels

*Shit.* If Rose is right about Stephano, someone bankrolled him. I count three armor-plated SUVs with bullet proof glass and at least a dozen mercenaries.

Lucky glances between the double doors, shares a worried look with Suds, then turns toward Slate. “Should we call the Feddies?”

“Right. We’ll all say merry fucking Christmas and here’s a hijacked truck of designer drugs, just for you.”

Ignoring our boss’s biting sarcasm, Suds winks, then grins. “Well hell, I’d volunteer to explain but the FBI has banned me from every interrogation room in the US.”

The world-renowned rambler cracks the opening wider and sticks his head out. “Whatever y’all decide, you better do it right quick. Those bastards are on us.”

A shot rips through the metal, inches above his head. Everyone drops to their stomachs except Rose, who doesn’t hear a damn thing. After pointing out the bullet hole, I pile boxes around her body and motion her to stay low with my palms down.

Once she’s safe between crates, I help the others stack more in front of the doors. As we squat behind them, our comm unit crackles and Hands clears his throat. “The grenades are ready to drop on your say so.”

“I hope those damned fraggies work.” Our resident Aussie aims his weapon at a biker with a swastika on his neck.

Another rolls down a window, his silhouette lit by the car behind. After opening his Cruiser door, he rests the barrel of a semi-automatic in the glass’s gap. “Come out and we spare your lives.”

Because none of us inside respond, a spray of bullets lodge themselves in the crates. Wood splinters and stuffing flies but no one gets hurt. The fact his employer's ex-wife could've caught a bullet doesn't seem to be a problem.

Paulo's a piece of work. No wonder she divorced him.

The drone whines overhead, our commander glances up at the sky, then slams the doors shut. "Drop when ready, Gabe, and try not to kill anyone."

"Copy that. Frag out." At Hands' warning, we cover our ears, and the subsequent booms rattle our molars. When it quiets, I crack open the doors.

*Shit.* A few feet away, men crawl out of overturned vehicles and grab their guns.

Head to my chest, I shout to our driver in the cab, and brace. "Floor it, Jack."

"Woo hoo! Nothing like a good old-fashioned explosion." Back in New York, our drone pilot's celebration is short-lived. "Oh fuck. You've got three new tangos, closing in fast."

"Quick. Stack more crates." Slate shoves at Suds but my friend doesn't move.

After waving a hand in front of his eyes, I lead him to Rose. The fucking grenades triggered his PTSD. No time for charades, I push the top of her head down, but the whack-a-mole pops up, grabs my arm, and opens her hands.

Pointing to the back door, I mime a guy with a machine gun. She looks confused for a moment, then types on Slate's smart-book.

**It's Vinny's men.**

*What the fuck? She's double-crossed her ex, as well?*  
Dipping my head, I speak into the comm to inform the rest. "Rose says they're Vitale's thugs."

Damn. She used us to get rid of Stephano which paved the way for her Brooklyn mobster to steal back the fentanyl he sold to the cartel. It's a brilliant plan. Too bad none of us will live to tell the tale.

Lucky whistles through his teeth and shakes his head. “We should ask Sam to work her magic. She can explain the situation to the Feddies.”

“Too late.” Our leader paces the small dark space. “No way Vitale will let us drive off alive.”

My solution is much simpler. “How about we pull to the curb and blow the motherfucking load to kingdom come?”

“Ace, mate!” As the Australian pounds me on the back, Suds returns to earth, shakes out the cobwebs, and shoots me two thumbs up.

“You copy, Jack?” I shouldn’t’ve worried.

“On it.” He guns the engine and we’re thrown, jerking side to side.

While we brace like a bunch of pirates on rough seas, Hands speaks from the crow’s nest. “You’ve got trees close to the road, a half klick ahead.”

Hanging onto the door handle, Slate struggles to pull a package of white clay from his vest. “I’ll detonate the fuel tank. Lucky and Suds, you provide cover. Wheels, get Rose clear.”

After a chorus of affirmatives, I grab my former girlfriend’s hand and lead her to the back where the rest crouch, ready to go.

While we squat, she tugs on my shirt and opens her hands in a gesture of confusion.

Damn, I’ve only seconds to explain. Then, with a flash of divine insight, I finger-puppet Little Bunny Foo-Foo running into the forest.

A quick nod tells me she understands. Biting her lower lip, she clamps onto my wrist as the eighteen-wheeler slows to a stop. We push and the doors clang against the sides. First to jump, I turn, grab her waist, and set her down.

“Go, go, go.” I run like hell for the trees and when bullets spray the dirt in the grass buffer zone, I scoop her into my arms.

At the metal fence, I help her climb and push her ass over. With her hiding behind a thick trunk, I drop to my belly and shoot at the men coming for Slate. He needs a couple more seconds to slap C4 on the truck's underbelly.

"Move it." With military precision, our guys create a line.

One fires, one drops back, then the other takes his place.

Thinking they won, Vitale's mercenaries inch forward. The brightest of the lot inspects where Slate placed the explosive.

When he spots the white clay, he starts running and shouts. "Bomb!"

Vaulting the fence, I push Rose to the ground, and roll on top. A moment later, a huge boom rocks the ground followed by a searing blast of hot air. On the side of the road, enormous flames devour the truck along with the closest SUV.

