

A man with a beard and tattoos, wearing a dark shirt, is the central figure. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the left. The background is dark with some blurred lights. The text 'HELD CAPTIVE' is overlaid on the image in a large, green, serif font. The word 'HELD' is on the top line, and 'CAPTIVE' is on the bottom line. The letter 'A' in 'CAPTIVE' contains a black four-leaf clover. The author's name 'Elie Drake' is written in a green, cursive font at the bottom of the image.

HELD  
CAPTIVE

Elie Drake

# HELD CAPTIVE



ELLIE DRAKE

# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Afterword](#)

Copyright © 2023 by Stormy Night Publications and Ellie Drake

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Stormy Night Publications and Design, LLC.

[www.StormyNightPublications.com](http://www.StormyNightPublications.com)

Drake, Ellie

Held Captive

Cover Design by Korey Mae Johnson

This book is intended for *adults only*. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults.

# CHAPTER 1



“U mm, Rocky, I think your computer is having some sort of seizure.”

Glancing up from the pasta on the stove at my roommate Tasha, who is currently pointing at my laptop with a look of great concern, I step over and see the flashing email notification. “Oh, it’s Jackson, looks like he has a new manuscript for me to start working on.” Considering the precarious state of my bank account, the timing is fantastic.

Tasha smiles. “Ooooh, exciting! What’s the title?”

I grimace. “The Virgin and the Minotaur Pirate.” I look up just in time to see Tasha’s jaw drop.

“You’re joking, right?” I don’t think she’s blinked in at least a minute.

“Serious as a heart attack, babe.” I shrug. It’s not the first smutty romance novel I’ve edited since I started working for Jackson, and it certainly won’t be the last. Some of them are actually pretty good, and given my complete and total lack of any company in my own romantic life, I’ll take what I can get.

“Remind me why you do this job again?” she asks. “You’re a talented journalist with a degree from NYU, for Pete’s sake.” Pouring a glass of wine, she hands it to me and then takes a second for herself.

“Because freelance journalism doesn’t bring home the bacon. I’ve become accustomed to a certain lifestyle.” I toast our apartment with my glass, which makes her laugh.

In terms of New York City real estate, our apartment isn't exactly going to make the cover of any magazines. We share a two-bedroom apartment on the third floor, walk up, on top of a mom and pop Italian restaurant smack dab in the middle of little Italy. Our respective bedrooms have just enough space for a bed and dresser. The closet and desk are shared space, and they are in the living room. The kitchen comes fully equipped with no dishwasher and a café table that seats two, and only two, people. All things considered though, it's a great place, and it's something two twenty-five-year-olds can afford.

I met Tasha when I started at NYU. We've been best friends ever since. She was pre-law, and I was majoring in communications. We were roommates in the student dorms on campus the first few years before branching out to find this humble abode. I graduated and started working as a freelance journalist, but quickly realized that I would need a more reliable form of income, so now I read manuscripts by day and investigate by night.

I return to the stove and drain the pasta, dumping in a jar of canned sauce. Mrs. Morelli, who owns the restaurant downstairs, would be aghast. I really can cook, I just hate doing it. I split it into bowls while Tasha refills the wine.

"Is everything set up for your mom's surgery?" I ask.

"Yeah, my brother is picking me up tomorrow morning to take me back to Trenton. The doctor said to expect her needing help for the next two, maybe three weeks."

"Ok, call me if I can help with anything. I adore your mother, even if she does talk about me in Russian like I'm not in the room."

Tasha smiles. "Don't worry, she does that to everyone. She is just trying to set you up with every nice boy she knows is all."

Maybe I do need to go on a date if Tasha's extremely conservative mother is trying to be my matchmaker.



## CHAPTER 2



Groaning, I thrash around my nightstand until I find my phone's alarm and shut it off. I'm not a morning person on the best of days, and the morning after splitting a bottle of wine is certainly not one of those.

After a few minutes of self-pity, I make my way to the bathroom. I don't bother to shower, since I'm starting my day with a run anyway. I wash my face and braid my long brown hair down my back. Even though I've been in New York for years now, I still haven't adapted to the cooler weather. As soon as the summer temperatures begin to fall, I start embracing long sleeves and leggings to run in.

Popping my headphones in, I head downstairs and out the back alley. I wave at Gino Morelli unloading supplies from the delivery truck. He's Mrs. Morelli's grandson. He smiles and his eyes flash. Tall, with caramel skin and warm brown eyes and a smile that shows off a pair of dimples, everything about him should be attractive. I've watched enough girls trip over their own panties when they meet him to know it's true. For some reason though, he just doesn't work for me.

Turning the corner, I warm up with a jog before speeding up my pace. I debate internally if I want to go all the way to Central Park today. It's about five miles each way, more than I usually do. Fuck it, my schedule is light today and I can always catch the subway back if I don't feel like walking. I let the fast beat of the electronic music blasting in my ears take me away.

I discovered running after my sister's suicide. I needed to do something, anything, to burn off the anger and hurt I felt. But there is nothing you can do after something like that. I tried going back to Texas to help my parents for a while, but my mother slammed the door in my face. She never stopped blaming me for her death. Sometimes I do too.

I shake my head. Digging up old ghosts does nothing but cause heartache. I relax into the steady pounding of my feet and the thumping music in my ears, drowning out the city around me. Taxi horns vanish, the distant subway sounds disappear. All that's left is me and my feet and the earth. In my head, there's nothing. No anxiety, no guilt, no fear, just blankness.

Rounding into the park, I take a minute to rest. Chest up, arms behind my head, breathing in the damp earthy smell, so foreign in the middle of the city that never sleeps. I work through a series of stretches until my pulse is normal and my body has a warm, relaxed glow.

I pull out my phone and see a message from Tasha. She's safe and sound in Trenton. I start clicking through emails, wandering slowly toward the exit of the park. Face buried into my phone, I don't notice the brick wall I walk right into.

Tumbled onto my ass, I look up and my jaw hits the ground. The biggest, scariest man I've ever seen is standing there, glaring at me. As my gaze travels down, I realize why I thought he was a brick wall—he might as well be. A solid block of muscle from his broad shoulders down, the anger blasting out of his dark blue eyes is enough to melt stone.

“Watch where you're goin' next time. Clumsy lass.” His thick Irish accent doesn't speak so much as command. I'm too shell shocked to be as indignant as I normally would. With one last glare, he turns around and continues his own run.

I watch him go, sprawled out on the wet grass, wondering why I'm equal parts angry, terrified, and turned on.

## CHAPTER 3



I begin working my way back to the apartment, stopping to check the news a bit. I haven't had a lead on a juicy story in a while. Though many of my peers focus on smaller, consistent stories, I tend to search for the big fish. The breaking news, high value exposés that change the world. My editor says I'm reckless. He supports it, mind you, because of the benefit it brings to the paper. My success is his success.

Stopping by the newsstand, I pick up a few copies of the local papers and gossip magazines. They almost never pan out, but it's good to keep an eye on the background news of the city. That's how I noticed that the timeline and budget for some city hall renovations were way off schedule. A few months later and I was breaking news on a kickback scheme costing New Yorkers millions.

From there I head to a little coffee shop with a large outdoor patio. Getting a large americano and adding a healthy amount of cream, I settle into one of the patio chairs and begin going through my papers. The coffee is mediocre at best, the garbage cans stink, and the view is of a back alley. It does, however, happen to be owned by Sarah Rosenberg, the biggest busybody and gossip I've ever met. She somehow manages to get complete strangers telling her their life story. She then proceeds to repeat it to everyone. From my cozy spot, I can browse my papers and eavesdrop while half of New York spills their secrets to a sweet old lady and one sneaky journalist.

“Carla! As I live and breathe, how are ya doing? How’s Peter?” Her loud greeting startles me out of my reading.

Looking to be in her early fifties, with perfectly coiffed hair and a fresh manicure, Carla practically beams. “Peter is doing so good! Just got promoted to attending at St. Mary’s emergency room.”

With a sharp look at the girl putting pastries out in the case, she says, “Bethany! Did you hear that? Her son is a doctor. And he’s single!”

Bethany sighs. “Stop being such a yenta grandmother! I’m not dating anyone right now.”

“It’s probably for the best,” sighs Carla. “He’s working such late hours at the hospital and now he’s helping at the medical examiner’s office too! I swear he will never get married.”

Sarah’s face practically glows. “Oh, really! How exciting! But why are they having him help out?”

With a grimace that almost passes as distressed, but better shows her pure conspiratorial joy, Carla whispers, “Well, you didn’t hear it from me, but apparently there’s more bodies showing up than usual.”

“Oh, my, how odd,” says Sarah, shaking her head.

I’d say it’s fucking fascinating, but that’s just me. I polish off the rest of my coffee and drop my papers in the trash on my way out. I found my lead, just not in the papers. God bless old gossips.

Thirty minutes and one subway later, I’m back in my apartment. Perks of being temporarily roommate free, I’m stripping off my workout gear the second I’m in the door. Cranking the shower heat up as high as it goes, I set about scrubbing sweat from my skin and hair. I’m running conditioner into my locks when my mind starts to drift over the day.

It runs, metaphorically, into a blue-eyed brick wall. Who was that man? He seems vaguely familiar, and my inability to place him is driving me batty. I’m usually very good with faces, but I can’t seem to conjure up why I recognize the Irish

testosterone factory. Maybe it's the fact that he was shirtless, with miles of tattooed muscles on display. That's bound to short circuit any girl's brain. That, and the sharp jaw, high cheekbones, and short cut dark hair.

A slow throbbing starts between my legs. It's been a long time since I've found myself running my fingers up and down my folds, circling my clit, and dipping into my pussy. With the hot water running down my body, my fingers picking up speed, and the sounds of a rough Irish accent floating through my head, I come. It hits with wave after wave, my body shaking and starting to slip down the wet wall.

Holy shit.

After I regain my composure, I finish my shower and dress. I pick out dark skinny jeans, a t-shirt under a black tunic-style turtleneck sweater, and black bootie heels. My clothing and shoe selection is actually pretty small, but what I keep is good quality. The shoes aren't designer, but they are sturdy, beautiful, and pure leather. I made a vow to stop with bad shoes years ago; life is too short for blisters. After I moved to New York, I also discovered that I love high heels. There wasn't much place for them on the ranch I grew up on, and my Ariat Lacer boots still come out during the winter, but so long as the weather and my feet hold, I'll be in heels. I twist my damp hair up with an octopus clip at the back of my head and apply some light makeup. The liquid liner and mascara is just enough to make my hazel eyes pop.

My laptop goes into a well-worn purse. The bag is designer, but given how little I paid for it in a back alley of Chinatown a few blocks away, the authenticity of the item is questionable at best, not that I actually care.

Downstairs, I set up shop on the little patio of the restaurant. One of the many perks of being Mrs. Morelli's upstairs tenant is that she lets me use her patio as my office during the less crowded hours. I help myself to a cup of Diet Coke from the fountain. Of my vices, Diet Coke is certainly the biggest. Tasha teases that if I need blood drawn, the nurse is going to get a syringe filled with soda.

I download the first few chapters of the cringe-worthy ‘The Virgin and the Minotaur Pirate’ and dig in.

After a few hours, I find myself incredibly grateful for the shower orgasm earlier. Any libido I still had would have been thoroughly murdered by this book. With perfect timing, Gino comes around the corner and helps himself to my table.

“Hi, Rocky, you look gorgeous today.” Something is off about his tone. It’s not the cordially polite one we normally use.

“Oh, um, thanks.”

“You should have dinner with me tonight. I made reservations at La Petite.” He seems very proud of himself. It feels like he’s ordering me to have dinner with him.

“Gino, thank you for the invitation,” I stress the word, making it clear that there wasn’t an invitation actually given, “but I’m not interested in dating right now.”

His cocky grin falls. Something dark flashes in his eyes, but then it’s gone, almost so fast I doubted it was there. He reaches for my hand but I withdraw it.

“Excuse me, I have some things to attend to.” I grab my laptop and purse and walk out to the busy sidewalk, rather than into the alley that leads to my apartment.

Thoroughly creeped out, I finish a few more chapters at a tea shop a few blocks away before sneaking back to my apartment. It’s time for a nap. I have a feeling I’ll be chasing down this dead bodies lead all night long.

## CHAPTER 4



*S*ean

“Aye!” I snap when there is a knock on my office door. Patrick, my second in command and closest friend, walks in.

“Oy, a bit testy today, aren’t ya?” His accent is even thicker than mine. It’s total bullshit, he’s been in the US just as long, I think he just likes it. He’s not wrong though. I’ve been bloody distracted all day.

I should be focusing on the multitude of problems currently sitting on my desk, and the ones I’m expecting to get worse sooner rather than later. I should be dealing with the Russians and their perpetual attempts to expand into our territory. I should be doing just about anything other than thinking about the girl that crashed into me this morning in the park. I’m the head of the Irish mob, for Christ’s sake.

Bloody hell, she was beautiful. Tiny little thing, probably only comes up to my chest if she was on her toes. Long chocolate brown hair, hazel eyes. With her skin flushed from the run, her eyes almost looked green. I imagine what they would look like with her face flushed from more enjoyable reasons. Like my cock fucking her throat. Christ, I’m never going to get anything done today.

“Well, this isn’t going to make ya any happier.” He makes himself comfortable in the chair across the desk. “Got a call from O’Malley at the precinct. Seems they served a warrant on some MS13 arseholes and found a few RPG-27s.”

“What fucking moron would sell those dickheads RPGs?” The mob has been known to traffic arms from time to time, as have the Italians, Russians, and just about everyone else in organized crime in history. Typically, no one is stupid enough to provide heavy munitions to violent street gangs. They don’t get any more violent than MS13. It’s bad business, guaranteed to involve the police at some point, and probably going to get civilians killed. Basically, it’s bad for everyone.

“Got their heads up their arses for sure. I’m beating the usual sources for information.”

Smiling, I tell him, “I think the expression is ‘beating the bushes.’”

“Aye, it is, but I’m not beating the bushes.” Patrick laughs, obviously pleased with himself.

“When you talked to O’Malley, did you ask after his mother?” Having a sympathetic friend in the department is a good thing.

“I did! He says she’s doing much better with the new hip, and the agency nurse you sent over to stay with her has been a godsend. O’Malley wanted to make sure you were aware he was grateful.”

“Good. See that the nurse gets a bonus from us as well.”

Patrick stands, buttoning his coat “Aye, I’ll do that. I’ll see to it personally.” He gives me a wink.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, does your dick ever get sick of leading you around the city? For fuck’s sake, the poor girl’s a professional.”

Patrick doesn’t respond, just laughs on his way out.



## CHAPTER 5



*R*ocky

The incessant chiming of my alarm wakes me a little after nine p.m. All my best sources work night shifts. People talk more when the boss isn't around, and the boss never works the night shift.

The NYPD police morgue is a sprawling nondescript government building. Aside from a suspiciously large loading dock and a small, battered sign, you could miss it entirely. It's also a secured facility, without visitor access, and certainly not visitor access close to midnight.

I'm casually leaning against the wall, out of sight behind a garbage can watching the loading bay. My opportunity comes in the form of a young, pimpled funeral home employee struggling to navigate a stretcher through the door. He clearly hasn't learned about the handicap button to open the doors for him. All the better for me. With a serious expression on my face, I step around into view, my cellphone held to my ear as if I was mid conversation.

"Yes, sir, I'll make sure the detective gets the report immediately. Yes. Ok, thank you. Goodbye, sir," I say to absolutely no one.

Looking at the struggling kid, I smile. "Oh, here, let me get that for you." He mutters a thanks while I hold open the door. I disappear inside, the door closing behind me with a bang.

With the heels of my boots clicking on the dingy linoleum floor, I wander deeper into the building. If she's not actively prepping a body, Maggie should be in the office working on reports. She's been the morgue technician for as long as I've been a reporter, her quirky humor and unflappable nature a perfect fit for the often grisly job. Finding her hunched over the computer, soft classical music drifting from her speakers, I rap on the door.

She jumps clear out of the chair.

"Oh, my god! Rocky! Jesus, don't sneak up on people like that! Why didn't you just call me so I could buzz you in?" She's still standing, holding her chest.

"I just like to remind people that I have mad skills. How ya doing, Maggie?" I pull out two watermelon energy drinks from my purse and hand them over. Her eyes light up at the sight of her favorite beverage.

"Oooh, come to Mamma!" Maggie is in her mid thirties, with a thick head of curly red hair, barely restrained by a scrunchie. I have a feeling she would be pale even if she didn't work nights in a morgue, but that certainly doesn't help. "Thanks, love, you have no idea how much I needed these today."

"Well, I might have an idea actually." I give her a conspiratorial wink.

"Oh, Christ, what have you heard and who told you?" She sighs and plops back into her chair.

"Maggie, you know I don't share my sources." She's known me for years and is well aware of that. "As to what I know, I know y'all have been swimming in bodies lately, enough that the ME can't keep up by himself anymore."

Maggie sighs again, rubbing her temples. She suddenly looks years older than she is, dark circles showing through her pale skin around her eyes. "You're right. I wish you weren't, but you are." She goes to the fridge and returns with two cups of ice. Pouring each of us a hefty cup of energy drink, she leans back in her chair and closes her eyes.

“I started noticing about two months ago. We had this body come in, Jane Doe. She was emaciated, couldn’t have been older than late teens. We weren’t really able to positively determine her age. No hits on state facial recognition, prints, DNA, missing persons. Then we ran her face through immigration; no matches to their systems either. Doc says cause of death, malnutrition. Not surprising, right?” She takes a breath. “But get this, the type of malnutrition, scurvy.”

“Wait,” I pause her, “scurvy as in ‘ahoy, mateys’?”

“Yep. That’s the one. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get scurvy in the modern era? Basically anything and everything has vitamin C. It’s even a preservative in a lot of processed food.”

“So she literally starved to death? Ate so little for so long she died of a basically unheard of disease?” It seems so bizarre to me.

“Yep. Doc couldn’t believe it.” Her face shows me that she doesn’t believe it either.

“You said that was the start, are there more?” I ask.

She nods. “Yeah. Excluding those we can identify or determine a clear cause of death, we’ve had twenty-two in the last two months.”

“Twenty-two unidentified remains?” It’s shocking, even to me.