The survivors back away, pile into a vehicle, and depart in the opposite direction by driving over the meridian. As their red taillights fade away, I run up the hill, and at the top, wait for her to follow.

Distant sirens tell me the state police are on the way. As much as I want to interrogate her, it will have to wait. When she stumbles, I catch her, then use hand signals to show her we can't rest here.

My anger, which I tamped down during the mission, resurfaces. Was I her patsy from the get-go? No doubt, she was tired of being a hairdresser and when the cat entered the dark web, saw an opportunity and took it.

While I ponder her treachery, Hands texts me the closest town's GPS coordinates.

"How far?" Rose reaches for my phone, but I hold it high in the air.

"So now you can hear?" I wonder if she was faking that, too.

"Mostly." She wears the same outfit I removed from her body in Vermont. It seems like a lifetime ago.



“Mind telling me how you ended up inside the cartel’s container truck?” A part of me wants her to confess so I can forgive her and move on. The ex-SEAL craves justice.

“It’s a long story.” Out of breath, she trips, landing on her hands and knees.

*Follow the money. Isn’t that what they say?* I squat beside her. “How much did Vincent pay you?”

“What’re you talking about?” Brushing herself off, she stands, and shoots me a hurt look. Her acting, I have to say, is superb. She could win an Oscar.

“Come off it. Paolo and your uncle knew exactly where to find us.” My patience for her nonsense has run out.

“I didn’t tell anyone anything.” She stomps a sneaker into the frozen ground and juts out her chin,

“Riiiiight.” At my unbelieving tone, she grabs my arm.

“Hey. Wait just a goddamn minute. After you left the B & B, I got worried. Nothing made sense. Why would my uncle sell his shit to the cartel? So, I called Joey and confirmed. His father only wanted payback. He was going to double-cross them and steal it back. I tried to warn you, but you didn’t pick up. Then Paolo showed up.”

“You expect me to believe he *magically appeared?*” Air quotes emphasize my sarcasm.

“Yes.” She crosses her arms.

“And despite my warning, and how you claim you feel about him, you opened the door for he-who-should-not-be-named?”

“Oh my fucking God. I thought he was the guy you sent to guard me.”

Honing in on her face, I search for a twitch or any sign she’s lying but find none. “Okay, let’s say I buy your story. Why did you leave with him?”

“I didn’t really have a choice.”

Her kissing him comes to mind. Done talking, I reach into my pocket, pull out my mobile, press play, and shove the video under her nose.

Her mouth drops open, and her face heats. “Wait, I can explain...”

“Know what sweet cakes? How about you shut the fuck up.” Swiveling, I check the GPS, and as I head us in the right direction, she trails after me.

“Why are you being such an ass? I tried to warn you, but Paolo took my phone.”

“How convenient.”

“Oh my God. You’re so unreasonable. You make it sound like I planned this whole thing.

“Didn’t you?”

“Fuck you.” She mutters something about stupid assholes in her life then radio silence which is fine with me.

I warned her. I don’t share.

## Chapter 28

Rose

It's been weeks since the incident and I'm still trying to figure out what I did wrong.

Sure, I kissed my ex, but I've explained via texts over a million times why. A reasonable man would've understood. Because he's been no help whatsoever, Dr. Downy has been demoted. His new job is to catch my tears as I cry myself to sleep. He's probably moldy but there's no point in replacing him until the waterworks cease which isn't in the foreseeable future.

Mia, the bane of my depression, shouts from the kitchen. "Rose. Get up."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm coming." I haven't slept in days, but don't want her to nag so I crawl out of bed, throw on yesterday's clothes, and put my hair in a ponytail.

Walking down the hall, she sprays disinfectant. "Aren't you going to shower?"

"Nope." I sniff my pits and shrug. It could be worse.

Hey, she and Mom are lucky I show up for work. The only reason I do is to keep the blue-haired brigade from staging an intervention. Unlike the octogenarians, Mia uses food to try and cheer me up and today, French toast is her secret weapon.

"Sorry, sis." Holding back tears, I swallow coffee over the lump in my throat. It was sweet of her to try but the smell of maple syrup reminds me of Vermont-ageddon.

Shit. If the waterworks start again, she'll rat me out to Mom. At best, I'll get a lecture. At worst, I'll end up in church surrounded by the rosary club with Father O'Connell sprinkling holy water.

The only option is escape so I don my coat and walk down the stairs. Like I have for the last fourteen days, I shoot Joey

the bird. I don't know how, but I'm pretty sure he said something to someone and fucked up my life.

Halfway to work, I realize I'm still in my slippers. Fuck. Maybe no one will notice.

I trudge past Santas, elves, sleighs, sales, reindeer, and countless other fucking cheerful shit. Ignoring them, I pull my hoodie tighter against the cold and shuffle through the snow, dusting the sidewalk.

The white powder resembles fentanyl which makes me think of Wheels which reminds me how much I hate him, and I start to cry.

At the salon door, I unlock and retrieve clean utensils from the steamer. Once the stations are prepped, I sit in my chair, and stare at my phone. No texts. No calls. No nothing. Apparently, the man I loved was abducted by aliens.