“Yeah, and they are all so similar. Young, very young, probably fifteen to twenty years old. No obvious health problems, no identification. No missing persons reports. Doc said some of the dental work on a couple was suggestive of third world care, but again, no facial recognition, so they never came through immigration. All some degree of emaciated and dehydrated, but not as bad as the first. Mixed ethnicities; a few would come in that were all Asian, then later Hispanic and Caucasian. It’s like coming to work and wondering what the theme of the day would be. Most ended up with a general diagnosis of malnutrition as cause of death. One was indeterminate; she had sea water in her lungs but was found by the docks, so no one could tell if that was pre- or post-mortem.

One had a gunshot wound to the head. Close range, from behind. A few had ligature marks around wrists or ankles.”

Maggie is starting to look a little green. I’ve seen her casually scooping brain matter into a Ziploc bag like she was packing a lunch. Something is clearly wrong to bother my unflappable friend. After she takes some fortifying sips of her caffeinated beverage, I ask, “Anyone have theories so far?”

“I don’t know. Honestly, the whole thing started to majorly creep me out.” Maggie shivers involuntarily.

“Who is handling the case?”

“Let me check real quick.” She pops up and goes to the file room. Plopping a thick stack of folders on the desk, she starts flipping through them. “Looks like it’s Detective Reynolds at NYPD.”

Rats. I don’t know him.

Maggie smiles for the first time since this depressing conversation started. “I think I hear something in the refrigerator drawers. I should make sure the zombie apocalypse hasn’t started without me.” She grabs her drink and walks out.

The files are sitting on the desk. Well, you don’t need to tell me twice. I flipped to the beginning of the stack and started taking pictures of the documents with my phone. For Maggie’s sake, I need to keep it brief. Middle of the night or not, it wouldn’t look good if someone happened to find a reporter pawing through official documents. I focus on the face sheet of each file, which gives the highlights, a physical description of the remains, a summary of findings and cause of death, and the dates and locations the bodies were found. I send the photos to my Dropbox as soon as it’s done. You can never be too careful.

I hear Maggie coming, casually whistling down the hallway. I’m lounging in the guest chair with my feet up on the desk when she comes back. “How are the zombies?”

“False alarm. I’ll keep a watchful eye out though. You’ll be my first call.”

“Thanks, babe.” I grab my purse.

“Hey, Rocky?” Maggie stops me as I start to leave. “Be careful, ok?”

“I’m always careful, Maggie!” I say it casually over my shoulder. Neither of us believes it anyway.

Thoroughly creeped out, I treat myself to a cab ride home. Something about dozens of dead women just makes me not want to ride the subway in the wee hours by myself. I’m more convinced than ever that there is a story here. A big story.

When I get home, I print out the photos I took and lay them on the floor in front of me. Twenty-two women.

“Jesus fuck,” I mumble. “What the hell is wrong with this world?”

After sorting and shuffling and sorting again, a pattern starts to emerge. The bodies are found in clusters. Several will be found over a few days, then nothing for a week or more. Then more bodies. Each wave is primarily dominated by a single ethnic group. The locations are a bit more sporadic. Some were found near the docks, some found in dumpsters around the city.

The realization hits like a ton of bricks. “It’s trafficking.” These girls are being trafficked and dying, either on the way or when they get here. But what’s changed? Why are the bodies only showing up now?

## CHAPTER 6



I spent what was left of the night tossing and turning, my mind racing with details. Then I dress and set off for an early morning run.

I'm running with no particular destination, just my feet and the concrete. I have a passive understanding of human trafficking, but haven't worked with the subject before. I do have some connections with the NYPD, just not the detective in charge of the case, which, honestly, is a good thing. It's an active investigation; the lead detective isn't likely to be feeling chatty with a reporter.

My thoughts turn to the twenty-two girls, and what their last weeks were like. Where did they come from? How did they get here? Who brought them here? Who killed them and threw their bodies away like trash? Lost in my thoughts, I head home.

After a shower and some breakfast, I sit down to read up on human trafficking. Three hours later, I've lost faith in humanity. Completely. I'm beginning to wonder if the twenty-two girls in the morgue aren't the luckier ones.

I've known NYPD detective Matthew Hensley ever since I did a report on police corruption. He was suspended over it at the time, but a little investigation by yours truly revealed that Hensley's superior was not only a dirty cop, but planting evidence so Hensley took the fall for his deeds. Hensley has been promoted, and he's had a soft spot for me since.

Outside of the precinct is a coffee truck, so I grab two before heading in. It's business hours, therefore negating any need to be sneaky. The bullpen is a busy place, with dozens of officers at desks and milling around, phones ringing, and the constant buzz of printers and faxes. A very loud and very animated woman is giving a statement about Elvis stealing her car from her house this morning. No one gives me a second glance. Hensley's office is on the second floor, overlooking the chaos, with his door propped open and an industrial-sized bottle of antacids on his desk.

"Hiya, Hensley!" I say, helping myself to a chair. The man himself is in his late forties, graying at the temples. His brown eyes could bore a hole into your soul if you ended up on his bad side. Despite his age and rank, his physique is still reminiscent to the college football quarterback he once was. He smiles, showing off a set of straight white teeth.

"Roxanne! What a surprise!" He takes the coffee I'm holding out to him like a drowning man given a life ring. "What's the occasion?"

"Do I need an occasion to catch up with an old friend?" I aim for an innocent expression. I'm pretty sure I failed.

"Of course not," he says, "but I know what your 'reporter' face looks like, and you've got it on right now."

Damn observant cop. "It's that obvious?"

"Kid, never play poker for money, you'll lose." His laugh is deep and infectious. "What are you working on this time?"

"The pile of dead girls stacking up in the morgue like cordwood." I give him a deadpan look. His mood sours instantly.

"This is New York; the morgue always has bodies stacking up." He seems evasive. Interesting.

"Oh, absolutely, but a dozen over a few months with similar CODs and physical characteristics isn't typical." I'm intentionally blurring some of the facts. Hensley looks uncomfortable. Actually, he looks worried.

“Roxanne, you’ve been here long enough to know how often bad things happen in this town. It’s easy to see unrelated incidents and pick and choose facts until you see a connection that isn’t there. Sorry, kid, but this story is a dead end.”

Whoa. Matthew Hensley just lied to me. Also, he looks to be dangerously close to having a stroke.

I sigh. “Oh, I see what you mean. You’re probably right.” I watch the tension in his shoulders melt just a little bit. “I did have just a few questions for a Detective Reynolds. I don’t recognize the name from homicide though.”

Hensley swallows. “Oh, yeah. Newer guy, don’t think you’ve met. He’s out sick today.”

Now that, that was a bold-face lie. “Well,” I say, grabbing my purse and coffee, “it’s not a big deal anyway. Like you said, there’s no story here. Thanks for the chat, Hensley.”

He smiles. “It was good seeing you, kid. Stay safe out there.”

Interesting. One of the most honorable cops I’ve met is lying to my face, and the investigation is being handled by a detective that’s mysteriously absent.

I’m almost out of the lobby when I notice the receptionist with the neat business card holders lined up on her desk.

“Hi.” I give her my best smile. “I forgot to get Detective Reynolds’ card when I was in his office. Do you have one here?”

The receptionist looks at me over her thick glasses. “Certainly, sweetie. Here you go.”

Printed in neat blue font next to the NYPD seal, I read the words:

*Detective J. Reynolds, Organized Crime*



## CHAPTER 7



*B*ased on the days the bodies were found and their estimated times of death, I've started to get a rough idea of when they likely arrived in NYC, plus or minus a bit. My next question, how are they getting the girls here? With forensics suggesting that the girls were foreign, it seems likely by plane or boat. I'm halfway through a glass of orange juice when it hits me. Scurvy. At least one of the girls had been isolated without fresh food long enough to develop a critical vitamin deficiency. Air transportation seems unlikely. It's just too quick. A boat though. Take a poor, probably malnourished at baseline girl, stick her in a box without enough food, and ship her across the ocean for a few weeks, and scurvy seems much more likely.

I know port records are available to the public, or at least a lot of the records are, if you submit a request. I also know that takes time and generates a paper trail. With the organized crime connection, I'd like to keep a lower profile until I'm ready to break the story. It's harder to murder a journalist right after a major story.

So I go with the next best thing. A low-cut top, a push-up bra, and a ditzy attitude. I stroll into the port authority office and thank my lucky stars I only see one employee; he's young, and he hasn't looked up from my cleavage since I walked in. I've spent years cultivating a neutral, professional tone of voice. Usually I have to be either drunk or angry to let my accent slip out. Today I drop all of that and let every bit of sweet Texas twang fall out of my mouth.

“Oh, hi!” I smile sweetly at the employee. “I was hoping you could help me.”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” He gulps and continues to stare at my chest. “What do you need?”

“Well, you see, I’m an assistant to Professor Johnson over at NYU, and he’s been askin’ me to get some records on ship traffic in and out of the port, and I was hoping you’d be able to help me.” I bat my eyelashes at him and shift my shoulders just enough to emphasize my breasts again.

“Well, records requests can be filled out online,” he informs my cleavage.

“Oh, shucks. You see, I’m in kinda a pickle. The professor just decided he needed this information by day after tomorrow, and it’s gonna be all my fault if I can’t get it to him. He’s gonna fire me and I’ll lose my scholarship.” I quiver my voice just a little and blink my eyes rapidly. A quiet sniffle completes my fake tears act. “Isn’t there any way you could help me,” I look at his name tag, “Kevin?”

To his credit, he looks incredibly uncomfortable for about three seconds. “Ok, honey, I’ll get them for you. How much do you need?”

“The last six months if you’re able to. Thank you so, so much, Kevin!” I give him my best smile and bat my eyelashes some more. I feel like I’m sending out Morse code at this point. It doesn’t take long before Kevin returns with two thick file folders, still warm off the copier. Little overachiever, it looks like he copied much more than I asked for.

“Oh, my gawd! Thank you so much! You’re savin’ my life right now!” I take the folders from him. I can tell he’s about to ask me something, so I shout out another over the top loud thank you and scoot out the door.

As it turns out, my new pal Kevin copied the last eighteen months of data. I have papers stacked on every horizontal surface in my apartment. My problem isn’t a lack of data, it’s so much of it. NYC has one of the busiest ports in the world. I separate the dead girls into groups based on when the bodies

were found and backtrack to the earliest estimated time of death per group and consider that an arrival date. Hundreds of ships arrive on those dates.

Jesus Christ. Talk about needles in a haystack.

I pull out a bottle of wine and sit down with my laptop. I start making my own spreadsheet. Name of vessel, country of origin, owner, date of arrival, customs information.

This is going to be a long night.

## CHAPTER 8



*S*ean

I start every day with a workout of some sort. It's the best way to keep myself from shooting someone for being a pain in the arse first thing in the fucking morning. Today, just like every other day this week, I spent the morning running in Central Park. Unfortunately, I haven't caught up to the hazel-eyed beauty again.

I slow to a jog and head back to my penthouse apartment. I nod at the men guarding the back entrance I use and enter the code to call the secured elevator. It also requires a fingerprint scan to activate the lift. The elevator leads directly to my front door. From there, an open concept floor plan flows from the living room to the kitchen and dining areas. A short hallway leads to my office. Patrick sits on the living room sofa with a cup of coffee, reading through my daily copy of the *New York Times*.

"You're up early, mate." I dip my head in the direction of my office. I have the apartment swept for electronic listening devices daily, but the office has active countermeasures to prevent recording or transmission. Business discussions happen in the office.

Grabbing a bottle of water from the mini fridge, I lean against my desk. Patrick doesn't keep me waiting.

"Popov's been selling weapons in the city. We tracked the RPGs back to some of his lackeys. He's been doing some

small arms as well.”

Dimitri Popov, newly risen head of the New York Bratva, and a perpetual pain in the arse. I knew it was only a matter of time before someone had to handle the situation. The city functions with a tenuous cease fire, a division of labor and resources between us, La Cosa Nostra, and the Bratva. Popov has been slowly pushing the limits of the arrangement.

“He’s going to make a play for a bigger stake in the city. That’s going to have to be dealt with. Get ahold of the Italians and set up a meeting with De Luca. I want him to know that we have no problem with La Cosa Nostra. Last thing I need is for that pompous fuck to think we disrespected him by keeping him out of the loop.” I down half the water.

Patrick snorts. “We can handle the Italians.”

“Aye, we can,” I nod in agreement, “but it’s not wise to fight two enemies at once. Keeping the Italians happy is in our best interest.”

Patrick grunts before nodding his agreement. It doesn’t actually matter if he agrees with me, but I prefer to have power through respect and loyalty, rather than fear and intimidation.

“Then have the boys get as much updated intel on Popov as we can. I want to know everything, from when his shipments come in, to where he fucks his mistress.”

“Aye, boss.” Patrick pulls out his phone as he walks out, already delegating my orders.

## CHAPTER 9



*R*ocky

I wake up to the shrill ringing of my phone. The sun is blasting down on my throbbing head, and I'm on the living room floor. I fell asleep surrounded by a sea of port records. The ringing continues.

"Hello?" I greet groggily.

"Well, hi to you too, sunshine." Tasha sounds way too cheerful for her own good. "What's got your morning grump going? Late night? Oooh, did you have a date?"

I snort. "You know it's been so long since I've been on a date my vagina sent me a forwarding address."

"Um, ok, TMI, Rocky." Tasha giggles.

"Whatever, you asked. How's your mom doing? How's everyone?" I genuinely like her family. Her mom may try to set me up with everyone she meets and her brothers tease me as much as they do Tasha, but they are family. Before my sister died, our family was a lot like that. A sharp pain shoots through my chest. I shake my head until my thoughts come back to the present.

"Mom is doing good, better than expected. My brother is a pain in the butt, what else is new. It's been really nice being home for a while." She sounds happy.

“Woman, you better not be thinking about moving home and leaving me,” I grumble.

“OMG, never, babe. What have you been doing?” I hear the soft racket of pots and pans in the background. She must be cooking.

“Reading shitty romance novels and working on a new story, you know, my usual.” I set up the coffeepot.

“What’s the story?” More banging in the background. I can hear her brothers arguing in Russian.

“I think there is a human trafficking ring in New York.”

She gasps. I proceed to tell her about my conversation with Maggie and fill her in on my port authority shenanigans.

“So how are you going to prove it?” she asks.

“Hell if I know. I’ve got a rough idea of when they came into the city, but there are tons of ships in and out of that port every day. I’m not sure how I’m supposed to figure out which ones they are on.”

“What about customs?” Tasha asks.

“What do you mean?”

“So, say I have a ship of girls I want to smuggle into the country. I send them from wherever we started to the port and then what? Hope customs doesn’t look?”

I shrug, not like she can see it anyway. “I assume they pay people off.”

“Ok,” she continues, “but who? How do you guarantee that you can buy off whatever customs person happens to be working that day? Just about everyone has a price, but do you just carry massive sums of money to buy them off? It seems like a large risk to ship the girls here and just hope you can snag an amiable customs official.”

I damn near drop my coffee. “You’re a genius, Tasha.”

“I know.” She sighs. “But why, specifically, am I a genius?”

“Customs. They have someone on the payroll.”

She pauses. “Ok, yes. And?”

Holy shit. I can search backwards. Sort by who clears them through customs, then look for patterns corresponding to my arrival dates.

“And there probably aren’t too many customs inspectors on the take.” I pause. “Or at least I hope not. I gotta run some numbers down. Talk later?”

“Of course! Be safe, Rocky.”

“I’m always safe,” I assure her. It’s a lie, but if everyone knows it’s a lie, does it still count?

I return to the spreadsheet I made. After a few clicks, I have things sorted by customs inspector. I print it out. I return to the computer and sort it by ship and then by arrival date, printing each of those. Starting with the arrivals that fit my date range, I switch to the sheet showing the customs inspectors. Two ships are signed off by the same customs inspector each time they arrive in those dates. Switching over to my ship log, I see that these two ships are only ever signed off by that same inspector. They come with regularity, including times not associated with the girls’ dates. Each and every time, the same inspector, even on the days where it looks like the ship came in a few days later than expected based on the prior pattern. The same inspector also signs off a few dozen other ships, but I can’t see any real pattern to those.

“I found you.” I say to myself. Both ships are registered under the country of Georgia, with a departure port of Pivdennyi. Where the hell is that? A quick google shows that it’s a busy seaport outside of Odesa, Ukraine.

Why is a Georgian ship moving cargo from Ukraine to New York? The owner is listed as Black Sea Shipping lines. It’s sad how much of my early research defaults to google, but here I go. I’m surprised to see the company address is in Delaware, USA. I’m more surprised to see that there isn’t a phone number associated with the business, a contact person listed, or a street address. Just a generic Gmail address and a P.O. Box. The website is a single page so generic it might as well be a template. Maybe it is.



I call Tasha back.

“Why would a company with no real contact information own a shipping line with boats from Georgia sailing from Ukraine?” I ask without preamble.

She’s known me long enough to jump right in. “It sounds like a shell company.”

“What do you know about shell companies? You’re a lawyer!”

“Yes, but I’m an immigration lawyer. And my firm does a lot of pro bono work, especially the younger members like me. And pro bono cases don’t always have strictly legal circumstances.” This is a side of my sweet as pie friend I’ve never seen before. A hidden gritty layer I wasn’t expecting. “As I was saying,” she continues, “shell companies. They don’t really exist, except on paper. Most are foreign but a few US states are easier than others to set up in.”

I’m chewing on my thumbnail, nodding along. “Would Delaware happen to be one of them?”

“Ding ding ding, we have a winner.” I can hear her smile through the phone. I migrate to the kitchen and pour a glass of wine.

“Are you drinking all our wine?” Damn her supersonic hearing.

“Not all of it.” I hear her bubbly laughter from the other end of the line. I flop down on the floor, propped up by pillows against the wall. The apartment looks like a copy machine blew up, papers everywhere, sticky notes, highlighters, my laptop.

“How do you track down who really owns the shell company?”

“Honestly, you usually don’t. The government spends months trying to figure it out and is only partially successful. Sometimes the fronts are just businesses or individuals hiding from taxes, sometimes they cover up money laundering or more serious criminal enterprises.”

“Great. So Black Sea Shipping is a dead end basically?” I sound dejected. I feel it too. I’ve got connections, but low-hanging fruit. It’s not like I have the FBI on speed dial. It’s pretty clear that Hensley isn’t going to help me on this. Actually, it’s damn clear he wanted me off the story, a little detail that floats back to mind. I realize the other end of the line has gone quiet.

“Black Sea Shipping owns your ships?” Tasha sounds nervous.

“Yeah, looks like two that keep coming back routinely from Ukraine and always check in with the same customs officer. The dates line up with my deaths, but they also come in on other days too, when there aren’t any deaths.”

“Rocky, you need to let this go.” She’s quiet, and very serious. “That company is dangerous. Our firm won’t touch anything even close to related to them.”

“Why?”

She starts to speak and then stutters. “Ok, so, I don’t know anything for sure, but Robertson talks about them like they are the boogie man.” She pauses again. “Rocky, they are owned by the Russians.”

“Like the government?”

“No, babe, the Bratva.”

The bomb she just dropped hangs in the air for a minute. Holy. Shit. I think about the NYPD business card stuck on the fridge. J. Reynolds, Organized Crime.

“Ok, what do you know about the New York Bratva?” I ask her.

“Oh, no, you don’t! Nope! You are not going there. Babe, they kill people. For a hell of a lot less than this.”

“I know, Tasha, their bodies are at the morgue right now, and their families will never know what happened to them.”

“Rocky, your family will never know what happens to you. You’ll just disappear, unless they decide to dump your body on the front steps of the *New York Times* to prove a point.” I’ve never heard Tasha talk like this, this fear, this anger in her

voice. “Russian families teach their children to stay away from the Bratva. Killing you might be the nicest thing that happens to you.”

“Tasha, what about the girls that didn’t show up dead? What happened to them? How many more are going to end up here?” I can’t stop the tears from rolling down my cheeks.

“Rocky, it’s not like Nicole.”

I don’t respond.

“Rocky, it doesn’t bring her back.”

“I fucking know that!” I take a deep breath and try to bring my anger down a notch. Or twenty. My mind flashes back to the night I found my sister’s body, her suicide note folded on the nightstand. “Tasha,” I breathe. “Nicole was stronger than I’ll ever be. One night broke her, babe. They raped her, and she killed herself. One night. What the hell do you think happens to these girls? Night after night? More than just rape? How many of them pray to die every day and don’t have the power to make it happen?” My voice cracks. “Tasha, this is what I do. This is why I am a reporter. The police obviously aren’t getting anywhere. These girls need someone to tell their story. They will never get justice any other way. More girls will keep dying.”

Tasha doesn’t speak for a long while. When she does, the tears are obvious in her voice. “Ok, babe. But don’t you dare fucking leave me.”

## CHAPTER 10



*J*esus, it's cold. The wind whips off the water and blows across containers piled across the loading docks. I'm lying on my belly, on top of a stack of containers three deep to get a better view.

I've layered leggings under my jeans and have two sweaters under my black hoodie. My beanie is pulled down over my ears and my hands are covered with thin gloves. I'm freezing but can't operate the delicate knobs of the camera or telephoto lens with anything thicker. My elbows, knees, and hips are poking painfully into the metal. I return my attention to the viewfinder and the scene unfolding.

I've come to the docks every night this week, waiting for my ship to arrive. Tonight it docked, but as expected, no one came aboard for several hours. Customs seems to have no need to inspect this ship, conspicuously busy with others that have arrived today. Finally, long after sunset and after every normal person has gone home, a semi pulls up, accompanied by a few dark SUVs and some very large men. I snap away. God bless digital cameras. A lone dockworker appears from beside a crane, one of the men speaks to him, hands over a thick package. He tucks it away without opening. Lights appear on the crane, and he begins to move containers around on the ship. I return to the SUVs and truck and snap several pictures of license plates, and then several more of the faces of each man.

Mostly, they just look bored. Two are smoking, one is on his phone, and another doesn't seem to be doing much of anything

other than leaning against the driver's side door. He looks up at me, and I freeze. My heart pounds frantically in my chest. I know he's unlikely to see me this far away, and even so I'd just be a slight bump on top of a container. His hair is slicked back into a ponytail, a jagged scar cutting across half of his face. An altogether sinister appearance. My skin crawls.

A container drops onto the semi with a loud crash. I just about jump out of my skin, having been so focused on Scarface and the goon squad. The men load back up in the SUVs. With the semi in the middle they caravan out of the shipyard.

I pop the SD card out of the camera and swap it with a generic card filled with random pictures of the shipyard. The real card I tuck back in the plastic case before slipping it into my sports bra. I pack the camera into my backpack and begin climbing down the ladders attached to the containers.

I don't head home right away, instead opting to ride the subway for several hours, going back and forth to nowhere. I pull the images into my tablet before stashing the card back where it was. I note the license plates of the SUVs and the truck. Eventually, my paranoia settles enough that I head back to my apartment.

After uploading my data to my Dropbox cloud, I make a beeline for the shower, and crank it as hot as it goes until I've worked the last of the chill, literally and emotionally, out of my body. I dry my hair, braiding it against my scalp in two French pigtails and change into a less *Mission: Impossible* outfit: a tight white t-shirt, skinny jeans tucked into my black boots, and a black coat that goes to mid-thigh. It's late, but I'm headed to see someone that doesn't exactly keep banker's hours.

I met Pierre years ago, investigating police corruption. Pierre is an odd fellow, vaguely resembling a humanized scarecrow. Tall, lanky, it's difficult to determine his age. Somewhere between thirty and one hundred with almost translucent pale skin and sunken cheeks.

He stands behind the counter of his pawn shop. The shop is real enough, and turns a tidy profit. The usual assortment of

musical instruments, sports equipment, tools, and jewelry dots the meticulously maintained shop. I can feel his gaze on me the minute I walk inside.

“Roxanne, lovely to see you.” His voice is soft spoken, with the slightest trace of a French accent. I know his appearance is a carefully crafted ruse. He’s an astute business man, far stronger and more cunning than he looks, and trades in information as much as money.

“Pierre, it’s been too long.” I give him the traditional French air kisses on each cheek.

“Would you like to sit down for some tea?” It’s an invitation, also a code.

I nod.

He rounds the counter, locks the door and flips the sign to ‘closed.’ He holds the curtain covering the back door away and sweeps his arm for me to enter. As I pass, I see him flip an unmarked switch on the wall. It makes the glass vibrate, so parabolic microphones will struggle to pick up anything, and it activates active interference with any other listening, recording, or transmitting devices. Through the back, we make our way down into the basement. Here, it’s brightly lit and spotless. An artist is painting in the corner. I’m not sure I want to know if he’s counterfeiting the Monet in front of him or restoring one. We settle into his plush office.

“What can I do for the city’s most promising journalist?” He tents his fingers in front of him.

“Information,” I start. “I want to know where to find the New York Bratva and who the major players are.” If he’s shocked, it doesn’t show on his face. “And,” I decide to push my luck, “I need a new ID.”

“Hmm.” He taps his fingers together. “Why?”

“I’m working on a story.”

“Of course you are, my dear. But those are two big requests. You’ll have to give me something more than that.”

I pause. I trust Pierre, to a point. But I see no possible way to get this story without his help. Plus, I've already confessed enough to condemn my soul to the Bratva if he were going to sell me out to them. In for a penny.

"I think they are trafficking girls through New York. A lot of them are turning up dead. They are young, Pierre. Like, teenagers." I see his face soften. I know he thinks of his own daughters, tucked safely away with his sister in Paris at art school.

"Dimitri Popov is the head of the Bratva in New York." Pierre frowns. "Of all the families, the Bratva is by far the most brutal. The bigger problem being that Popov himself is a vile, narcissistic sociopath."

"The families?" I ask.

"The mafia families. Russian Bratva, Italian La Cosa Nostra, Irish mob. There exists a fine balance between the families, which creates a sort of truce. There hasn't been a mafia war in decades because of it. In general, the mafia has a certain amount of ethics, in their own way. Honor, loyalty, things like that. Popov doesn't care. He will succeed by any means necessary, regardless of who he had to double cross to get there. He would make a deal with the devil to sell his own mother out."

Pierre rises from his desk to collect an electric teakettle from a cabinet. "It would have to be his mother; he murdered his father to gain his position."

"He what? I feel like that would not go over well." Isn't the mafia all about family?

"Popov is charming, you see, he manufactured some evidence here, bribed some people there, convinced the Pakhan back in Russia that his father was skimming profits. So they allowed him to kill his father and assume his position." Pierre hands me a cup of tea and a small sugar bowl.

"Pakhan?" I ask. I put two cubes of sugar in my tea and watch them melt.

“The head of the Bratva, in general. Of the families, the Bratva is most connected to the old country. You won’t find much influence with the Sicilian mafia in La Cosa Nostra, or the Irish seeking approval from back home. But the Bratva is connected, though it’s mostly about money. So long as the money keeps flowing up the way it’s supposed to, the local factions run independently.”

I nod along. “So the Pakhan thought Popov’s father was skimming money, blessed Popov to kill him, and now Popov is in charge. Is he on good terms with the Pakhan?”

“For the moment? Yes. But I have my doubts that will last. Popov has been slowly pushing the other families. I think he’s likely to disturb the balance of power. That creates war. War costs money, and involves the police.”

“Is human trafficking something the families often do?” I ask.

“Absolutely not. To my knowledge none of them do. There is money in it to be sure, but from a strictly business speaking point, it’s high risk. Not to mention the moral considerations, though again, Popov is a sociopath, and a known sadist.”

Goosebumps rise along my arms and I fight a sudden chill. I take a healthy swig of the tea and wish it were wine. Or vodka.

“And where does one find Popov and his minions?”

“In addition to the assorted personal properties, the locations of which I don’t know, he has a collection of smaller businesses, loan shark offices and such. Publicly, he owns the nightclub Glisten and a massage parlor in Manhattan. I know he conducts much of his more public meetings from a VIP area of Glisten, and meets business associates at the parlor often.”

He refills both our teas. “Now, child, why do you need an ID?”

“Oh, to get a job of course!” I try my most innocent expression. Pierre somehow manages to look more pale.

“You are not thinking of working for him.”

“Not only thinking of it, I’m planning on it.” I hold his gaze.

“You don’t speak Russian,” he informs me.



“I’m aware.”

“You’ll need proof of his activities.”

“Indeed I will.”

Pierre stops, stares blankly at me for what feels like hours. Finally, a faint smile lifts his lips. “You’re mad, did you know that?”

“It’s been mentioned.”

“I’ll speak highly of you at your funeral.” His smile has reached his eyes, giving them a slight sparkle.

“That means a lot, Pierre. I don’t think you’ve ever gone on the record having actually liked anyone before.” My own smirk has appeared.

“Ah, but you’re one of a kind, my dear.” He puts his tea down. From the same cabinet the kettle was in, he retrieves a high quality digital camera. He indicates a plain section of wall behind me. “Picture time.” After taking a few images, he tells me to make myself comfortable. He steps out, and I hear him speaking softly to someone outside the office in French. Footsteps echo down the corridor.

About an hour later, he hands me a matched passport and driver’s license.

“Miss Rebecca Jackson, I presume,” he says with an exaggerated wink.

“Cutting it a little close, don’t you think?”

“To your real name? Roxanne Johnson, journalist? Yes. But you may run into someone you know, or slip up yourself. Keeping the name similar makes it easier to cover up the error. You’ll note that I kept your birthday the same. The address is to a duplex a few blocks away. I own it actually, and there is a vacant furnished apartment.” He hands me a key. “You should move a few items there just in case you need it.”

I’m beside myself. This is so much more than I could have ever asked for. “Pierre, I don’t want to put you at risk for this.” He laughs. Not a giggle or a smirk, a full blown laugh.

“Darling, my affairs are wrapped in so many layers of deception it’s a wonder I haven’t forgotten about them. Now, a few more things.”

He hands me a silver bangle bracelet covered in intricate vines and roses and a matching rose pendant necklace.

“The bracelet records short clips of audio. It doesn’t transmit. You have to sync it later.”

I’m as close to speechless as I get. “Pierre, do you have some sort of alter ego working with James Bond?”

“Certainly not!” the Frenchman snorts in mock offense. “But my darling,” Pierre’s voice takes on a somber tone, “you’re planning on getting in some dangerous waters. You’d better be damned sure you know how to swim before getting in.”

## CHAPTER 11



Standing in the shower, watching the inky water run down my body, I vaguely wonder if I'm way over my head. The diluted dye swirls around my feet and down the drain, providing no answers on the way.

Towelng off, I wipe the steam from the mirror and stare at my new reflection. I dyed my chocolate hair a deep, rich black and finely plucked and tinted my eyebrows. Wrapping my hair up in a towel, I start on my makeup. A thick black liquid liner and several layers of mascara make my eyes glow. Powdered foundation slightly lighter than my typical shade contrasts with my now inky black hair. A glossy bright red lipstick completes the look. Goth Marilyn Monroe. I dry my hair and twist it up in a heavy black octopus clip, so the loose ends cascade from the top of the clip and down the sides. I set the makeup with a spray and a light dust of translucent powder.

Next, I slide into the skintight black pants, matching black corset top with red laces down the back, and red-soled stiletto shoes. My new work uniform.

Glisten is one of the hottest nightclubs in the city. The cover charge is outrageous, the line is halfway down the block all night long, and the bouncers have a tendency to deny entry for reasons know only to them. And now I work there. Rebecca Jackson, cocktail waitress.

The subway stop isn't far from the employee entrance of the club. As I round the corner, I see Ivan guarding the door. I met him when I came to interview yesterday. Like every other Russian here, he's massive, with tattoos covering the backs of

his hands and down his knuckles. He keeps his hair cut short, and wears the required black on black suit. The bulge under his jacket inclines me to believe he's armed. He breaks into a smile when he sees me. His smile is almost disarming. Almost.

"Hi, new girl. First day?"

"Yep, wish me luck!"

He opens the door and steps aside for me to enter. Inside, the building is awash in prep work. The DJ works at his booth, testing speakers and discussing pyrotechnics. The bartenders are setting up tills and filling up the cubbies with cut limes and other garnishes. Dozens of men bustle back and forth bringing case after case of liquor to the bar. A hostess is setting up VIP tables for bottle service, referencing her iPad for reservation details periodically.

"Rebecca!" Michelle, my new boss, is waving me over to the bar. She's tall, beautiful, with delicate features, moss green eyes, and red hair in a pixie cut. She walks in the required heels like they are molded to her feet, and the corset top is made for her slender frame. "Sorry to have you start on a Friday, I don't usually like to throw new girls to the wolves, but we're just so short handed and it's supposed to be a full house today."

"It's no problem," I assure her. "I'll try to keep from slowing you down!" We both laugh. Michelle seems genuinely nice, at least in the limited interactions I've had with her. She gives me a tour of the massive multilevel club. The center dance floor is ringed by table service booths, which are then surrounded by a giant wraparound bar on both sides. Above, three separate VIP balconies jut over the dance floor. Each has a perfect view of the stage, its own dance area, with glass railings and floor giving the illusion of being at risk of falling into the crowd below, as well as several large sofas, recliners, and some tall top tables.

"The side balconies anyone can rent or be gifted access to, but the center balcony is reserved for Mr. Popov and his guests."

I nod along. I'll prod her for information later. Right now my goal is to settle in at my new job, not raise suspicions. She

introduces me to more waitresses, bartenders, and several security guards. The guards are all large, Russian, and intimidating. Some, like Ivan, are quite likable. I quickly realize he and Michelle have a thing going on, but I don't mention it to either of them. Others, like Igor, standing guard by the VIP area, scare the hell out of me.

After the first hour, my brain is spinning with all the names I've forgotten already. Michelle gets an access badge for me that activates the registers so I can keep tabs open for customers and allows me to cash them out. She explains the customary tip sharing between waitresses and bartenders.

"Ok, we open in twenty minutes. Take a few minutes as a break, bathroom, smoke, whatever. We're going to be handling booths 1, 2 and tables A, B, C, D tonight. Those aren't considered primo spots, since they are closer to the walkway than the main stage, but I figure it's best to try and ease into it for now. Then let's just play it by ear, ok?"

"Sounds good! Where's the staff bathroom again?"

"Oh! Right. Ladies' bathroom and locker room are just to the right of the door you came in earlier."

"Alright, I'll meet you back here in a few minutes." I totter off in my sky-high heels. I'm currently just pleased with myself for having not fallen off them yet. Jesus, my feet are going to kill me later.

After washing my hands, I give my hair and makeup the onceover, pleased to see my skills in setting makeup to survive the Texas humidity translate well to the New York night club heat. My black hair and pale skin really do set off the bright red lips. I'm surprised by the look, still not used to the color of my hair just yet, but overall, I have to say I dig it. *Just breathe*, I tell myself. I practice introducing myself as Rebecca in my head some more, just to set it in. *Ok, Rebecca, let's do this*.

I find Michelle reviewing the expected guests at our section with the hostess. No one of any particular interest tonight. I help set their tables up with the requested bottles of alcohol and decanters of mixers and garnishes, nestled in a giant ice bin. Michelle winks at me. "It's silly really, most of these boys

couldn't make an old-fashioned if their lives depended on it, so we will throw most of this crap away at the end of the night." I can't help the giggle that sneaks out. The booth guests start to trickle in, and we get them set up in their spots. We alternate taking drink orders from them and the table guests being sat behind us. It's only about three a.m., and Glisten is known as a party until the sun comes up kind of place. Michelle and I have settled into an easy groove and my college waitress days are coming back to me. The tips are certainly better here though, I think to myself as a suited hedge fund manager hands me a hundred-dollar bill as a tip.

I can see people have filled up all three VIP areas. Does that mean Popov is here? I've looked at his picture, but never seen the man in person.

"Hey," Michelle shouts over the music, "we're going to swap with Christi since it's a little slower here and you're keeping up. Her section is hopping and she's exhausted. She has the south balcony." She points in case I don't know which one is which. "Head up and she will introduce you to the tables, I'll let our tables down here know she's taking over."

I nod and spin on my heels, headed for the spiral staircase that leads to the balcony. The music is phenomenal, with sounds that you feel deep in your chest and flashing lights timed to the beats. This is the kind of place Tasha and I used to frequent when we were younger. But we aren't, and certainly won't be coming here when this story is done.

I find Christi with a tray of lemon drop shots, handing the first to a girl with a white veil and 'bride to be' sash. She's flanked by a posse of 'bride squad' sashes. The bride takes the glass and salutes across the open space to the opposite balcony, which is exclusively occupied by young men in designer suits. One is standing, saluting her back with his own drink.

"I love you, baby!" the bride screams. Her squad breaks into cheers and holds their own shots up before everyone drinks.