I scroll through our pictures wishing I could delete them, and I will, but not today.

My mom arrives next. She frowns at my appearance but knows better than to give me shit. The last time she did, I shrugged and went home. I kind of wish she would, because then I could lay down, pull the comforter over my head, and forget the last few weeks ever happened.

At lunch, Mia pulls me aside. "You can't keep beating yourself up. He's gone and you need to live with it."

She's right. I let Paolo kiss me. I was wrong but was I unforgiveable? Is my compass so off that I don't know the degree of my immorality? Should I have sat around on my ass in Vermont and let come what may?

"Go out with us tonight." My sweet sister takes my hands in hers, but I tug mine back and shake my head, no.

Sam has Suds, Mia has Hands, and me? I am destined to be a doily-crocheting lonely cat-lady the rest of my life. "How about you guys go out and I babysit Mikey?" *Other than Dr. Downy, he's the only person I can tolerate for more than five minutes.*

Thank God, she agrees. Otherwise, I'd spend all afternoon coughing, pretending to come down with a cold. With the hour hand on five, the minute hand on twelve, I sigh and put down the broom.

I'm not hungry but if I don't eat, Mia will know. So, I stop for a cheese slice to go and will give it to a homeless guy who hangs out on the corner.

"You look like shit." Petey's comment is true, so I don't take offense, but he's still an asshole for putting it so bluntly.

"Nice, real nice." I pay and as I'm about to go, Uncle Vinny sneaks around the corner.

I pretend he's not there, but he catches up with me and clamps onto my arm. "We need to talk."

*Fuck. I'm tired of talking. I'm tired of Brooklyn, and I'm sick to death of the whole damn world.*

"What is it?" I stand fast in front of the cash register and refuse to follow him to his private dining room where he does business.

"I heard a certain container truck blew up outside Chicago. You wouldn't happen to know anything about it?"

"Nope. If I wuz you, I'd ask Paolo." With narrowed gaze, I double dare him to pin that shit on me.

His brows raise. "He still owes me for a doll."

I open my purse and write him a check, leaving me with a balance of two dollars and three cents. "Here you go."

"Listen up, I found a nice man to take you to dinner tomor..."

"No. Uncle Vinny. No." I shove a finger into his chest. "Toss me out of the apartment. I don't care. I'll live at the 'Y'. Whatever. No more blind dates. I'm done."

Turning on my heel I wait for him to have the last word, but he doesn't even try. The best thing about being depressed is how you can say what you want, and no one calls you out.

However, the moment I get home, my sister drags me to the bathroom. “You stink. Shower.”

“Fine.” Whatever. At least I can go to bed, and she’ll stop bugging me.

When I get out, the attic stairs block my bedroom door and sitting on the top step, Mia, Sam, and Catrina stare down with slanted eyes, judging me.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. What-choo want now?” I cross my index fingers to ward off evil, but they don’t even flinch.

“You’re coming with us.”

“No. Leave me alone.” I assume the cat’s not included, otherwise, I might agree. Because she can’t talk, she’d be the best company.

Sitting on the floor, I cross my legs in a half-lotus position, and begin to chant. “Oammm...”

Maybe, they’ll take the hint. No such luck.

When my ass falls asleep and I can no longer feel my right foot, I give in. “Fine. But I’m not staying more than one drink.”

## Chapter 29

### Wheels

I still can't believe Rose set us up, but the evidence is indisputable. The minute I left the bed and breakfast, Paolo showed up. Then, she flew with him to Illinois. "What I don't understand is why he put her in the back of the truck."

Suds and Hands sit with me, drinking beer, reminiscent of the night we rushed to the rescue, the start of my descent into hell. Now, I've hit rock bottom. Every night, I close my eyes and in my dreams, we make love. When I wake, the ache is worse than the day before. Was it all a lie? Did she not have any feelings for me? My chest aches and my fists tighten by my side. How did a guy like me let my guard down? I blame my prosthetic. It made me desperate for a woman's touch. I will never let it happen again.

Knowing alcohol is not the answer, I nurse my one beer and eye the rest of the happy people in the bar. A gay couple holds hands in a booth in the back, smiling into each other's eyes. A blond man with plenty of ink plays pool with a giggling girl. When she holds the stick backwards, he stands close, whispers in her ear, and shows her his moves.

*Ob-la-di, ob-la da, life goes on, bra...* For some reason, the Beatles song has been stuck in my head for days.

When the bartender comes close, Suds motions for another round and takes a deep breath, about to start one of his rambles.

"Don't." I shove a palm to his face. "Listen, I understand she's your wife's cousin, but Rose and I are done."

"Just talk to her." When he lowers my elbow, we arm wrestle, and he wins.

"Sorry." My fucking chest aches as I swallow over the hard lump, stuck in my throat for days.

Even if she told the truth, the fact remains she kissed her ex and said she was just stringing me along. How's a guy supposed to react to that?

*God almighty.* A sappy country singer croons from the speakers and losing my shit, I snap my fingers at Omar. "You mind playing something else?"

The song reminds me of my dad. A SEAL, he was gone for months at a time and even when he was home, his mind was elsewhere. Old memories, long forgotten, float to the surface. I recall my mom crying, wiping her eyes real fast, and blaming the onions.

Countless nights, she curled up on the couch and watched old movies with a box of tissues in her lap. An adult, I better understand her loneliness but can't forgive her infidelity. She got what she wanted. A stay-at-home husband.

While I wallow in a pity party of one, Suds punches my arm and hands me his phone. "You're a damn fool."

Sighing, I stare at the video playing on his screen. It's the same one Paolo sent, only it starts a few minutes earlier. After he kisses her, she slides across the back seat and opens the window.

When I hit stop, Suds glares. "Listen up. Sam did the research. Rose didn't rat us out. This is how it went down. First, we all agree Sam was hired by the FBI to research a new kind of fentanyl, yes?"

I nod.

"Great. So, Sam finally admitted she was already on the Zoom meeting when Rose came upstairs. The cat's no evil genius, it simply rolled on the keyboard and hit enter."

"Huh." *Fact check. Their cat's the spawn of Satan and timed the whole thing perfectly.*

Suds brings a beer bottle to his lips, swallows, then leans in with his voice lowered. "Now, here's where things get interesting. When Rose enters her email address, these dark web guys know they're fucked. They research her IP, find out she's related to dear old uncle Vinny, and sell their shit to him.



He sees an opportunity to fuck the cartel and sells them the opioids. All the while he plans to double-cross them and steal it back.”

“But what about Paolo. How does he come into play?”

“He was hired by Vinny to steal the stuff back, but instead, he tipped off the cartel and started working for them. That’s how he knew the truck’s location.”

A light bulb goes off in my head. “Joey. He warned Vinny?”

“He was worried about Paolo and for good reason. To make sure Vincent wouldn’t try anything, Paolo put Rose in the container and fed him a video. When you killed the camera, Vincent thought she was dead, and with nothing to lose, instructed his guys to kill everyone.”

“So, Vinny doesn’t know we were there?”

“We all had masks on. He thought we were the guys Stephano hired for the cartel.”

“And what about Stephano? Where is he?” Picturing punching his lights out, my hands fist.

“I wouldn’t want to be him when Vincent catches up with him. So, we good?”

“Sure, and thanks for not rambling.” I bump my pal’s fist. “Listen, while I appreciate all the explanations, you’ve only proved I’m right. I suck at relationships. Always have, always will.”

“Best tell her to her face because there she is.” Suds points to where the woman who stole my heart sits with Sam and Mia.

She’s lost weight, has dark circles under her eyes, and red, puffy lids say she’s been crying. A better man would take her in his arms, and never let her go. Me? I stride to the door, exit, and run like hell.

## Chapter 30

Rose

With Christmas and New Year's over, there's absolutely nothing to look forward to. Winter has arrived and like that movie with Bill Murray, it's Groundhog Day. Unlike him, I don't get to start over. In an endless loop, gray days stretch before me.

I cut hair, I speak with clients, and go to bed. Then, I wake up and do it all again. The twenty pounds I lost, should cheer me up but it doesn't because I need to go shopping but have no money. Maybe I'll start a new trend, frumpy chic.

"You're depressed." Mia starts in on me the minute she walks in the salon.

*Thank you, Captain Obvious.* I shrug. Who cares? Life sucks. I will deal with it in my own way.

She shoves a phone in my hand. "Get some help."

I think of Dr. Downy in the dumpster and tears well. "I threw him out."

"You tossed your shrink?" Eyes wide, she places a palm on my forehead. "No temperature. Are you seeing things? Hearing voices?"

"No, nothing like that." I drop to the floor and lift my knees so I can bury my head in them.

"Honey, you can't keep doing this to yourself." Lowering beside me, she puts her arm around my waist and holds me while I sob.

# Chapter 31

## Wheels

Most bodyguards want off for the holidays, so I had plenty to keep me busy. My latest client, a senator, had huge get-togethers for both Christmas and New Year's Eve. With his family threatened, I had to stay vigilant.

I was doing okay until the ball dropped. Then as lovers hugged and kissed, my chest tightened. It took all my willpower not to text the only woman I've ever loved.

Mid-January, congress is back in session. Waiting outside the chambers with the rest of security, my thoughts wander to her as an older gent in a dark suit approaches.

“Girl trouble?”

“That obvious, huh?” I shove my phone in my pocket, not at all surprised he guessed correctly.

The men in this room are some of the most perceptive in the world. In his late fifties, he's had plenty of time to sharpen his skills. “What're you waiting for? Go get her.”

“It's complicated.” I don't want to be an asshole but it's none of his business. We spend a lot of time here and I have no desire to make our lives awkward.

The gold band on his left-hand flashes under the chandelier as he scratches his bald head. “You young people have the worst expressions. It's simple. Do you love her?”

“I did.” As an image of my dark gypsy appears in my mind, my gut aches. According to the doctor, it's heart burn. Go figure.

A dog with a bone, the pesky man refuses to let it go. “No sir, there is no past tense. If you love someone, it doesn't end.”

So, how long you been married?” I congratulate myself for cleverly changing the subject until the frown lines around his

mouth and nose deepen.