"Bachelor and bachelorette party," Christi explains, though I'd come to that conclusion myself. "The girls here are trying to outdrink the boys. I've been lightening the liquor in their

drinks as the night goes on and putting our sparkling water with fruit in champagne glasses to encourage hydration, and discourage vomiting.” My respect for her increases.

“That’s a great idea. I’ll make sure the tips find their way to you.” She has, after all, done most of the work.

“Thanks, doll, just split them with me. You’re doing me a solid by swapping with me. We can meet up at closing and work out the tips that I owe you from your tables downstairs too.” After introductions to the bridal party, Christi sashays gracefully down the stairs.

Michelle finds me with a tray of fruity water with elegant lemon swirls on the sugared rims. “Christi is a genius, isn’t she?”

I nod. The girls are quite sloshed. Glancing across the way, it looks like the boys are well on their way. All things considered, I’m actually enjoying the job.

The bridal party is busy posing for pictures, each taking turns to hand me their phones to snap some for them. Suddenly, the bride squeals.

“OMG! OMG! OMG! I have the best idea.” She stamps her high-heeled feet up and down. “Rebecca! Can you take a tray of old-fashioned over to the boys? Be cute about it, like in the movies when they’re all ‘from the gentleman at the bar’ and stuff.”

I glance at Michelle, not sure if this violates some rule. She nods an approval. I get a quick head count from the bride and then mix up my drinks with Michelle’s help. We each have to carry a tray to prevent making two trips.

The three VIP balconies extend out from a shared ring that goes around the entire floor. More lounge areas are here as well as a bar, bathrooms, and glass elevator for guests. We cross from our balcony, around the upper ring, to the bachelor’s balcony. Michelle introduces me to Vivian, who appears grateful to have some help wrangling the boys.

“Gentlemen,” I say with a slight bow, “the ladies across the way send these with their compliments.” As the first takes his

drink and holds it up in the air, I hear the girls' shrill cheers despite the music. The boys thank us, with the best man handing us several hundred-dollar bills. I discreetly peel off about a third and slip them to Vivian on our way out. Michelle nods her approval.

Headed back to our balcony, Michelle tells me, "You're a natural at this, doll. You can shadow me for the rest of the weekend but then you'll be fine on your own."

I turn my head to hear her better, and to thank her. Before the words come out of my mouth, I crash into someone. I'm knocked clean off my high heels, landing firmly on my butt.

I'm looking up at Scarface. The feeling of my skin trying to crawl off my body returns. He growls at me, accent thick, "Watch your step, you stupid cunt."

I'm trembling. Michelle is trying to pull me up, apologizing rapidly. I'm barely on my feet when Scarface pulls his hand back to slap me.

Someone stops him.

A low, controlled voice comes from behind me. "Boris, that's enough." A warm hand presses the bare skin of my shoulder. Michelle shrinks a step away. Boris nods, says something in Russian, and leaves. The hand on my shoulder slides down my arm, the man slowly turning my body to face him.

Looking up, even in my high heels, I find the darkest eyes I've ever seen boring into mine. Can human eyes even come in black? His hair is buzzed close to the scalp. He has a neatly trimmed beard. The collar to his white dress shirt is partially open, tattoos showing across the skin and up the sides of his neck. The rough hand holding me in place is tattooed as well, including each knuckle. "You're new here."

It's not a question. I try to speak but my throat is dry. Michelle steps in.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Popov, may I introduce Rebecca. Today is her first day here. She's done very well. I'm sorry about crashing into Mr. Sidorov, it was my fault for distracting her." Michelle's eyes are downcast, her hands folded in front of her.



“No apologies necessary, Michelle, it was clearly an accident.” He pauses and seems to just now be realizing that he is still holding my arm. He smiles before releasing it. “I look forward to seeing you again, Rebecca.” He turns and strides away.

The rest of the night is uneventful, the drunken bride squad tips heavily, which we share, and we then help tuck them into their waiting limos. Ivan and Michelle insist on walking me to the subway.

In my apartment, I drink two shots of vodka and head straight to the shower. I fall into bed, simultaneously exhausted and knowing full well sleep won't come for a very long time.

## CHAPTER 12



It's early evening when I wake up, having spent all night at work and then had trouble sleeping, despite the double shot of vodka before bed. I dress in my warmer running clothes and set out, hoping that keeping as close to a normal lifestyle as possible will help with the sleep problem. I can't imagine my stress is going to get lighter.

I head out, forgoing the headphones to listen to the sounds of the city, my feet pounding against the concrete. I'm running through Chinatown; the streets are crowded but most of the tourists have gone home. You can still find the counterfeit salesmen standing on corners, listing the brands they sell quietly under their breath, waiting for someone to take them up on their offer of discounted designer goods.

By the time I'm back at my apartment, my muscles burn and I have the slight endorphin rush that makes my head and body feel light and floaty. I set a frozen pizza in the oven and head to shower. I take extra time washing and conditioning my hair, and exfoliate my skin with my coconut body scrub. A quick shave completes the routine. I moisturize and wrap up in a towel, with my hair wrapped in another towel on top of my head. Tasha is still with family, and I see no reason to bother with clothes just now. I down half the pizza and stick the rest in the fridge for later.

The designated work uniform for tonight consists of a short black dress with a mandarin collar. The red-soled shoes are a staple, regardless of what the daily outfit is. I put my hair up into a bun on my head and tuck decorative chopsticks in the

side. My makeup is my armor. I reapply the thick liquid cat eye and mascara, the pale powder, and add a blood-red lipstick. I put a tiny amount of shimmery white powder in the inner corners of my eyelids. I wrap up with a double-breasted black trench coat and grab my purse.

I walk up to the employee entrance and greet Ivan with a smile. He returns it, flashing his own white teeth and one dimple. “Good evening, Rebecca.”

“Hello, Ivan, is Michelle here already?”

“Yes, she should be waiting for you. Try the locker area.”

“Thank you!” I wave goodbye to him.

We aren’t as early as we were yesterday, because now it’s just a work shift; we’ve done the HR and touring stuff already. The doors actually open in a few minutes. I hang my purse and coat on a hook and check my makeup. Michelle rounds the corner. If the unsettling encounter with the men last night fazed her, it doesn’t show.

“Hi! We’re doing the VIP again today, north side this time. Looks like both sides were booked by a pharmacy sales group for the top representatives.”

We finish the prep work for our area and meet the clients downstairs, escorting them up to their balcony. The same DJ is playing as yesterday, but the music still sounds fresh and vibrant. Quickly, the group is relaxed and having a good time. I bring over a round of tequila shots and limes, which leads to the women sprinkling salt on each other’s cleavage and licking it off, much to the delight of the men in the group. Michelle makes the rounds with the other waitresses and helps them catch up.

I didn’t notice the group starting to form in the center platform.

I’m helping some of the women pose for pictures when Michelle comes up behind me and taps me on the hip.

“You’ve been requested to work the center balcony.” There is no emotion in her voice.

“Oh, who is taking over for us here?” I ask.

“No, babe. *We* weren’t requested, *you* were requested. I’ll stay here and hold down the fort.”

I stare blankly at her. I don’t move.

“Rebecca, this is a now kinda thing. They aren’t exactly patient men.”

Right. Ok. Crap. Looking over, I see the balcony has become crowded with men in dark suits. On shaky legs, I start walking.

When I approach the velvet rope blocking off the individual balcony, a large man I don’t recognize unclips the rope and lets me pass, clipping it back behind me. A girl I’m not familiar with has been serving up here. She looks relieved to see me, and ushers me over to the man himself.

Seated on a loveseat on a slightly raised platform is Dimitri Popov. I feel his black eyes on my body, looking me up and down. It’s like a caress. I shiver. For all the evil he is, Popov is a handsome man. It’s not right that the devil would be so beautiful. In other circumstances, a man as attractive as him looking at me like I’m his next meal would be more than welcome. But here, now, I’m terrified. I am acutely aware that I am in his world right now, surrounded by his men. A fly in his web.

“Thank you, Anna,” he says to the girl, his gaze never leaving mine. “Please explain our preferences to Rebecca before you go.”

Anna touches my elbow and lightly guides me to the bar. She explains the various vodkas, but that Popov only drinks Stolichnaya, with a single ice sphere in it. Because that’s what he drinks, that’s what they all drink. I’m to keep bottles on ice at the table and make sure to fill glasses anytime I see they are low. For Popov, try to swap his glass to a fresh one if the vodka gets to one-third of the glass. She shows me, and sends me in his direction with the vodka.

I return to Popov and hand him the glass. I’m exceedingly proud of myself that my hand isn’t shaking. He takes it, his

fingers brushing over mine. I reach to remove his old drink from the table next to him. He grips my wrist with his hand and tugs gently, pulling me off balance in my heels. Reflexively, I put my hand out to keep from falling, which means I'm suddenly pressing my hand against his firm chest. His eyes flare.

"Please, sit." He releases my wrist and gestures to the small portion of the loveseat next to him.

My mouth is so dry it's hard to speak to acknowledge him. He seems to take this as a challenge.

"Sit. Down."

So I sit down. I fold my hands in my lap and cross my ankles. He remains silent, so I tentatively look up at him. He smiles at me. It's not a sinister smile; it actually manages to appear genuine.

"Tell me about yourself, Rebecca Jackson." He uses my last name to show that he knows things about me. Translation: *I'll know if you lie to me.*

"What would you like to know, sir?"

He drapes his arm along the back of the sofa, behind my shoulders. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"Why did you come to work for me?" He drums his fingers on the sofa.

"I'm morally opposed to starving and dislike being homeless," I deadpan.

He throws his head back and laughs. I'm not sure if anyone has ever sassed him before. His laughter disappears almost as quickly as it came on. He sips the vodka and watches me intently. Staring at my folded hands, I try not to falter under his inky gaze, but the pace of my breathing and the slight tremor in my hands belies any attempt at appearing calm.

"Are you afraid of me?"

I pause. I feel him shift on the sofa. Ever so slowly, he reaches a finger under my chin and turns my head to face him. His eyes glitter, his gaze intense.

“Yes,” I answer honestly.

“You’re a very smart girl, Rebecca.” He smiles again, but this time the warmth has evaporated from it. It’s cold and eerie, predatory. I don’t say anything. I don’t imagine he wants a response.

He pulls a card from his wallet and writes something on the back of it. Looking at me, he says, “You’re fired.”

I inhale a small gasp and blink. *What the hell?*

He holds the card out to me. “You’ll be at this address tomorrow at one p.m. Text this number when you are on the way.”

My confusion must show on my face, because he leans toward me, rubbing a thumb over my cheek. “You still work for me, you just don’t work at Glisten anymore. Go home, Rebecca. Sleep well.”

## CHAPTER 13



“So you’re fired, but still employed?” Tasha asks.  
“Apparently. I don’t know what the hell I did.”

“Do you know what he wants from you? Do you know what the new job is? Do you think he *knows*?” Tasha whispers the last part into the phone.

“If he knew, I’d probably be dead. But otherwise, no, I have no idea what he wants.” The idea that he *does* know and just wants to fuck with my head first certainly crossed my mind. Repeatedly.

I’m unpacking. Given the new development, I decided to put some distance between my real life and my current one and take Pierre up on his duplex offer. It’s actually a gorgeous place, a converted factory space in an industrial area. I look over at the new phone I purchased earlier today. It’s an older iPhone, prepaid. It’s currently charging. I gave Tasha the number, but told her not to call me on it unless someone was dying, *and* there was something I could do about it. I don’t want her name associated with me if Popov finds out.

“What’s he like?” Leave it to Tasha to ask the hard questions.

I think about it for a minute. *Terrifying? Sinister? Cold?* “He’s poison, in a beautiful package. Like how frogs or other poisonous creatures are usually the most beautiful. He is intelligent, but the interaction is all a game and only he knows the rules.”

Tasha chews on that for a while. “It’s not too late to quit this, Rocky.”

I think back to the look in his black eyes when he held my face to look at him. “Actually, I’m pretty sure it is.”

I googled the address on the card he gave me. Nothing shows up. I have no better idea of what I’m walking into. I repeat my detailed shower process from last night, and then apply some light makeup. I keep the pale powder on, but the black eyeliner is much thinner. I add some gold shadow above my eyes, and opt for Chapstick instead of lipstick. There is no way in hell I’m wearing a skirt today. I pick high waist skinny jeans, a charcoal cowl neck top, and knee high black boots. I arrange my hair in loose waves, cascading down over my shoulders.

The taxi drops me off outside of a trendy women’s clothing boutique. I start to explain that this must be the wrong place, but the cabby is already driving away. *Okay then.* The door opens, and a beautiful petite blonde woman steps out.

“Miss Jackson? We’re ready for you.” She gestures for me to enter.

The store is set up almost like a bridal shop, where there is a dressing pedestal in the center, flanked by padded chairs. Champagne sits in a chiller bucket with two flutes on a small table. I turn to ask her about what’s going on, but a slight movement from the front door catches my eye. Popov is here.

Without the coat or tie, he looks more casual, but no less menacing. One side of his mouth quirks up in a smile. “Good afternoon, Rebecca.”

“Umm, good afternoon, sir.” I swallow.

“Dimitri.”

“What?” I blurt.

“Call me Dimitri.” He pauses. “Though I do like hearing you call me sir.”

I blush out of reflex. “Ok, Dimitri. What are we doing here?”

“Shopping for your new work clothes.”

My face must show my absolute confusion.



“Your old uniform from the club will hardly be appropriate for my assistant. My men would become distracted and I’d be forced to shoot someone.” His smile widens at my shocked expression. “Now, please allow the lady to measure you, and then they will bring some samples out.” He gestures to the pedestal.

Dumbstruck, I do as I’m told. Assistant? *Holy shit.* The blonde, Deborah, measures me in great detail. She offers to size me for bras if I would like to undress, which I decline, providing her my usual sizes for bras, underwear, and shoes at her request. She nods along as if this is all completely ordinary. When Deborah is satisfied, she gestures to the chairs. Dimitri holds a champagne glass out to me when I sit down.

A parade of women’s business attire begins: traditional skirts, pant suits, vintage and modern business dresses, blouses, capris, and even rompers.

“No rompers,” Dimitri says.

“Of course, of course,” Deborah agrees.

Next up come the shoes. Ballet flats, pumps, and wedges in assorted neutral colors.

“Excellent selections, Deborah. Please call the office when they are ready for her. Do you have anything that can be ready today?”

“Oh, yes, several just need a tiny bit of tailoring to fit them properly. I’ll be back shortly.”

True to her word, she returns holding a knee-length black skirt, a fitted cream blouse, a tailored wool pea coat, cream pumps, and a cream with black accents shoulder bag. I see a small gift bag and realize the outfit comes complete with bra and panties.

We all stand there, staring at each other for several minutes. When it’s painfully awkward, Deborah clears her throat. “The dressing room is back this way.” In a daze, I follow her.

I change into the new clothes, dump my phone, keys, and wallet into the new purse, and pack my old clothes into a bag Deborah provided. She takes the bag from me and informs me

that she will have it delivered with the rest of the clothes once the tailoring is done.

In the main room, I find Dimitri speaking to Ivan in Russian. Upon seeing me, he turns. “You look lovely. Let us go.”

I’m herded to a big black SUV. Ivan opens the door for Dimitri, who waves him off. Dimitri holds out a hand to help me into the back seat. Ivan heads up to the front; apparently he’s driving. I step into the car and reach for the seatbelt buckle, only to find Dimitri already starting to tuck it around me, his hand brushing against my hip while he clicks the buckle into place.

This man is unnerving; this beautiful lie he’s portraying is disturbing in a deep, visceral way. I’m well aware of his violent nature and his veiled threats. The gentlemanly display is just that, a display. A mock-up. An act, geared to lull you into a sense of security, right up until he puts a bullet in your head. He shows the world a polished, attractive exterior, which serves to hide the poisoned evil just below the surface. I remember Pierre’s words. Sociopath. Sadist.

My heart pounds against my ribs. *What the hell have I done?* I battle to keep my exterior tranquil. I fold my hands in my lap and focus on them. *Breathe in. Breathe out. Remember why you’re here.* Nicole’s face flashes in my mind. Nicole riding with me. Nicole in her knee boots mucking stalls out with me, laughing so hard we couldn’t breathe. Nicole in the hospital exam room. Nicole when the nurse handed her the antibiotics and emergency contraceptive. The life left her eyes long before I found her body.

I watch Dimitri walk around the SUV and get in the other side. He created twenty-two Nicoles. At least. That’s why I’m here.

I decide it’s time to get involved.

“So, where are we going?” I look at Dimitri.

His Russian accent comes out like a purr. “To dinner, and before you ask, to discuss the details of your new position.”

“What happened to my predecessor?”

A brief smirk flashes across his face. “You ask the most interesting questions.”

“You dodge the most interesting questions,” I counter.

He stares out the window. “You do not have a predecessor. I have only recently decided I need an assistant.”

“Why now?”

His gaze slides to me. “Because of you.”

I suddenly feel like a small animal about to be eaten. *This is bad.*

“Oh?” I aim for a casual tone. I’m not entirely sure I hit the mark.

“You’re afraid of me.” He smiles. He clearly enjoys that. “But you came to meet me anyway.”

“Did I really have a choice?” I’m feeling reckless.

He laughs, low and evil. “No. If you didn’t show up, Ivan would have gone to your apartment and brought you to me.”

“Why?”

“Because few people will challenge me. I find that fascinating. And I think you will be a very valuable contribution to my affairs.”

Interesting. *Ok, Rocky, control the interview. Steer the conversation.*

We pull up to a posh Manhattan steakhouse. Ivan opens my door. Between the two massive Russians I’m escorted to a private dining room. The meals are already served. Ivan pulls my chair out, I sit, and he disappears.

Taking a sip of the rich red wine, far better than anything I’ve ever bought, I gesture toward Dimitri. “Ok, explain.”

“I own more than a nightclub and a spa, Rebecca. I am involved in many businesses. Showmanship is part of negotiations, and negotiations are business. You will take notes for me, schedule appointments, make reservations, and handle some of the day-to-day issues that may arise.” He

pauses to sip his own wine. “While I’m certain I’ll find your assistance very useful, on some occasions you’ll be a prop, for lack of a more flattering term.”

“Hence the wardrobe.” It’s absurd to hear him discuss his business like he lives in a boardroom or day trades stocks. He’s an organized crime boss, a killer, and likely a sociopath.