“It would’ve been thirty years next week. I lost her. Cancer.” The poor guy sighs. What if Rose had died? How would I feel?

*Ah shit. I’m an ass.* “I’m very sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, well, then do me a favor. Text your girl and patch it up.”

Recalling my pathetic exit at the bar, I shake my head. “I’m afraid it’s too late.”

“Life is too long to spend by yourself, son. Whatever you said or done, get her to forgive you.”

“Dammit! Almost every fucking thing I do reminds me of her, and it pisses me off!” As my voice echoes in the chamber, my face heats, and I race across the hallowed halls.

Outside, I reach into my pocket, pull out a pack of smokes, light up, and pace. Fuck. I’m a mess. When Slate hears of my outburst, and I have no doubt he will, I’ll be benched until I’m okayed by his shrink.

Thinking of her made up pillow doctor, I swallow the knot in my throat. She was so damn cute. What made me screw it up?

Hand shaking, I pick up my cellphone and stare for the longest time. Sending the text is the hardest thing I’ve ever done.

**Me: I miss you.**

Like a kid up before everyone else on Christmas, I wait for her reply. By now, she’s moved on and I probably won’t hear from her for days, if at all.

At the sudden ping, I don’t dare look. It’s too soon. The quick response is no doubt a rude emoji.

**Rose: I miss you, too.**

I wipe my eyes, clear my throat, and look away, hoping no one saw.

**Me: Talk later?**

**Rose: I'd like that.**

## Chapter 32

Rose

With the bright sun warming the cool air, Mom opens the front door, and a slight breeze caresses my skin. Exuberant shouts from the street filter in from the sidewalk and I wave out the window at the kids on skateboards. St. Patrick's Day in the city has always been one of my favorites. How can you not like a holiday which boasts a parade, green beer and green bagels? Not only that, today marks the end of winter.

For over a month, Wheels and I have texted and talked every day. I learned about his time in a wheelchair, his battle with painkillers, and his exciting work with the men designing Paralympic prosthetics.

Mentally, I cross off another day. In two weeks, Wheels has some vacation time and I promised to visit him in DC.

Busy snipping split ends, I don't look up at the shadow in the doorway. "Be with you in a second."

Hopefully, someone will explain we're booked solid until closing. "I think I need a haircut. Can you fit me in?"

At the sound of Wheels' voice, I turn, joy filling my heart to the brim. "I thought you had to work this weekend?"

"I found a sub." In front of everyone, he strides across the room, folds me into his arms, and plants a kiss on my lips.

While a few blue-haired ladies giggle and some dab their eyes, my mom says, "Take the afternoon off."

With a wide grin, Mia grabs my shears. "Buh-bye."

"Thanks." Snatching my coat off a hook, I check my makeup in the mirror, then bounce to my man.

After a fierce hug, I push off his chest, and stare at his handsome face. "You hungry?"

“I am but first, I want to discuss something with you.”  
Maybe he’s going to break up with me, but we’ve been so happy, I don’t think so.

He must notice my worry because he kisses me again, then cups my cheek. “It’s nothing bad. I’ve been offered a job. The Midwest guys want me to partner with them. I’ll still work with Patten but eventually, I’ll phase out. To begin with, they’ll be some travel and I need to know you’re okay with it.”

“Oh my God, of course I am. That’s such great news.” As my chest swells with pride, he grabs my hand, and increases his pace.

“There’s more. I want you to see something. Come with me.”

A few blocks later, out of breath, I follow him up three brownstone steps. Taking a key, he opens the door next to the ‘For Rent’ sign in the window, then leads me under the stairs where he unlocks another.

“Wow.” In this neighborhood, cement countertops and stainless appliances are considered a luxury.

“Do you like it?” Eyes on mine, he raises his brows.

It seems like a lot of space for just him but he’s so enthused, I wouldn’t dream of putting a damper on it. “What’s not to love?”

My hand in his, he pulls me past the stove and down a hallway. “One bath, two bedrooms.”

He opens the door, revealing a king-sized bed, the only furniture in the place. “I know it’s too soon to ask you to marry me, but Rose, baby, say you’ll move in and give us a try.”

For a moment, I’m too shocked to think. Then, grinning so wide my face hurts, I grab a pillow off the mattress and read the DO NOT REMOVE THIS TAG.

Folding the soft cushion in half, I create a creased mouth. “What do you think, Doctor Poly Foam?”

Wheels chuckles, grabs my phony shrink, and squeezing the mouth open and shut, speaks in falsetto. “I think you strip naked and fuck his brains out.”

“Well, if you insist...” I lower the two shades and when I turn, he’s naked, and removing his prosthetic.

When he’s done, I run, jump, and tackle. Rolling me onto my back, he hovers above me on his elbows, and destroys me with his kisses. Coming up for air, I toss my shirt over my head, a bit embarrassed by my I-haven’t-done-laundry-this-week bra.

Chuckling, he unclasps the one remaining hook, slips off the stretched-out material, and as he stares at the escaping underwires, holds it over my face.

“It’s had a rough life. Be kind.” At my giggles, he pulls off my jeans and moans when he finds no undies.

“Commando, sweetheart?” He nibbles past my belly button and as he proceeds lower, I writhe, barely able to hold a coherent thought.

“Wash day... Oh God, too fast. I’m going to come.” As I gasp and pant, his tongue slides over my most sensitive area.

“We’ll do slow later.” Snatching my wrists, he holds them captive in one of his large hands.

While he kisses up my body, I catch my breath until his finger finds my slick nub and circles it. As he plays, he sucks on a nipple and the resulting tug goes straight to my core.

“Wes, oh, shit.” As I arch, about to explode, he plunges so deep, I rocket into space.

“Sweet Jesus.” He moves inside me, prolonging my orgasm and as he thickens, I lock my heels behind his back.

My body a five-alarm fire, I bite his shoulder and buck while he thrusts. “Look at me, love.”

Opening my lids, I’m reborn in his heated gaze, and when his eyes roll up, I come again, this time with him.



Sometime later, we float down from orgasm-land, smiling and touching. Before we know it, we're making love again but this time, slower. After round three, we're exhausted and call for emergency pizza.

"Babe?" While he sits on the center of the bed, he chews, deep in thought.

Busy biting into my slice, I answer with my mouth full. "Mmm?"

"You want kids some day?" His question surprises me but I take it in stride and try to answer honestly.

"Sure, you?"

"Yeah, about an even dozen." At his wiseass grin, I recognize he's joking, and slap his naked thigh.

"How about we start with three?"

"It's negotiable. And I'm cool bringing them up Catholic as long as I don't need to go to church."

"Are you pregnant, Wheels?" I try to look horrified. "I thought you were on the pill."

Laughing hard, he throws a pillow at me. "I'm being serious, for once. And living here is okay for now, but maybe, once we have a few rugrats., we could think about moving out of the city?"

"Yeah, sure, why?"

"Well, that's it. According to Glamour magazine, we've covered everything."

He pulls out a fuzzy box. "Marry me, babe. Make me laugh, have my babies. I was going to wait but why? I'm not going to change my mind, and neither will you."

I swallow hard, pepperoni goes down the wrong hole, and I cough up a lung. Once I can breathe, I put the pizza box on the floor, straddle him, and kiss him senseless.

After we make love, I stare at the gorgeous ring and as I watch it sparkle, my mouth drops open. "What are we going to tell people when they want to know how you asked?"

“No worries. Give it back and we’ll have a do-over.”  
When he tries to steal my engagement ring, I slap his hand.

“Too late, you’re stuck with me forever.”

“Phew.” His lips find mine and after a long kiss, he props up Dr. Poly Foam, leans in and whispers, “I told you she’d say yes.”

“You do realize she’s not a licensed therapist.” I roll my eyes and after he punches her face back into a pillow, his lips brush over the tip of my nose.

“From now on, you don’t need her. I promise to be your sounding board.” At his sweet sentiment, my eyes water.

Taking him into my arms, we make love until neither of us can move. In my reoccurring dream, the woman has lost her scarlet letter and aged. She lives in a shoe and has so many children, she knows not what to do.

Giggling quietly, I wake, turn over, and snuggle close to the man lying beside me. “I love you.”

When I kiss his warm cheek, half asleep, he smiles and mumbles back. “Love you, too, babe.”

As I fall into a sound, dreamless, guiltfree-sleep, somewhere in fake-shrink heaven, Dr. Downy smiles down on me.

The End

## More by This Author

Hi Luvs,

Wheels and Rose thank you so much for sharing their story. If you like what you read, please leave a kind review. A click and a few kind words are all it takes, and it means so much!

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God Bless!

Stella

## SUDS AND SAM

Samantha Russo, Private Detective... Almost

“Don’t say anything and get in.” My ex-boyfriend keeps his voice low but the jab from the barrel of his gun is loud and clear.

Heart thumping, I slide into the backseat of a yellow cab in front of Murphy’s Bakery just north of my subway stop where I was about to order one of her famous cannoli.

“Where to?” The driver turns and glances back at Will, sliding in beside me.

*There’s a gun in his pocket, dude.* My silent warning ignored, the cabbie clears the meter as my ex states our destination.

“Port Authority.” Will whispers in my ear. “Don’t try anything. Nod if you understand.”

I do because laser beams of pure, fucking crazy shoot from his eyes. Sure, his texts had gotten weird as of late, but this? Nope, I missed the signs. *Dammit.*

We traverse through Brooklyn, over the Triborough Bridge, and crawl up Eighth Avenue. Despite many traffic lights and slowdowns, I dare not move. In the movies, private investigators get shot all the time but I like both my kidneys, thank you very much.

When the yellow cab finally stops in front of the bus station, Will throws the man behind the wheel a hundred dollar bill and tells him to keep the change.

*Holy shit.* My ex is either out of his mind, sold his book, or inherited a fortune.

I could run, but the sidewalk is jam packed with commuters. A bullet from Mr. Loony-Toony might not only

kill me, but injure someone else.

*A good detective knows how to bide her time.*

Holding back a scream, I bite hard on my lower lip as he clamps, vise-like, onto my upper arm. He yanks me past the hundreds of shops and down two flights of escalators. Along the way I pointedly stare up at the many cameras, praying someone will notice I'm gone before I'm dead.

Will stops us at a gate marked Washington, DC.