He gives me another predatory grin. “Already so observant.”

## CHAPTER 14



*I* stroll out of the duplex right as the SUV comes around the corner. Ivan is punctual if nothing else.

“Good morning, sunshine,” I chirp.

Ivan is unamused. He’s never been what you could call a ray of sunshine, but he’s become grumpier than usual over the last few weeks. I gave up on making small talk when he’s in a mood. He navigates the big vehicle swiftly through New York traffic. I’m not sure what I thought being a personal assistant to the head of the New York Bratva would be, but it certainly wasn’t this.

The last few weeks have been the most boring of my life. A large portion of the day is spent at my desk at the import/export company Dimitri is apparently the head of. Whether or not this is actually a critical part of his empire remains to be seen, because nothing interesting happens here. The meetings are logistical, the phone messages are generic. I haven’t caught any reference to Black Sea Shipping, any boats from Ukraine, or any business coming to or from the entire state of Delaware. The SUVs have different plates than the ones from my dockside surveillance, and I haven’t seen Scarface since that night in the club.

When not at the office, I spend my daily grind trailing around behind Dimitri. I schedule his business lunches and usually attend to take notes. I know the more interesting things happen in Russian, but I haven’t been able to consistently be close enough to bother trying to record them with Pierre’s bracelet. If I’m going to risk having that on me, I don’t want to risk it

for the potential of a snippet of overheard conversation from a table away at a restaurant. He has many properties by the docks, but I always stay in the car there. I ignore the times Dimitri comes back to the car and immediately changes into a spare shirt, or the times I watch Ivan putting heavy rings on each finger before they go inside.

Dimitri and, so far as I can tell, every other Russian man in the city frequents their spa. I assumed it was just a front for a brothel, but it turns out it actually is a spa, and Russian men like to discuss business naked and sweating in a sauna before getting massages. Good on them. I spend my time in the waiting room on my tablet replying to emails and company inquiries, or working on whatever other project Dimitri has me on at the time.

I'm sitting on the spa sofa, tablet in hand, herbal tea on the table to my left, feet folded underneath me and my shoes tucked neatly under the table when two gentlemen in suits walk in. I don't recognize them. When they speak to the attendant, I hear a Spanish inflection that I can't quite place. *Interesting.* The attendant leads them away and returns several minutes later. I'm a familiar sight here, so no one notices, or cares, when I put the tablet down and head back myself.

The bathrooms are back here. As are the massage rooms, communal bath, changing rooms and sauna. I pause outside the sauna. I hear Dimitri's business voice. The overly friendly 'let's make a deal' tone. I hear the Spanish voices again. Unfortunately, I can't hear much more than muffled snippets. Once I hear Dimitri say 'shipment' but that's about the only clear word. I also can't stay all day here. First off, someone could see me listening outside the door. Second, someone will notice my absence from the lobby. Begrudgingly, I continue to the bathroom and use the facilities before returning to my sofa.

About an hour later, the two men exit, talking in quiet Spanish. I hear the words for 'girls' as well as 'police' and 'business' as they go by. They look pensive. *Interesting indeed.*

Ivan appears shortly and tells me that Dimitri has other things to do but that he needs me for the rest of the day, and that Dimitri needs help this evening. He tells me to have clothes

sent to Dimitri's home. I text Deborah for a new set of business clothes and pajamas, just in case.

Ivan drives silently back to the docks. I've long since given up trying to figure his moods out, so I pull out my iPad and settle in, but am surprised to see Ivan open my door.

"Come, it's too dangerous to leave you out here alone."

*Umm, what?* I notice the tension on Ivan's face.

Inside the warehouse is an odd mix of bachelor pad and storage unit, with a couple of semi trucks that are suspiciously familiar. He converses in Russian with several men. A few look at me in a manner that makes my skin crawl. Ivan growls, and I hear Dimitri's name mentioned. Then they don't look at me anymore.

We're walking back to the SUV when I hear tires screech. Ivan looks up while pulling two handguns from under his jacket. I didn't know he had two guns on him. Why that's the detail I think of first, I'll never know.

"Down!" he yells, shoving me behind a metal barrel. I curl up so I don't leave any body parts that might get shot off sticking out.

You don't grow up in Texas without knowing about guns. Still, the loud gunshots make me jump out of reflex. Several more men have come out of the warehouse, shouting in Russian. They all have rifles and are shooting back at god knows who. *Jesus fuck, please be good shots.* With my luck I'll be shot by the Russians because their aim sucks.

Glancing around, I see there isn't much else between me and the SUV. I consider running for it but decide against it because I'm mostly certain Ivan has the keys. I haven't seen Ivan since he shoved me down here. Speaking of, there are a couple more barrels that look just like this one sitting about fifty yards away. A bullet hits one.

It bursts into flame. *Oh, hell, no. Nope. Not today, Satan.* I am not getting blown up in a shitty warehouse parking lot. I've made my peace with my new mantra when a low whistle sounds. I've never heard that before.

Then the warehouse blows up. Along with all the Russians I saw earlier. The gunshots stop, an odd silence broken only by the ringing in my ears follows. *Fuck it.* I pop up and run for the stacks of metal shipping containers on the other side of the parking lot, doing a little zigzag for good measure. I hear shouting but the wind is rushing by my ears and my heartbeat is pounding so I would never be able to hear the words.

I'm just about to round the corner of a container when my hair is grabbed, and I'm snatched clear off the ground. I fall on my ass, my scalp throbbing and tears in my eyes.

I struggle to get air back into my lungs. A man walks into view, upside down since I'm still staring straight up and he came from somewhere near my head. He's beefy, with shaggy blond hair. He's wearing tactical pants and has a rifle hanging on a sling high across his chest.

"Who the hell are you?" he says with an accent that makes the 'you' more of a 'ye.' He shouts something I can't understand over his shoulder. Another man appears. Blondie turns slightly to face him. *That was dumb.* I roll over, pop to my feet, and throw the handful of gravel I grabbed into his face. Then I run.

More shouting, more of the language I can't understand. I weave in and out of the containers. I can hear the voices getting closer. *Fuck.*

I turn to the closest container and haul myself onto it. I press flat on my belly, willing my heart and breathing to slow down. I hear them moving around, fanning out, shouting. What language is that? While I'm asking rhetorical questions, how about *what the hell just happened?* I keep my musings to myself and focus on slow breathing in and out and on keeping the trembling from starting. *You can freak the fuck out later.*

I wait forever. Then I wait a little bit longer. It's been quiet for a long time.

I peek over the edge of the container. No one. I sit up a little and look around. I'm alone. I crawl down the container, banging my knee and shin in the process. Biting back the curse, I slowly creep toward the entrance of the parking lot. I'd



rather go out the back, but the lot is surrounded by a ten-foot chain-link fence with razor wire. I can't begin to climb it.

It occurs to me that a building burst into flames and a gun fight broke out and I haven't seen a cop or firefighter yet. Odd, even in an industrial area. Someone had to notice. I'm too exhausted to think about it right now though.

I'm crouched behind the last container. It blocks most of my view. There is nothing I can see between the container and the gate except the shot-up black SUV we arrived in. And some bodies. I debate the relative merits of staying in place until the cops show up. Then I dismiss the thought. I'm not sure why they aren't here, but I doubt they're coming. I stand up, take a deep breath, and run.

I make it about ten feet before I'm tackled from behind. *This is so not happening to me right now.*

A heavy weight is on my back. A human. I jerk my head back, crashing the back of my skull into his face. It hurts like hell, my damaged scalp screaming. He howls and curses, and his weight shifts.

I roll to my back. Blood is dripping from his mouth, landing on my chest. *Hiya, blondie.* He's shifted down and the majority of his weight is on my hips, arms braced by my torso. I can work with that. I reach my arm across my body, trapping his. Using my thighs I arch my hips up and roll my body toward his trapped arm. Suddenly, I'm on top, his arm is trapped, and I'm popping his elbow out of place. He screams. I scoot back, pop up, and run.

Right into a very angry man, holding a gun, pointed right at me. He's dressed like blondie, also with the tactical pants and boots. He's shaved his head and has a thick red beard. He's also not alone, with more men flanking him and circling behind me.

"Stop," he commands.

My hair gets yanked again, which makes me whimper. I'm not going to cry, because fuck him, that's why.

“You little bitch.” Blondie pulls my head back and spits a mouthful of bloody saliva in my face. I do take at least some pleasure in seeing his other arm dangling unnaturally from the elbow down.

I stomp on his foot. He has boots on, so I’m sure it doesn’t hurt, but it’s the principle of the matter.

I see Red coming toward me. The gun is gone, but I realize he’s holding thick black zip ties. Blondie twists me so my back is toward Red. I feel his rough hands on my wrists. I feel the plastic wrapping around them. Trapped between the two men, I have nowhere to go. The zip ties tighten painfully. Any more and I’ll lose circulation.

Blondie bends forward and throws me over his shoulder. I start to kick and thrash. He spansks his remaining hand over my ass. Someone grabs my ankles. More zip ties. *Fuck.*

Blondie starts walking; I see the ground going by under his boots. I hear a car door open. Suddenly I’m thrown into the back seat, bounce, and land on the floorboard. My head cracks against the metal rail where the seat connects to the floor.

And then everything goes black.

## CHAPTER 15



*S*ean

“What the hell happened?” I look at Patrick. We’re in my office, both of us holding a glass of whisky. He rubs his hands over his bald head and down his signature red beard before responding.

“The assault went off fine, didn’t take any major losses on our side, lots on theirs, and the building is blown to hell. Popov wasn’t there of course, but we didn’t think he would be.”

I nod. The decision to hit their warehouse wasn’t one taken lightly. However, Popov has been escalating lately, encroaching on territory and trying to weasel into the arms trade business. It was bound to create a problem eventually, and it did a few days ago, which resulted in two of my men getting hurt. They aren’t high in the organization, but it doesn’t matter. Popov spilled Irish blood. My retribution will be severe.

“What about the woman?” I take a sip of the whisky, watching the ice melt and swirl in the brown liquor.

Patrick snorts. “A real handful, that one. Outran us once, hid from us, and to top it all off, she laid Jimmy out pretty good. Had to pop his elbow back in meself. He’s awfully sore about the whole thing.”

*I’ll bet he is.* “Who is she?” I ask.

“Not a bloody clue. The Bratva isn’t known for having women in their ranks.” He pulls something out of his pocket. “This is the only thing I can find.”

He hands over a surveillance photo. Dimitri Popov and a pretty woman with long dark hair walking into a posh restaurant. “There’s a few more like that,” Patrick says, taking a drink of his own. “Her and him at his office. Going to that spa he owns.”

“A girlfriend?” I ask. Seems unlikely. Popov is known for being a true sadist. The stories I’ve heard are nothing short of disturbing. He’s also never been known to take them into public, and this girl has been all over the place with him.

“I don’t know. But she fights like a cornered banshee. Where ya suppose a lass learns something like that?” Patrick muses.

“Where is she now?”

“Tied up in the basement.” He smiles.

“Here?”

“Aye. Figured we ought to keep the ranks closed for a bit since Popov’s bound to be pissed. Didn’t want to have to leave men guarding her at some other location.”

It’s a good decision, and I tell him so. “Figure out who she is.”

He finishes his whisky and leaves.

## CHAPTER 16



*R*ocky

My head pounds painfully to the beat of my pulse and I'm freezing. I open my eyes and regret it immediately. There isn't much light, but what is there is causing the throbbing to intensify. A wave of nausea hits me, and I try to get on my hands and knees to throw up, only to discover that I'm still zip tied.

"Fuck me," I mutter. Instead I pull myself into an upright position, my legs folded to the side like a mermaid. I'm close enough to a wall to lean my head against it and take deep breaths until the nausea passes. I do a little systems check. My head hurts; I've probably got a concussion. My neck and scalp are sore from being yanked around by my hair. Assorted bumps and bruises. A man's disgusting dried blood and spit on my face. My clothes are in place and the zip ties make me think I probably wasn't raped while I was out, which I appreciate. My mouth is dry.

I look at my environment. I'm on a dusty concrete floor. I see a water heater, a filtration system, an a/c system, and a washer/dryer. *I'm at a house?* Does that make any sense? There is no bed or blankets, which is probably why I'm freezing. There is a horizontal crack of light at the top of a few stairs. A door. Interesting. I realize the two shadows are feet. Someone is guarding the door. Zip ties and a guard? I must have really pissed them off. I grin a little thinking about the

shocked face of the guy whose arm I broke. *Surprise, fuck face.* After Nicole, I took every self defense class NYU offered. I was a very dedicated student.

I hear noise at the door. I'm not ready to deal with people just yet and would honestly prefer they think I'm unconscious for a bit longer. I fall back to the floor and close my eyes. I hear loud footsteps coming down the stairs. Boots. They come closer and stop.

"I know yer awake, so ye might as well stop the act."

Reasonable. I open my eyes and roll to face him. It's Red. Well, I suppose that's better than Blondie. I don't think he likes me very much.

"What's your name?"

I answer instantly. "Hermione Granger."

"What's your real name?"

"Bella Swan."

"Don't fucking test me."

"Why? Would you fail? Don't be ashamed, even smart people get test anxiety." This is fun. I'm going to die anyway. It's nice to let Rocky out. I'm sick of being Rebecca. Plus, I'm always a bit testy when I don't feel well.

Red glares at me. "Do you have any idea how much trouble you're in right now?"

I take a breath. "Well, I've been chased, shot at, and almost blown up. I got zip tied, manhandled, and knocked unconscious and woke up on a concrete floor with your charming ass. Yeah, I'd say I have a pretty good idea of how much fucking trouble I'm in."

"It can always get worse, lass." He smiles at me. I think I'm supposed to be intimidated. But honestly, I'm just too tired to give a shit.

"Look, Red." I kick my bound feet out straight in front of me. "I'm tired, I'm cold, my head hurts like a motherfucker, and I need to pee. If you're going to kill me, get on with it. If not,

either help me out or leave me alone.” I then make a great show of yawning, lying on my side, facing away, and curling up. I hear boot steps, a door being slammed open, then closed, and then nothing.

## CHAPTER 17



*S*ean

Patrick bursts back into my office, face damn near as red as his beard. “She’s a cop.”

*A cop?* “She just out and said that to you?” It seems unlikely.

“Of course not. But she has to be. Interpol or some shite like that.” He pours himself a drink.

“What, exactly, happened down there?” I haven’t seen him this worked up in a while.

“She fucking dismissed me! Wouldn’t tell me her bloody name, insulted me, complained about her circumstances, and told me to kill her or bugger off.”

Well, that’s interesting. “And because of that you decided she’s a cop?”

“What the hell else would she be? No normal woman acts like that.” He tosses back the drink.

*Interesting.* “Not sure that equals cop, but unusual for sure. Let’s go have a chat with her.”



## CHAPTER 18



*R*ocky

The door slams open. I wish I didn't jump, but I did. Reflexes are a bitch sometimes.

Red stomps down the stairs. If looks could kill, I'd be dead already. Twice over.

"Could you make any more noise, Red? Some people are trying to rest." I glare back at him.

"Unfuckingbelievable," he mutters. He grabs my feet and drags me toward the middle of the room. He pulls a large knife out of a pocket and flips it open. My pulse picks up. He cuts the zip tie on my ankles and puts the knife away. He grabs a handful of my hair and yanks me to my feet. I can't stop the scream, it hurts. And then my head spins and the nausea kicks up. *If I throw up, I swear to god I'm aiming for his shoes.*

"Get your pretty ass up those stairs." He gives me a shove toward the stairs.

I wobble a little bit but don't fall down, and given that my hands are still tied behind my back, that would really have sucked. At the top, the door opens and another angry, burly man stands there. He grabs me roughly by the upper arm and starts dragging me down the hall. Given that he's at least a foot taller than me, I can't keep up. I stumble and fall down, crashing onto the knee I banged on the container earlier. I give a loud hiss.

I feel a hand in my hair again. *Nope, not again.* My scalp has had enough. I jerk my head back and hit him in the balls. I'm rewarded with his moans of pain. New guy is still in front of me, so I realize it must have been Red's balls that I rearranged, a fact confirmed when the man himself slaps me across the face and I feel my lip split.

Something breaks inside me. I laugh. I laugh and laugh until I'm hiccupping. It must be the concussion. I should be crying. I should be afraid. Actually, I realize, I *am* afraid. I'm fucking terrified. But I'm also really, really mad. I have no power to change a goddamned thing. I knew the risks of being undercover with the Bratva, or at least I thought so. But this? What the hell even is this? Who are these guys? Maybe it's cumulative adrenaline or some odd sort of PTSD, but my anger at being absolutely powerless is overcoming my basic instinct to be afraid. So I laugh with blood running down my face and mobsters staring at me like I've got two heads.

Apparently, we no longer trust me with walking, since New Guy throws me over a beefy shoulder like a sack of flour. I just hang. I've got no reason to fight right now. Of all the things today, being manhandled is annoying, yet tolerable. Plus, I'm a little tired from my giggle fest a few minutes ago.

We wander down a few more hallways until we come to a door. I'm unceremoniously dropped onto a bed. Red pulls his knife back out. I scramble backwards and hit the headboard.

"No!" I screech.

Red laughs. Bastard. "Oh, we finally found something that scares the ice queen." He reaches for my ankle, which I pull away. He lunges.

"No! You better fucking kill me. I swear to god—" My cursing is cut short when he succeeds in pulling me down the bed, flipping me over, and cutting the ties off my hands. *Wait. What?*

"I'm a lot of things, girly, but I'm not a fucking rapist." He almost seems offended.

*What the hell?*

He points at a door opposite the side we came in. “Clean up. Change your clothes. You stink.” Then he turns and walks out. The door slams shut. A faint click inclines me to believe it’s locked.

I let out a shaking breath. My pulse is still racing. But I really do need to pee. I roll off the bed, limping on my hurt leg. I open the door to a sparkling bathroom that looks like it came out of a hotel. After taking care of my immediate issue, I wash my hands and look in the mirror.

And gasp.

Holy fuck, do I look like shit. My hair is a tangled mess covered in dirt, my lip is swollen and split. My blood has dried on my chin, and Blondie’s bloody spit dried on the rest of my face. My blouse is dirty, bloody, and ripped and my slacks are torn. My bootie shoes are caked in god knows what and the zipper is broken.

I look around the bathroom. A pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt are sitting on the counter with a bath towel and a washcloth. The walk-in shower is massive, with multiple showerheads. I recognize the familiar green bottles of the peppermint and tea tree shampoo and conditioner. I briefly consider ignoring the order to shower, but then I realize that I would really rather feel clean again and if there are hidden cameras or whatever the hell else in here, it’s worth it to not be filthy. I can’t see how the shower would put me in a worse position than I am currently.

I strip out of my clothes and wonder if there is a biohazard bin somewhere. Or a fireplace.

This may be the best shower I’ve ever had in my life. I shampoo my hair twice, letting it soak until the peppermint starts to tingle my poor abused scalp. I slather on a thick coat of conditioner. I lather up the washcloth and scrub head to toe, twice. Then I just let the water pressure blast until my skin tingles.

Stepping out of the shower, I look around for a comb but don’t find one. I settle for running my fingers through my hair until it’s tamed and then braiding it down my back. I wash my hair

tie in the sink before putting it back in my hair. The t-shirt is massive, hitting me at middle thigh. *Who the hell does this belong to? Sasquatch?* The sweats aren't much better, so I tie them as tight as I can and then roll them down my hips a few times. I have no bra or underwear but decide I don't care. I rinse my mouth with water from the tap repeatedly and then swallow several large mouthfuls. I walk out to the bedroom and stop cold.

There is a man sitting on the bed. A huge man in a fitted black suit. His dark hair is cut short, his face shaved smooth, highlighting a sharp jaw and high cheekbones. When he looks up, deep blue eyes bore into my soul. My heart hammers against my chest. Suddenly I can't breathe. I want to run away but I'm trapped in his frozen gaze.

"My name is Sean O'Connell." Something clicks when I hear the Irish accent. *Oh, my god.*

## CHAPTER 19



*S*ean

Given my conversation with Patrick, it didn't seem like we could just isolate and scare the girl into compliance. It's like the harder the world is on her, the more she just curls into her shell for self protection. It's remarkable really. Just the zip ties and waking up on the basement floor would make the average man piss himself. So, I decided to try the softer approach.

Standing in front of me, wet as a drowned rat, with her bottom lip swollen and bruised, she's beautiful. Her head is held high, and her eyes shine with determination. The warm peppermint of her shampoo drifts toward me. She's wearing the clothes I set out for her. My clothes. For some reason, that makes me intensely pleased. Something about her is familiar, but I can't place it.

"My name is Sean O'Connell," I say. Something flashes in her eyes, gone so quickly I almost doubt it was there. She recognizes me.

"Love that for you. Why am I here?" She crosses her arms over her chest.

"Do you know who I am?" That look flashes again.

"Nope."

"You're lying, little one."

Her gaze is positively deadly. We stare at each other for a while.

“Why am I here?” she asks again.

I answer honestly. “Because my men didn’t know what else to do with you. They aren’t used to finding female Bratva soldiers. Though Jimmy probably wishes he just shot you instead.”

“That the blond guy?” she asks.

I nod.

“How about the guy with the red beard? I don’t think he likes me very much either.”

“Patrick. I haven’t seen him that pissed off in years actually.”

She snorts.

“And that was before you hit him in the balls.”

She shrugs.

“What’s your name?”

“Hermione Granger.”

“You’re lying again, little one.”

The *little one* part irritates her. Good.

“Fine. Ms. Granger, if you’d like to gather your wand, they are serving supper in the dining hall with the rest of Gryffindor.” I sweep my arm toward the door and lay on as much sarcasm as I can without laughing. I see the smallest trace of a smirk appear. Then it’s gone.

She doesn’t move toward the door or acknowledge my offer. However, her stomach then releases a loud growl. She looks down at her abdomen as if she’s sincerely disappointed in the organ. I open the door and stand in the hallway, waiting for her. She stares at me for several seconds before she gives in and follows me out. She looks both ways in the hall and seems surprised that we are alone. She gives me a quizzical look, which makes me smirk. *No, little one, I’m not afraid of you.*

I'd had the boys drop her in one of the spare bedrooms on the opposite side of the penthouse from my suite. I lead her down the hallway, not checking to see if she's following. We step into the large kitchen. I gesture to a set of stools on one side of the granite island. She walks over to it and hops up. It occurs to me how tiny she is. She's got to be all muscle for the way she defended herself against Jimmy. I wish the clothes on her weren't so baggy, or that I'd had the good sense not to leave her pants.

I pull a bottle of water from the fridge and give it to her. She accepts it, appears pleased when she feels the plastic seal break.

"Do you have any allergies?" I ask her.

"Um, what?"

"Allergies, to food. I'm going to make you something to eat."

"Oh. Um, no. Thank you." That she is a little flustered makes me pleased. I start pulling ingredients out of the pantry and fridge. I can always make grilled cheese sandwiches and Alfredo pasta on demand. I go with the Alfredo, dumping chopped garlic into a pan with butter. I can feel her watching me as I start pouring cream into the pan.

"Will you start the water to boil for the pasta?" I point to the hanging pot rack above her head. She pauses, unsure, and then selects a pot, fills it with water, and sets it on the stove.

"Stop looking at the knives, Hermione."

She blushes slightly, having been caught eyeballing my butcher block.

"Parmesan is in the fridge," I tell her. She doesn't hesitate this time, going to the fridge and bringing it back to me. I also notice the beer in her other hand. *Bad girl.*

"Are you even old enough to drink?"

She smirks at me, expertly popping the cap off using the edge of the counter. Apparently not her first time.

"What were you doing at the warehouse?"

She counters, “Why were you blowing up the warehouse?”

We stare at each other some more. In the bright kitchen light, she’s even more beautiful. I turn the heat off, let the cheese melt into the sauce, and dump the pasta into the boiling water.

“Because Dimitri Popov decided to start a war.”

She seems to digest this. “How?”

“My turn, little one. Why were you in the warehouse?”

She shrugs. “Because they told me it wasn’t safe to wait in the car this time.” She adds, “Apparently they were correct.”

“You usually wait in the car?” I ask.

“Yep. Every time until today.”

“What exactly do you do for the Bratva, little one?”

“Why do you call me that?”

“Answer me, or so help me I will put you over my knee and spank your arse red.”

She swallows. Besides the irritation in her eyes, I swear there is something else. Interest? Desire?

She looks down at the granite, as if it’s the most interesting fucking rock she’s ever seen. “Mostly respond to emails and take messages. And set up dinner reservations. Sometimes arrange employee travel.”

I’m halfway through draining the pasta when I freeze. Her eyes meet mine. “You’re a fucking secretary?”

“Pretty much, yes. Technically I’m his personal assistant. But why split hairs.”

I search her eyes for the lie, but I don’t find it. She’s telling the truth. She is Dimitri Popov’s personal assistant. Why the fuck does he even have one? For reservations? I look at her beautiful face again. Then it dawns on me. She’s more than his assistant. Irrational rage starts to cloud my mind.

“And how long have you been fucking him?”

The malevolence burning from her eyes is shocking. She swallows, and then takes several deep breaths, as if she needs



to say something very important and can't risk being misunderstood.

"I. Am. Not. Fucking. Him."

Pure fury comes off of her in waves. She hates him. That's interesting.

"I'm sorry, that was rude of me." If any of my men were here to see me apologize to her, they would drop over dead from shock. I finish draining the pasta and toss it with the sauce. I split it on two plates and take her empty beer bottle, trading it for a glass of wine. Her stomach makes another loud protest. I hand her the fork. We eat silently. She's delicately putting the pasta in her mouth so as to not aggravate her split lip. I wonder if it's worse than I thought it was. When she's finished, she takes a sip of her wine and closes her eyes.

"That was very good. Thank you."

"You're welcome." I stand and hold my hand out to her.

She looks at me with skepticism.

"I need to look at your lip. The first aid kit and better lighting are both in the bathroom."

Her tongue pokes out, runs along the split in her lip. She grimaces and then nods. She doesn't take my hand but does follow me. We're headed to the opposite side of the apartment from the guest room. To my room. She pauses briefly at the doorway, her bright eyes evaluating me again, before she proceeds. I turn on all the bathroom lights and pat the counter. She sits. Stepping in front of her, I gently tilt her face toward the light. I tease apart the split in her lip with my fingers and she flinches.

"You need a couple of stitches."

"Oh, cool. I'll just run over to the clinic. Be right back!"

I laugh. She's funny. Few women would be strong enough to make jokes in her situation.

"Don't worry, little one, I'm very good at sutures." I take my time cleaning the area before pulling out a pack of monofilament suture and tools.

She raises an eyebrow at me.

“I’ve had lots of practice.”

She rolls her eyes.

“Do you want me to numb it?”

She shakes her head. “No, just get it over with.”

She closes her eyes as I step closer to her. I don’t miss the slight increase in the pulse I see beating in her throat. I carefully place my hips so she doesn’t feel the obvious sign of just how attractive I find her.

The wound is small, only needing a couple of stitches to close. I apply a tiny bit of antibiotic ointment to the area to keep the skin soft. “I’ll take the stitches out in a couple of days.”

She nods.

Back in the kitchen, I hand her a tablet opened to Amazon.

“Add whatever you need to the cart.” I stand behind her to make sure she doesn’t leave the shopping app.

“Need for what?” She looks over her shoulder at me.

“You’re staying here.”

She spins around on her stool, glaring at me. “I am not staying here.”

“Aye, you are. You’re staying right here until I figure out what I’m going to do with you.”

She tries to murder me with her eyes again. When that fails, she turns back to the tablet and starts shopping.

Because I’m an asshole and I want to get a rise out of her, I pat her gently on the head and tell her quietly, “Good girl.”

She flips me off.

When she’s done, I walk her back to the guest room and lock the door. I hear a muttered curse on the other side of the door and laugh. I text Patrick and tell him to meet me in my office.

“She’s not a cop. She’s Popov’s personal assistant.”

His jaw drops. “She just told you that? What the hell did you do get it out of her?”

“I made her dinner.”

I’m pretty sure Patrick is as close to falling out of his chair as I’ve ever seen him.

“Never would have thought of that. She sure as hell doesn’t act like a personal assistant.”

“I put stitches in her lip too. How’d that one happen exactly?”

Patrick blanches. “That was me actually. She head-butted me in my balls and I slapped her.”

I put my drink down. “From now on, no one touches her. Restrain her if you need to, but no one hits her. I’ll deal with any attitude problems that occur.”

Patrick looks shocked for several seconds before schooling his features back to his normal scowl. “Aye, boss. I’ll make sure the boys know too. What are you planning on doing with her?”

I consider him for a minute. “I don’t know.”

“You can’t send her back. If she’s loyal to Popov, she might give him an advantage. We both know this shite is far from over.”

“I’m not convinced she is loyal to him.”

“Then Popov will kill her, probably after torturing her just because he’s a sick fuck.”

Changing the subject, I hand him the tablet she’d used to shop on, which is now in a plastic bag. “Have O’Malley run her prints.”

Laughing, he says, “Didn’t tell you her name, did she?”

“Shut up.”

“Maybe try dessert next time, might get a name out of her.” He walks out of my office laughing, far too proud of himself.

## CHAPTER 20



*R*ocky

I'm escorted unceremoniously back to my room. Sean opens my door and waves his arm inside as if he's a real estate agent ushering me into a new listing. While it grates against every part of my nature, I step into the room as instructed. After all, I have literally nothing else to do.

"Good night, Miss Granger." Shaking his head, he steps back into the hall and closes my door.

And locks it.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I mutter, trying the door anyway. It's well and truly locked. Turning back to the room, I slowly start sinking to the floor until I'm resting with my legs out in front of me and my head against the door.

The room is huge, probably the same square footage as my entire apartment. Possibly more. The carpet is thick and soft and a light cream color that suggest either that my new landlord spends a fortune in cleaning services, or the room is seldom used. The bed is enormous and piled high with pillows that neatly coordinate with the snow-white duvet cover. Opposite the door are floor-to-ceiling windows dressed with gauzy drapes.

When I look out, the New York skyline greets me. The brief relief from the comforting view of the familiar city is

somewhat dampened when I realize how incredibly high up I am. My talents do not extend to flight or scaling skyscrapers.

The chest of drawers is empty, save for some dust collecting in one of the top drawers. The closet is a walk-in, and easily usable as a spare bedroom. The bins on the top shelf of the closet are filled with spare towels and blankets. Aside from the empty hamper and a collection of swanky padded clothes hangers, the closet is empty.

I wander back into the bathroom and take my time looking in every drawer and cranny. Other than the toiletries from earlier, I find a manicure kit that got shoved into the back of the bottom drawer, a stash of cleaning products and spare toilet paper rolls, and a hair dryer. *Perfect. Now all I need is the bathtub.* I snort. I'm not the suicidal type. Twisted, broken, severely messed in the head, and wrapped in a delicate layer of sarcasm, yes. But not suicidal.

Flopping onto the sinfully comfortable bed, I let my mind drift over the last few hours of my life, which unfortunately is currently a giant pile of *I don't know meets fuck my life.*

Starting with who is Sean O'Connell? And why am I here? I think back to my conversation with Pierre about the mafia families of New York. I feel like it's a reasonable assumption that I'm currently with the Irish mob. Fuck. Why didn't I ask more questions about the other families? Sean says that Popov started a war. Do I trust that? I sure as hell don't trust Popov. I remember Pierre saying that when the families of New York went to war, Popov would be the cause of it.

*Jesus, Rocky, did you bite off more than you can chew.*

Between the distant sounds of traffic, my overall exhaustion, and the *really* comfortable bed, I've started dozing off, with only paranoia and residual adrenaline warding off the allure of sleep.

It occurs to me I haven't heard a sound coming from inside the house in hours, at least by my clock-less estimation. I peek out at the cars buzzing around below my windows. New York may be the city that never sleeps, but it has traffic patterns like

every other metropolis. If I had to guess, it's well after midnight.

Crossing the room, I stand by the door and listen. *Silence.*

As I stare at the handle, it occurs to me that the lock might be more decorative than anything else. After all, this doesn't exactly look like a holding cell. More like a guest room.

Briefly, my cautious mind tells me that I'm about to do something incredibly stupid. Clearly in contrast to all the *stellar* life choices I've made so far. I take my manicure kit and one of the hangers and begin chopping away with the ridiculously tiny cuticle nippers at the satin and padding wrapping the hanger.

*Bingo.* I start to unravel the twisted wires that make up the flexible core of the hanger, until I've got a piece about a foot long, and bend it into a deep curve.

Bare feet aren't ideal for this little stroll, but broken heels are worse—loud *and* uncomfortable. Considering the rest of my clothes, my current borrowed and far too large clothing is as good of a jail break outfit as I could hope for.

I slide my wire between the door and the jamb, the curve causing it to wrap around the latch and return to my side. Slowly, I pull the wire forward while pushing the handle. Each and every pop, creak, and scrape sounds like it might as well be an explosion to my anxiety-riddled brain. With a final ominous click, the latch depresses and the door swings open.

*Holy shit. That hasn't worked since I used to steal snacks from the teachers' lounge in middle school.*

The door swings open on blissfully well-oiled hinges. Peeking out, the hall is empty. I tiptoe out and close the door behind me, leaving it unlocked in case I need to make a hasty dash for cover. Padding silently with my bare feet, I make my way down the hall, through the massive living room–kitchen combo, and to the door. Based on the numerous, non-decorative appearing locks, I'm guessing this is the entrance. Through the peephole it opens into a small lobby with an elevator and an unmarked door, which I presume leads to the

emergency stairs. A small box on the door that matches a connecting one on the jamb inclines me to believe it's alarmed.

*Well, shit.*

Naturally, this is the time I hear sounds of life from the opposite side of the house. Mainly, distant footsteps. My internal monologue has been replaced with a voodoo chant considering only of selected curse words.

*No time like the present.*

I slip out the front door, sending up a silent thank you to the heavens when no alarms start blaring. Which is dashed when the elevator doors slide open and reveal a very large man in a dark suit. His gray-flecked hair is buzzed short and his eyes fly open in surprise when he sees me.

"Bloody hell," he gasps, the thick Irish brogue barely registering in my brain.

Without further consideration, I dash down into the stairs, ignoring the shrill alarm that follows. I can hear him crashing down the stairs behind me.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I'm flying down flight after flight until my breathing is ragged. The behemoth is still behind me, his loud footsteps and occasional shouts to stop keeping me apprised of his location.

Rounding the next landing, I hear more voices coming up the stairs. I can't understand the Gaelic conversation, but they are very, very close.

*Shit.* I back up the stairs to the last landing and try the unmarked door. Not only is it unmarked, it doesn't even have a handle on this side. I slam my shoulder into it. *Nope.*

The voices below have started shouting up to the giant above me. I back as far against the wall at the top of the landing as I can and wait.

The voices below me end up being two men, far younger than the giant, but of much thinner build. I run as fast as I can down the stairs and try to barrel through the smaller of the two. The lanky blond kid isn't much older than me, and I'm pretty sure

a pajama-clad woman running toward him at full speed was not what he was expecting. He tumbles to the ground. I do too, but my momentum carries me down to the next landing. Half crawling, I pull myself back up and start down the stairs again, just in time to run right into Red.

“Oh, fuck,” I gasp. He’s got a giant hand around each of my biceps.

“Lass, where you running off to now? Didn’t like the supper he fixed you?” He laughs at his own clever joke and starts to prod me back up the stairs.

Which I’m absolutely not doing.

“Christ, woman, why do you have to make everything so bloody difficult?” Patrick complains, before hoisting me over his shoulder.

“Put me down!” I scream, kicking my feet and trying to hit my fists into his kidneys. From my upside-down angle, I’m not having any real success. The behemoth and the other two have arrived.

“Stop bloody hitting me or I swear to all that is holy I will drop you on your head. There’s nowhere else to run, lass.”

*Damnit. I hate that he’s right.* There is nowhere else. I’m severely outnumbered and there seems to be another cranky Irishman behind every corner. It was dumb luck I made it as far as I did. Being carried over his shoulder and bouncing up and down every step as Patrick carries me up the stairs is making my head throb and I’m starting to feel seasick.

“Ok, fine. Just put me down.”

Patrick sighs, as if I’m stomping on his very last frayed nerve. Setting me down, he grabs my chin between two fingers and turns me to face him. “No more trouble. Walk your arse back up those stairs. Now.”

So I do. Behind me, his phone chirps.