“Why are-”

“Shut. The. Fuck. Up. I swear I'll pull the trigger.” He pokes the gun to my ribs and walks me out the glass door where about a dozen travelers wait in a dimly lit tunnel.

Diesel fumes spewing, an engine roars to life, and our bus pulls up alongside the walk. Will's grip tightens, he drags me forward, and hands two tickets to the driver waiting at the door. Then, we take seats in the back where floral scents do nothing to mask the portable sewer.

Finally, the vehicle jerks and we exit the hellish darkness into the late afternoon sun.

Will's beard has grown along with his formerly well-groomed hair. With locks sticking out all over the place, I barely recognize the man who claimed to be the next Faulkner.

“Take out your phone, pull out the sim card, and give it to me.” When a car backfires, a montage of this-is-your-life flashes in my mind's eye.

I remember eating glue on my first day of kindergarten with my cousins Rose and Mia, my high school graduation with a flask of vodka under my robe, and getting fired from the FBI.

Fuck. I never got to prove myself to everyone. A woman can be a damn fine private dick.

My favorite character, Stephanie Plum, would no doubt do something amazingly brave and somewhat stupid before being rescued by one of her sexy boyfriends. However, this is real

life. I'm not all that clueless and my only boyfriend doesn't know I'm missing.

# TWO WEEKS AGO...

## Chapter One

Suds Sutcliff

Sipping on my cappuccino, I stare out the front window, just off Fifth Avenue. Tourists already crowd the sidewalk and a few working stiffs, like myself, glide between them at the pace of someone familiar with rush hour in New York City.

Well-dressed inhabitants stop for coffee, barely awake in their designer loungewear.

*Where is she?*

Like a randy teen waiting at a high school locker, I stand inside my beloved coffee joint, thinking of how I last saw her.

Revenge sex? Yeah, that's what she called it but not me. I say it was fucking mind-blowing. My cock goes rock hard, like it does every time I've thought about her since that night. At first, she'd laughed off my advances but later pinged my phone and met me in the hotel bar.

Days have passed but my body remembers the moment as if it was yesterday. A beautiful stranger offered to share her body with me. Who was I to say no?

I pace. My friends all warned me this would happen someday but I'd laughed them off. They said I was playing with fire and I scoffed. All happily married, they'd drunk the Kool-Aid but not me, never me.

Even now, while one part of my brain remains cool and collected, the other half knows I'm totally fucked. I got issues, says my right brain. The left flashes a picture as she came apart in my mouth. I recall her ankles locked behind my back



as her short nails dug into my arms and she screamed out my name.

Shit. I adjust my jeans and try to think of something other than her but it's too hard.

I chuckle at my own double meaning and choke on the last of my coffee.

Holy fuck. There she is.

At first, I play it casual-like but when she looks up and smiles, something inside me snaps. Taking three long steps, I open the door, toss my cup into the garbage, and pull her sweet curves against me.

Her lips meet mine, as hungry as I recall. Her palms slide under the erotic zone below my ears to the back of my neck and groaning, I thrust in my tongue.

Fuck Fifth Avenue, fuck the tourists, I want to fuck this woman.

Face bright red, she must realize how public a place and how private the kiss because she pulls out of my grasp. "Oh shit. I mean, hi."

I look her up and down, not ready to stop what I started. Her prim and proper black suit is doing a number on me because I know the passionate woman who lives underneath. It's like having a dirty secret and I love it.

I lean into her ear. "I want to fuck you so bad. The ladies' room?"

Her eyes widen. "Ah, I have an interview with your boss in five minutes."

"As I recall, that's all we'll need."

She blushes even deeper. "I can't. No, really. I need this job."

I was the one who convinced my boss to give her a chance but I'm not the kind of asshole who would remind her of that. She'll be between my legs soon enough.

"Come on then. Get your coffee to go."

She orders a small caramel latte, extra sweet, and turns to me. “Where to?”

I put a palm to her back, fingers lingering on the top of her sweet buns and direct her into the building next door. I sign her in with the guard and swipe my card, allowing us access to the twelfth floor.

On the way up, her phone pings, she rolls her eyes, and deletes the message.

I question her with raised brows and she shrugs. “The ex. He’s not taking our breakup real well.”

The cheating bastard. His loss however, is my gain. If he hadn’t left his phone on the kitchen counter, she never would’ve seen his cheating texts and she’d still be in DC.

Hell, I should send him an engraved thank you card.

Chuckling to myself, the elevator dings, and we walk into the offices of Patten Securities. Still in her scrubs, Slate’s wife, Lilac, takes my hands in hers.

I grin and kiss her on the cheek. “Looking good, darlin’.” Anytime you want a divorce, look me up.”

“Thanks. Got to run. Already late for my shift.” The beautiful blond gives me a hug. “Be good. Stay out of trouble.”

“Moi?” I feign an indignant look. “When have I ever-”

She glances at Sam. “Don’t believe anything he says.”

Taking the stairs, she’s gone in a flash.

“C’mon. Slate’s a stickler for promptness.” I glance up at the clock as I knock on the open door. “Nine AM, on the dot.”

Slate stands, just as fucking fit as he was in the service. Like all of us, he takes that shit seriously.