“Aye. We’re headed back up.” He chuckles. “Gave you the slip, did she?” His cheerful tone is nicely contrasted by the



muted growl coming out of the phone. I can't make out the words, but the tone doesn't sound particularly happy.

Fantastic.

Patrick chuckles again before disconnecting the phone.

Waiting at the top of the stairs is a very, very angry Sean. His dark hair is ruffled from sleep. He's barefoot, dressed only in a pair of dark gray sweatpants. I try to ignore his sculpted chest and shoulders with minimal success.

"What the fuck was that?" I can see him clenching his jaw as he speaks.

"Had a hankering for Chinese food?" I was aiming for a touch of bravado, but it fell majorly flat.

Sean grabs my biceps and pushes me through the door. As he closes it, I hear him mumble something to the behemoth. When he settles into a post outside the door, I realize my chances of a round two escape have just vaporized.

Sean leans against the kitchen island. Arms crossed over his chest, he focuses his arctic eyes on me. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"Um, that you kidnapped me and locked me in a bedroom. What do you think I was thinking? I was leaving."

He regards this answer for several moments before speaking again. "I made it perfectly fucking clear. You are staying here."

"I'm sorry, are you out of your fucking mind? Like are you actually touched in the head a bit? You *kidnapped me*. Don't act like I'm the unreasonable one right now."

"What exactly do you think happens to you outside? Do you think your boss is going to be just overjoyed to have you back? Or do you think he's going to wonder why I killed every one of his men, but you just walked out?" Sean pushes off the island and stalks toward me.

I step back until my back is pressed to the wall.

He slowly closes the distance, like a predator circling his skittish prey. “You have no idea how big of a mess you’re in, little one. You are staying here.”

I tilt my face up to lock eyes with his chilly glare. “Bite me.”

Something gleams in his eyes. The corner of his mouth lifts in just the tiniest smirk. He makes a tsk-tsk sound.

*Uh oh.*

“Oh, little one, I thought you’d never ask.”

Lightning fast, Sean spins me around. Grasping both my wrists in one large palm, he starts to walk me down the hall.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I try jerking my wrists away, but his grip doesn’t budge.

“Oh, I think it’s time we do a little attitude adjusting. You seem confused.”

We cross the threshold into his bedroom again. The room is done in shades of cool gray and black tones, with a large bed dominating the side closest to the en-suite bathroom. Opposite it is a small sitting area, complete with a fireplace, a pair of padded high-back chairs, and a sofa. I hear him grab something from the bureau as we pass. It’s not until I feel the cold metal against my wrists that I realize he’s handcuffing me.

“What the hell? Stop!” My thrashing around just elicits a laugh from him.

“Oh, little one, you don’t get a vote.” He walks us to the sofa and sits, pulling me over his lap.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“You seem a little confused. We’re going to correct that misunderstanding. Right now, you’ve got yourself into a very bad situation. The only place you are safe, the only way I can keep you safe, is for you to stay here.” He’s pushed my chest down, keeping his left hand on my back. His right hand sits ominously on my ass.

“What are you doing?” The hand has started massaging back and forth over my sweatpants-covered behind.

“Spanking you.”

“What? The hell you are!” I try to get up, but the hand on my back presses me back down. Between this and the hand on my ass, I’m not going anywhere.

Slowly, he stops rubbing my ass and grabs the waistband of the sweatpants, dragging it down to my thighs. The air is cold against my bare skin.

The slap comes without warning. His large hand connects with my ass and I shriek.

“You motherfucker!”

“Language and fits won’t get you out of punishments.” His hand connects with the other cheek.

“That hurts!” It’s like hot pins and needles spreading across my body.

“It’s supposed to hurt. It’s a punishment.”

His palm connects with my ass three more times in quick succession.

I can feel tears running down my cheeks. “Stop!” I scream. I buck and thrash against him, but his grip doesn’t budge.

Again and again, his hand cracks across my ass. I can feel the heat radiating off my skin. I can see wet tearstains on the sofa in front of me. *What is happening to me?* I’ve never been spanked in my life, not even when I was little.

“Why are you being punished, little one?” He pauses to rub soft circles across my heated skin.

“Because you’re an asshole.”

He resumes the spanking.

“Why?” he asks, this time without breaking the rhythmic pace of the spans.

“Because I ran away.” The next spank is even harder.

“Close, but no. Why are you being punished?”

“I don’t know!” I shriek at him.

More spanks rain down on my ass. He starts to move down my thighs and back up.

“You are being punished because you put yourself in danger by running away.”

*Smack.*

“You made it down fifteen floors by the way. Which is impressive. Two landings per floor. Let’s say thirty spanks. Say it. Why are you being punished?”

“I ran away!”

*Smack.*

“Try again, little one.”

“I put myself in danger.” It hurts, of course, but the humiliation of being actually, literally spanked is worse.

Sean goes back to rubbing soft strokes across my ass. He leans forward and whispers in my ear. I can feel his breath against my sweat-covered skin, sending a shiver down my body. “Good girl.”

The shiver is followed by a growing need between my thighs, and a confusing realization that I am very, very wet. My nipples are painfully hard, rubbing against the thin fabric of my t-shirt.

Sean shifts me slightly, pulling me back into position, and I feel his very hard, *very* large cock pressing against me.

*Oh. My. God.*

And then it starts again. One after the other, he rains down merciless spanks across my ass and thighs. I’m crying so hard it takes several moments to realize when he’s stopped.

“When I say I don’t know what else to do with you, I’m not being cute. By now Popov knows your body wasn’t at the scene, and he knows you didn’t close ranks with the rest of the Bratva soldiers. He will know you were with us.” He’s rubbing slow circles on my back, avoiding the heated skin on my ass. I almost wish he wasn’t. “Best case, he would just have you

killed for betrayal. More likely, he would torture you for any information on our organization, then a little extra just for fun.”

Sean slowly slides the sweats back up over my ass. He tugs on the cuffs momentarily, before I feel them release. He pulls them off, closes them, and tosses them casually onto the high-back chair next to the sofa. He gently transfers me into the opposite chair. Apparently lifting a grown ass woman isn't a problem for him.

I'm now eye level with the impressively large bulge occupying the front of his pants.

*Seriously, that doesn't fit inside a normal woman?*

Sean clears his throat, and I blush. He clearly noticed me staring at his cock.

“To sum up,” Sean says, his tone serious, “you are staying here. You will be a good girl and *behave*.”

I can't hold his steady gaze when he stresses the word. I stare down at my feet.

“Do you know what the definition of trust is?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“Trust is consistency over time. If you misbehave, I will punish you.”

He holds a hand out and pulls me to my feet. I see the faintest spark in his dark eyes.

He leans down and whispers, “And little one, I know exactly how wet you are after being spanked over my knee.”

I blush so much I feel the heat coming off my cheeks.

“But bad girls aren't rewarded with orgasms.”

*Oh. My. God.*

He casually takes my hand and leads me back to my bedroom. “This time, actually go to sleep.”

The door closes, the lock clicks.

My attention shifts to the glorious bed. Exhausted, I snuggle into the plush blankets and fall asleep.

## CHAPTER 21



Waking up in the large, soft bed, it takes a minute to remember where I am. Then it all comes back to me. Gunfight, explosion, kidnapped, whatever that conversation with Sean was, followed by an ill-conceived escape, and being spanked to within an inch of my life.

*Not spanked, punished.*

And then the deepest sleep of my life. I look at the clock. Apparently a lot of sleep.

*Holy shit.* No wonder I need to pee.

Coming out of the bathroom, I notice a bottle of water and ibuprofen on the nightstand, and a phone plugged in to charge. When did that get there? A note is taped to the phone.

*The phone has my number programmed. Text me when you want out of the room.*

*P.S. Yes, the phone can only contact me.*

*Sean*

I rub my temples. My head still hurts from yesterday, though it's markedly improved, so I'm probably not going to die from a brain bleed. Just about every other part of me hurts too, come to think of it. I send a little prayer to the ibuprofen gods for salvation and toss back the little brown pills. I send Sean a text.

*I want out of the room.*

The response is quick, but infuriating.

*Ask nicely.*

I respond out of reflex.

*Bite me.*

When he doesn't answer me, I try again.

*Please.*

A shiver runs through me when I read his response.

*Please bite you? Or please let you out of your room?*

I curse at my ovaries. He's part of the fucking Irish mob. They aren't convinced.

I unwillingly flash back to the day I saw him shirtless in the park. Followed by remembering the earth-shattering orgasm in my shower thinking about it later.

I really wish I had on underwear right now. I can already feel the heat building between my thighs. A slight residual soreness on my butt sends tingling sensations straight to my pussy. Which reminds me of *why* my butt is sore, which then reminds me of being held across his lap with his hand



spanking my ass. Oh, god, and his cock, long and hard and pressing against my stomach.

Just like that, my cunt is dripping wet and my nipples are hard.

*Please let me out of the room.*

He doesn't answer, but a few minutes later I hear the door unlock, followed by a knock.

I open the door. "Good morning," I greet.

He laughs. "Try good afternoon. It's almost dinnertime."

I shrug. "What do you want from me? I was tired."

He smiles.

I'm irritated with myself to admit that it's nice.

"Your belongings are here. Do you want to grab them? I'll get dinner ready and you can get dressed and do whatever it is lasses do in the mornings?"

"Sure." I follow him through the apartment like a fucking golden retriever, again. Sitting on the kitchen island is a large hamper filled with bags and boxes. "Whoa, I didn't order all of that." Not even half by the looks of it.

"I know. I took the liberty of adding some more items to the cart. Can you find your way back to the room?"

I nod, and grab my massive basket. In my room, I dump it all onto the bed. *Holy shit*. I put the toiletries and makeup I requested away, as well as the running shoes, leggings, t-shirts, and a hoodie. The sports bras, socks, and cotton underwear round out the extent of what I asked for. Ok, Mr. O'Connell, explain the jeans, sweaters, dresses, ballet flats, high heels, and lacy bra and panty sets?

I decide to ponder that in the shower. Grabbing the clarifying shampoo I'd asked for, I wash my hair repeatedly, watching the black dye run down the drain. I'm glad I'd only done a semi-permanent. I slather enough conditioner on to saturate

my hair, twist it up onto my head and start scrubbing my skin down. Then I shave and exfoliate.

I blow-dry my hair. I'm happy to see the chocolate brown color back. My makeup is light, in part because of the stitches in my lip. The makeup does help to blend the bruising in, so I feel less broken. I highlight my eyes with just enough shadow to make them glow. Looking at my new clothes, I consider wearing the leggings and t-shirts I'd asked for. But when I feel the softest ivory sweater I've ever felt in my life, my plans change. I'm looking for a bra when I realize I have to wear one of his bras with the light-colored shirt. *Sneaky asshole*. I debate rejecting the matching panties on principle, but hate to split up a set.

I wander back into the kitchen. Sean looks up from the wine he's pouring. He's dressed much like yesterday, only today his jacket is gone and the button-down shirt is open at the collar with the sleeves rolled to the elbow, showing off muscular forearms and colorful tattoos. I feel his eyes travel from my face to my feet and back.

"You look beautiful, Rebecca."

I freeze and feel the color drain from my face, my pulse starting to beat frantically. I don't want Pierre to end up on the bad side of the mob for helping me become Rebecca. I can't risk them finding out about Tasha in my real life.

"My men recovered what was left of your purse. Your ID held up very well."

I'm still frozen in place. Sean calls my name. My fake name. I snap out of it. He's giving me a quizzical look, but seems to shake it off.

"Hope you don't mind, I had steak delivered. Would you mind taking the wine out to the balcony?" He points at a sliding door I didn't notice yesterday. I step onto the balcony, and almost faint. The massive space overlooks Central Park. I didn't know people even owned these buildings, much less lived in them. "Holy shit," I whisper to myself.

Sean enters carrying plates of steaks and sides. I turn and ask him, “So do all the Irish mobsters have gazillion dollar apartments or are you just special?”

He laughs again. “Well, most of the men do pretty well for themselves, but realistically speaking I do get some perks based on the position.”

“What position is that?”

Sean stops and looks at me for a minute. A sly smile spreads across his face. “Rebecca, I’m the head of the Irish mob.”

I choke on my wine for a minute. *Holy shit*. What the fuck do I say to that? Then it occurs to me. He hates Popov, but I’m pretty fucking sure he isn’t going to like a reporter that’s poking around the New York mafia scene in general. A recurrent mantra of ‘oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck’ is chanting through my head.

The asshole notices. “You don’t need to be afraid of me, little one.”

*The fuck I don’t*. He just has no idea how much I need to be afraid of him.

“Why do you call me that?” I ask.

“Because I want to.”

I roll my eyes so hard my head turns with them.

“Why are you afraid of me?” he asks.

“Because I have to be.” It’s out of my mouth before I even think about it. He seems to find that incredibly interesting. I feel *something*. What the hell is this feeling? I feel tangled. And terrified because this man seems intent on unraveling me. Luckily, he drops the issue, though I have a sneaking feeling this conversation isn’t over.

The steak is phenomenal, and the wine goes incredibly well with it. Though it occurs to me that wine this good probably goes well served with a cardboard box. I go to the railing and admire the view of Central Park. The sun is still up, setting over the tops of the buildings, but the park is already cast in shadow. Sean comes up beside me, leaning with his forearms

on the rail. He isn't touching me, but I can feel the heat radiating from his body. I want to blame the wine for the warmth I feel settling in my core, but I know better.

"Did you mean what you said? About why you're keeping me here?" The wine does help with that question.

"Yes."

He regards me for several minutes before he continues. "Also because the violence between the Bratva and the mob will get worse before it gets better. If I let you go, you could give Popov intelligence that might get more of my men killed."

I try to cut him off but he shushes me by gently putting a finger over my lips. He continues, "And if he thinks you betrayed him, then when he gets his hands on you, and he will, he will torture you for everything you know and then kill you."

My heart is pounding in my ears, my breathing shallow. I'm acutely aware of him touching my lips, of how close his body is to mine. With an impressive amount of self control, I close my eyes and step back.

I have to remember where I am, and who I am. I am a reporter, undercover as a Bratva assistant, kidnapped by the head of the Irish mob and living in his house. It's a luxurious jail, but still a jail. And preferable to being tortured and killed by my former employer. I look up at the man standing before me. Exactly what would he do if he found out who I really am? What I really am? And what is this chemistry I feel? It's not one-sided. I can see it in his eyes, and in the lacy bra and thong I'm wearing right now.

"Why is your hair a different color?" His question pops me out of my internal metaphorical debate.

"Oh, um, I washed it out. It was just temporary dye basically."

He steps toward me and gently pulls a lock over my shoulder. "This way is better."

For some reason, it's probably the best compliment I've ever gotten. I blush.

He steps closer and tips my chin up toward him. “Did you know your eyes change color? When you blush, or cry, or get furious, they turn greener than anything I’ve ever seen before.”

And then he kisses me.

## CHAPTER 22



*S*ean

Jesus fuck, kissing her is like heaven.

I know I'm a bastard for kissing her like this. With everything she's been through in the last day, a good part of it my fault, and with stitches still in her lip, I shouldn't be kissing her. Once I realized she was the same girl I'd seen weeks ago in Central Park, the same one that I couldn't stop thinking about, couldn't stop dreaming about, I needed to kiss her.

She stiffens at first, then I feel her body melt against me. I wrap my arm around her back and pull her toward me, my other hand keeping her chin tipped up. She moans into my mouth, her hands holding my shoulders, bringing us closer. I feel her breasts pressed against my chest as she stands on her tiptoes. I smell the peppermint in her hair and taste the red wine on her lips.

I walk us backward, until her back is against the sliding glass door and I'm caging her in with my arm above her head and my body crushed against her. When my throbbing hard cock presses into her stomach, I feel a shiver run through her body. I pull the sweater away from her neck, kissing down her jaw and throbbing pulse. I run my hands up her flat stomach to her breasts. I realize she's wearing the bra I purchased for her and a possessive growl rumbles from me. Massaging her breasts, I feel her nipples pebble up in arousal. When I roll one between my thumb and finger, she moans.

“Oh, my god, yes.”

I rock my hips against her, my cock aching for more contact. I return my lips to her mouth, drinking from her like a dying man. I run my hands through her thick, soft hair and gently pull.

She hisses, her whole body tensing in pain.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” I’m looking straight into her eyes when I see her blink back tears.

“It’s just my scalp. My hair was pulled a lot yesterday and it’s still kinda sore.”

*Oh, fuck. I did this to her.* My men, acting on my behalf, hurt her.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Rebecca. I swear to Christ no one will hurt you again.”

She freezes. “No one can promise that, Sean.” Her voice sounds much older in that moment, weighed down by fatigue and sadness. She slips under my arm and walks away. I hear her footsteps retreating down the hall to her room.

Fuck.

## CHAPTER 23



*R*ocky

I hear the lock click in my door and let out a huff. I'm still dizzy from the absolute best kiss of my life. I've never been so consumed by a kiss. The rest of the world disappeared. All that existed was our lips together, his body pressed against mine. I was seconds from begging him to fuck me right there on the balcony.

And then the spell was broken. I saw the anguish in his eyes when he apologized for my pain. I know the apology was genuine. But when he promised that no one would ever hurt me again, I ran. Because I am guaranteed to be hurt again. *Literally or metaphorically.* I am, for all intents and purposes, absolutely doomed.

The intensity of the chemistry I feel when I'm with Sean is overwhelming and overpowering. I know the sex would be amazing, probably beyond amazing. But when it all came crashing down, would I be left standing? Even aside from barely knowing the man, it's only a matter of time before Sean realizes there is something off with my employment history. Then what happens?

I realize something profound. I am going to die. Sean isn't going to keep me here forever. When he finds out what I am, he will probably kill me himself. He is the head of the fucking mob, not a businessman in a nice suit. Even if he doesn't, as soon as I'm on the streets again Popov will kill me. I don't



have the information to publish, so I won't even have the thin veil of publicity to discourage him from killing me. I won't have the attention of the police, or their investigation to keep him busy.

I laugh. And laugh and laugh. There probably is something seriously wrong with my head if my response to my realizing my own mortality is to laugh hysterically. Maybe I am hysterical. Or just ordinary crazy. I should have listened to Tasha. I should have left my ghosts buried. Pierre was right. The waters are dangerous, I'm drowning, and the sharks are circling.