“Ms. Russo, please sit.” He points to a comfortably padded chair in front of his desk.

I sit next to her and Slate comes around to join us. “I trust you had no problem finding the office?”

*Small talk? I grin at Slate. Seriously dude?*

“I uh, I met Suds, rather he m-met me at the coffee shop.” Samantha smiles nervously, her hands clinging to her purse in her lap.

I slide a coffee to Slate and open my own. Interviews and caffeine, in my opinion, go together like grits and gravy.

We take a minute to open the lids before Slate starts in. “So, do you still want to join our little establishment?”

She nods with a milk mustache on her upper lip which I am dying to lick off.

“Good, good. I checked your references. Fifteen years with the FBI. A senior analyst. Your first boss had nothing but praise. Your second one, not so much, to be honest.”

“Yes, sir. I’m not surprised.”

“Would you like to explain?”

I glance over at Slate, eyebrows raised. I thought he had agreed to hire her. This sounds more like a second interview.

Samantha risked everything to move to New York. He must be testing her nerve under pressure. If she fails, the only work she’ll ever have is answering the phones and setting up appointments. Perhaps, he’ll let her analyze a little data in a small office cube.

She wipes her mouth, face blushing when she notices the milk on her napkin. “I am going to be perfectly honest with you, Mr. Slate.”

“Slate, just Slate. No mister.” He says it in the same manner as Bond, James Bond.

Samantha clears her throat. “Ah, okay, Slate. My position was outsourced to artificial intelligence and a team in Ireland. So I put in for another job in DC. My first assignment involved interviewing suspects, like Suds here.” Her eyes flash toward me and I grimace.

*Yeah, I got her canned.*

“My boss fired me on the spot.” She sips her coffee and I give her credit when she puts it down on the table and juts out her chin.

Good girl, she owned up to her failure.

It’s true. I was a complete ass during the interview but in a way, it’s Slate’s fault, as well. He told me to share nothing with the FBI so I didn’t. I suppose, in retrospect, I could’ve been a little nicer about it.

Slate looks into his laptop like he’s looking over her resume and I swallow a grin. He doesn’t need to review anything. He’s almost got a photographic memory.

“I also checked your references. They all speak highly of you. Dr. Jones sends her regards.”

As he clears his throat, Sam smiles widely. “Jenna? She’s amazing. Have you spoken to JASON? Oh my God, you’d never know he was artificial.”

“We’ve worked with her unit often. I’m glad to know you’ve had good results. Some find it difficult to deal with.”

Her brows go up. “Really? Hmm. I can’t imagine why.”

My boss regards her face for any sign of deception. Finding none, he sighs. “I also spoke to Police Chief Michael Russo and-”

“Listen, I’m real sorry about name dropping my dad. I need this job.”

“He suggested I hire you on as a receptionist and if anything happens to you, he will make damn sure we can’t do business in Manhattan.”

Her face pales. “No, no. I promise I will fix this right now.” She stands with her phone in hand.

“Sit down, Ms. Russo. If I succumbed to threats, we’d be out of business.” He eyes her and I hold my breath, wondering how long before she’s out on her pretty ass.

I got her into this mess so I feel rather responsible. “Slate, I think-”

“Shut it, Suds, or leave the room.”

*Fuck.* “Yes, sir.” I add as much disrespect as possible without getting fired.

He glares. “I’ll ignore that.”

Then, his eyes fixate on the tops of her bright red cheeks. “Ms. Russo. I also got a call from a Vincent Vitale. He said he would take it as a personal favor should I decide not to hire you.”

She rolls her eyes and curses under her breath. “Shit.”

Slate stands, walks to his desk, and makes a big deal out of hitting enter. “Check your email. Patten hires all his people as contractors first. If you make the grade, we’ll sign you up full time.”

“Thank you, Mr. Slate, I mean, S-S-Slate. You won’t be sorry. I promise. I’m good at what I do.”

He walks back to where she sits and holds out his hand. “Don’t thank me too soon. Find an empty cube, logon to our network, and look over our offer carefully. If you like what you see, you can fill everything out there. Shut the door on your way out.”

After she departs, I frown. “What the fuck? We never hire consultants.”

“If she’s any good, she’ll find out soon enough”

“You said you’d hire her. She moved here on your promise.”

“To be precise, I did offer her a job.”

“I assume consultant means part-time with no benefits?”

“Listen, Suds, what is it with you and this woman? Since when do you care who I hire and how? I get you slept with her but it still doesn’t mean she’s qualified. She wants to be a private detective, for God’s sake. Despite being a brilliant analyst, some part of her brain is squirrely.”

“True, but-”

“You need to dump this one, fast. Both her dad and her uncle will shoot you as soon as look at you.”

“Fuck.” I stand and grab the door handle. He’s right. The sooner I drop her, the better. She’s already getting under my skin and I never let that happen.

“It’s nothing. I felt bad she was fired on account of me.” I glare, better able to lie to him than any of his other bodyguards.

After about a minute, he grunts. “Get the fuck out of here and don’t let me hear you’re fucking her. Understand?”

“Okay. Y’all won’t hear a thing.” Laughing quietly, I close the door.

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