I briefly consider that if I'm going to die, I might as well have some fantastic sex first. But I don't want to lie to him anymore. The realization hits me directly in the chest, so hard it's like the air is knocked from me. I don't want to digest *why* I don't want to lie to him anymore. That's just a little too much of a mind fuck to deal with right now.

I go for the phone.

*I need to tell you something.*

## CHAPTER 24



*S*ean

I'm in my office, trying to get a handle on what the hell made Rebecca run away from the most intense kiss I've ever had when I get a message from Patrick that O'Malley needs to talk. He's always been a loyal cop to the family, but I'm a suspicious bastard. I pull out an encrypted phone that will route the call through a dozen overseas servers and scrambles the audio if anyone tries to record the line. Even so, I still speak carefully.

He answers quickly. "Mr. O'Connell, how are you?"

"Fine, thank you. What can I help you with?"

I hear a door close and music turn on in the background. "About that item you asked me to look at. I'm sorry it took so long, but when someone doesn't have a record it's much harder to match prints. The only set on file was uploaded by a small department in Texas, years ago. They were actually taken as exclusionary prints for an investigation in the family home. So that makes them harder to find."

"I see."

"Anyway, your girl is Roxanne Johnson, age twenty-five. I can email you the details if you want."

"Thanks, print it up. I'll have one of the boys pick it up from the bar later."

“Ok, sure. Goodbye.” He disconnects.

*What the hell?*

My phone dings. Speak of the devil and she shall come.

*I need to tell you something.*

Oh, yes, little one, you do.

## CHAPTER 25



*R*ocky

Sean unlocks the bedroom and I follow him to his office. It's uncomfortably formal, given that all of our main interactions have been in the kitchen, balcony, or his bedroom. It gives the situation a businesslike feeling. It's also intimidating as hell.

Something is different. I'm looking at Sean O'Connell, head of the Irish mob. Not Sean O'Connell, who was kissing me like his life depended on it an hour ago. He's tense, his face guarded. He drags a formal leather chair into the middle of the room. He's not gentle. The chair rocks on its legs before settling back on all four feet. He stands a few feet away. Feet shoulder width apart, arms crossed, unsmiling. Something is clearly wrong, and I'm beginning to have serious doubts about my new honesty plan.

"What do you need to tell me?" His tone is stern.

My heart beats faster. I swallow repeatedly, which accomplishes nothing since my mouth has reached Sahara dry.

"So, um, my name. It's not Rebecca Jackson." I take a deep breath, which should be steadying but isn't. "It's Roxanne Johnson."

He glares daggers at me. "Which is why you dyed your hair black."

"Yes."

“Why did you lie?”

I close my eyes and sigh. “Because there are people in my life that I need to protect. People that helped me.” Silent tears start falling down my cheeks.

“Why did you need a false identity?”

*Fuck.*

“To protect myself and the ones I love from Dimitri Popov.”

“Little one, you sure as hell better keep talking.”

I’m shaking so bad my teeth are almost rattling. “Because I was working undercover as Popov’s assistant.”

He becomes deathly still. His blue eyes are ice cold, showing no emotion, no hint of affection. He steps toward me, and reaches behind his back to pull a gun out. He runs the barrel down my temple and cheek before using it to lift my jaw and turn my face up to meet his eyes. My tears are flowing freely, my body shaking violently.

“If you have ever been truthful in your entire fucking life, make it now. Are you a cop?”

“No.”

He’s clenching his jaw so hard it might break. “Who do you work for?”

“The *New York Times*.”

This shocks him. “Start talking, *Roxanne*, and don’t you fucking stop until the whole bloody truth is out of your pretty lips.”

“I am a freelance reporter for the *Times*. Several weeks ago I got a lead that there was an increased amount of unclaimed and unidentified dead bodies in New York City. All young girls, malnourished, one died of fucking scurvy. I mean really young, like teenage girls. I began to think there was an increase in human trafficking through the city. The bodies show up in clusters of similar ethnic groups.”

I’ve been babbling full speed ahead, and stop to take a deep breath before continuing. “So, because of the scurvy I figured

they probably came by ship. Then I got port records and looked at what ships arrived based roughly around the time each cluster of dead girls showed up. I sorted it by customs inspector. Two ships, both owned by Black Sea Shipping, both flying Georgian flags but sailing from Ukraine and owned by a company that doesn't even have a phone number in Delaware, plus each and every time they are signed off by the same customs inspector. Even if the ship arrives late, same inspector. Every time. What are the chances of that? So I figure that the inspector is on the take."

The excitement of the story has temporarily overwhelmed my terror at the gangster that is probably going to kill me soon. My words tumble out, becoming closer to one long run-on monologue than a clear explanation.

"Come to find out, Black Sea Shipping is a Bratva shell company. But I needed clear evidence to connect them. So I got a job as a waitress at Glisten. Dimitri saw me there and on my second night fired me and told me I was going to be his personal assistant."

I exhale. I feel drained. Like I just bared everything I had bottled up inside me and now that space is empty.

Sean pulls the gun away from my head and puts it back where it was. He leans back against his desk and regards me for a long time. The silence is unnerving. "How did you connect the shell company to the Bratva?"

"A friend works with refugees. She knew about Black Sea Shipping being tied to the Bratva. I staked out the docks when a ship was coming in and got photos of them unloading a specific container after dark, photos of vehicles and people. But I couldn't tie any of those to the Bratva on their own. Also, the officer in charge of the death investigations isn't homicide, he's organized crimes."

"What friend?" he asks.

"No." I respond immediately.

"Excuse me?"

"I won't tell you who they are."

“Yes, you fucking will!” he roars, hitting his desk with his palm for emphasis.

I flinch, but Tasha’s face flashes in my mind. “No, I won’t. I won’t tell you who they are. They don’t deserve to be twisted up in this mess. They are a better person than I’ll ever be and one of the kindest, purest souls I’ve ever met. They help people every fucking day and the world is a better place every moment they walk this earth.” I inhale. “I’ll tell you everything about me, my work, project, whatever. But I won’t tell you about them. So if that’s what you want, just get it over with and kill me.”

He looks a little shocked. It’s nice to see an expression besides hate on his face.

“Did you just dare the head of the mob and the man that just put a gun to your head a minute ago to kill you?”

“Apparently.” I can’t decide if he’s pissed, impressed, or wondering how much the blood will stain his rug.

“What did you think I would do when you told me?”

I go with honesty. “I thought you’d kill me.”

“Why did you decide to tell me?”

I feel like he’s looking straight into my soul. I can’t handle it. I break eye contact and look at the floor.

“Look at me, Roxanne.” His voice is quiet, calm.

So I do.

“Because one way or another, I’m probably going to die soon, and I don’t want to lie to you anymore.”

Something changes in his expression. The anger is there, but something else too. Desire? Hunger? My heart starts to pound again against my ribs. He pushes up from his desk and stalks toward me. He pulls me to my feet and kisses me. It’s violent and possessive and raw.

Then his phone rings. He answers in Gaelic. His expression sours. When he hangs up, he turns to me.

“I have to go out, but I’ll be back soon. The penthouse is secured and guarded. I won’t be gone long.”

I nod. He leads me back to my room and locks the door behind me.



## CHAPTER 26



*S*ean

A fucking reporter, for Christ's sake. What the hell am I supposed to do with that bombshell? She's right to assume I'd have killed her. If she were anybody else I would have. I don't need a psychologist to explain it to me. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Her eyes haunted my fucking dreams after seeing her for all of a minute in the park. Her petite height, toned body, and deep brown hair basically walked out of any sane man's fantasy.

Then I met her. The fire and determination when my men found her at the warehouse, her utter commitment to not being anyone's victim astounded me. I've never seen a woman fight with her body and survive with her soul. She's smart and funny. Grown men would collapse into sobbing mush at the shit she's been through and she not only didn't, she kept making jokes.

*And fuck, the way it felt when she was bent over my knee, the way her gorgeous ass blossomed pink and red with my hand prints.*

But what the hell was she thinking getting involved with the fucking Bratva? When I think of how close she was to that sadistic bastard, how she could have been hurt, I want to rage and break everything in the goddamned room. I've been attracted to women before, I've fucked them, I've taken care

of them, but never before have I had the overwhelming need to protect one, to keep her safe and warm in my bed.

It was painful to leave tonight. I've never been so angry or turned on in my life. I wanted to bend her over my desk, spank her ass until she apologized for every lie and every time she put herself in danger, and then bury my cock in her hot pussy.

But when Patrick called with the update, leaving was required. Some of my men were in the hospital. I have always, and will always, take care of family. From making sure that the security around our men is tight, so they can actually rest without being afraid of their enemies coming in to finish the job, to supporting the families, to reminding the medical staff who these men belong to. It's twofold—it's the right thing to do, but it's also good for business and breeds loyalty. Men who know that the mob will take care of them and their family are loyal.

Luckily the boys aren't too banged up, though it sounds like the Russians were. We hit another one of their shipping warehouses, but they expected us this time given recent events.

I've only been gone a few hours, but it feels much longer when I finally pull back into the garage. I see Liam standing guard outside the lift. Which would be fine, except Liam is supposed to be at the other end. Protecting Roxanne.

"Liam! What the hell are you doing down here? Why the fuck aren't you upstairs?"

He pales. "Oh, well, since you had Jimmy come to supplement the security he figured it would be better to have one of us down here and he'd stay up there."

"What the fuck did you say? I didn't send Jimmy." Before the sentence is fully out of my mouth, it hits me. I sprint into the elevator and activate the lift. Jimmy is alone with Roxanne.

Roxanne, who beat the hell out of him and embarrassed him.

Jimmy, who Patrick says is still sore over it.

*Hold on, baby.*

## CHAPTER 27



*R*ocky

I wake up a little dazed. As soon as Sean had left, I'd lain down and promptly fallen asleep. Apparently adrenaline crash and emotional rollercoasters take a lot out of a girl. I rub my eyes.

And freeze. Someone is here, and I know in my bones it isn't Sean. Suddenly, a weight is on top of me, something metal on my wrist. I punch blindly in the direction of the weight but miss. And now he has my other wrist. I hear the handcuffs click.

"Not so tough now, are ya?"

My blood runs cold. *Blondie. Fuck.*

I head butt him and get rewarded with a curse and feeling his blood drip down my face. It's a short reward. He punches me with enough force he almost knocks me out. I try to pull my arms down but realize he's clipped them to the headboard somehow. He turns the lights on and grins.

"You see, I don't want you to miss a second of me ripping your fucking arse open with my cock."

He roughly flips me over, making my arms and the cuffs twist. I kick and buck, but he was anticipating me this time. I feel him grabbing the waist of my jeans and pulling them and my panties down my legs. I see him fist his cock, climbing over my legs to position himself behind my ass, pulling my cheeks

apart with his hands. I scream and curse him and every member of his family I can think of to curse. I see him lining up with my ass, feel the head of his cock brushing my hole.

The door flies open. Sean is standing there.

Blondie freezes. Sean pulls out his gun and shoots him in the head. The skull, blood, and brain splatter the bed, the room, and my exposed skin. Sean runs to me, gently rolling my body back over. He unlocks the handcuffs with a key he produces from a pocket.

“Baby, I’m so sorry.” The destroyed look in his eyes is real.

“You have great timing, Sean,” I complement, fixing my clothing.

He pulls me into his arms and carries me bridal style to his bathroom. He turns the shower on, but then pauses like something just occurred to him.

“If you’d rather be alone, I understand completely. Just tell me what you need.”

I consider it for a minute. I’m upset, covered in brains, and almost raped. But the almost part is really important to me. I don’t want to be alone. And being in the company of a man that killed someone without hesitation to protect me isn’t a bad place to be.

*Hmm. I’m probably supposed to be bothered by that.* I shrug internally. It’s not the first time my internal monologue has doubted my sanity. Certainly won’t be the last.

“Stay with me?” I ask.

Sean nods and opens his arms.

I step into them and nuzzle into his chest. Why does this feel so good?

## CHAPTER 28



*S*ean

The scene I walked in on will probably be burned into my retinas forever. Roxanne cuffed to the bed with that piece of shit on top of her. I didn't even think about killing him. I only wish he hadn't died so quickly.

She's fucking amazing. Any normal woman would be losing their mind right now. Rightfully so too. I can tell she's upset, but it's like she's taken a breath and decided to deal with it in little pieces. The minute I wrapped my arms around her, I realized I was totally and completely fucked.

The bathroom fills with steam. I look into her eyes and touch the bottom hem of her shirt. I slowly pull it up and she raises her arms above her head so I can slip it over her head. Christ, she's beautiful. And her back and shoulders are covered in beautiful, colorful tattoos. I wasn't expecting that. I unbutton the top of her jeans, watching her face the entire time. I slowly push them down her hips until they fall. She reaches forward and starts to unbutton my shirt before pushing it off my shoulders. I reach behind her, kissing the spot behind her ear when I unhook her bra. It falls to the floor. She has the most perfect, round, full breasts I've ever seen. I suck one nipple into my mouth, feeling it tighten into a firm nub. She moans, her hands running through my hair, pulling me closer to her breast. I switch to the other side, suck the little bud between my teeth, and bite. Her moans deepen, her nails scrape down

my back. She unbuckles my belt, slowly pulling it from the belt loops. She drops it to the floor, reaches forward, and runs her hand up and down my aching cock. I feel the heat from her hand through the fabric of my pants. Then she smiles, turns around, drops her panties and walks into the shower, the door closing behind her in a puff of steam.

The best renovation I made on the place when I bought it was the bathroom. The shower is massive, with multiple showerheads designed to spray from every angle and at basically any pressure. Roxanne standing under the main rain showerhead, with her head tilted back, water cascading down her body is quite possibly the most beautiful sight I've ever seen.

The door closes behind me, letting a gust of cold air in with me. Her eyes pop open. I feel her gaze on me, working down my body. She finishes her sweep and smiles, giving me a come hither finger wave. I grab the washcloth and shower gel, making a thick lather before I start working it over her skin. I stand behind her, alternating between scrubbing her skin and massaging her back. The moan she gives me makes my cock throb. I know she can feel it rubbing against her ass.

I work the soap down her back, her ass, her thighs, her legs. I reach around her, scrubbing her chest and breasts. I take one in each hand and gently squeeze them, which earns me another throaty moan. I start to roll her nipples between my fingers, increasing the pressure until she's panting and grinding her ass against my cock.

I rub the cloth down her stomach. As I go lower, she parts her thighs to give me access. I drop the cloth to the floor as I slip my fingers between her folds. Christ, she's soaked. I start rubbing slow circles around her clit and feel her body tremble. I wrap the other arm around her waist, pulling her tightly against my body. She lays her head back on my chest as I speed up the pace of my fingers. I nudge the hair away from her exposed neck with my nose and start to lick, suck, and bite my way up and down her neck, shoulder, and ear. Her breath hitches, she twists onto her tiptoes moaning and clutching my wrist, grinding her cunt against my hand as she comes.

I spin her around, press her back against the smooth tile wall. I kiss her like her lips are the antidote to my toxin. She wraps her arms around my neck and returns the kiss with ferocity. She nips my lip with her sharp teeth. Slowly, she moves one hand down my chest, running it across my abs until she's gripping my cock, stroking up and down.

*Jesus Christ, that feels good.*

"I think you need to come again before you try to fit my cock inside you." I nudge her feet apart and slip to my knees. Slowly, I kiss down her belly, my tongue dipping into her navel, before traveling down to nibble on the soft lips of her pussy. My tongue slides against her silky skin. She's fucking delicious. I push my tongue inside of her sweet cunt.

"Oh, my god," Roxanne moans, her nails raking against my scalp, "yes, please, I need you inside me."

"Like this?" I slide my tongue up to her clit and slip a finger inside her pussy. "Jesus, baby, you're so fucking tight."

I slip the finger in and out. Roxanne moans with every movement. I slowly add a second finger. Almost instantly, I feel the walls of her channel squeezing down on me. I lick and suck on her clit while pumping my fingers in and out of her.

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Please don't stop, don't stop, don't stop." Roxanne begs, just before she comes again, the sounds of her pleasure echoing against the glass walls.

I lift her up, easily sliding her back up the slick tile wall, her body relaxed and pliable in my arms.

"Oh, my god, yes. Fuck me, Sean."

She wraps her legs around my hips and my cock teases the entrance of her pussy. I slowly start to lower her onto my cock.

"You're so goddamned tight, baby." It takes every ounce of willpower I have to keep from thrusting my cock deep into her glorious wet heat, but I know her body needs time to adjust to my size.

Roxanne moans, her eyes closed. I press deeper into her core and they fly open. "Oh, my god!" she squeals, her hands

gripping my biceps so hard I wonder if her nails will break the skin.

She's panting in my arms, her pussy tightening on my cock.

"Sean! I can't. Oh, fuck. Oh, my fuck. It won't fit, Sean."

I press her body against the shower wall and twist her long hair around my fist and kiss her. She wraps her arms around my neck, parts her lips, and slips her delicate tongue into my mouth.

My control snaps. I bury my shaft to the hilt in one long, slow thrust. I have never needed to be inside a woman like I need to feel Roxanne's body wrapped around my own.

*Bloody hell.* Her pussy feels like it was made for me. I can feel her pussy starting to squeeze down on my length as I thrust in and out of her.

"Do you want to come again, little one?" I whisper into her ear.

She nods. "Mmmhmm." Her breathing is ragged.

"Tell me, Roxanne. Tell me what you want."

"I want to come," she moans.

"Where do you want to come, little girl?" I whisper, tightening my grip in her hair. She moans, but doesn't speak. "I want to hear you say that you want to come with my cock buried inside your hot little cunt."

"I—I—want to come on your cock!" Her voice is high and desperate.

"Then come for me!" I drop my mouth to a gorgeous nipple and bite down.

Roxanne comes, screaming my name, her nails scraping down my skin.

I fuck her through her orgasm, and then the next one. I feel my own release coming, my balls tightening as I pump faster into her perfect cunt.



“Sean...” Roxanne starts. I silence whatever she was going to say with a passionate kiss.

Just like that, I’m fucking my cum deep inside of her.

## CHAPTER 29



*R*ocky

We stay in the shower, his cock still inside me, the water pouring down on us for a while, trying to regain our breathing.

*Holy fuck.* I've never come so hard in my life. A man has never made me come so many times... in so many ways. Hell, *I* haven't made *myself* come like that. Ever.

Sean kisses me again, a deep, slow, passionate kiss, before sliding out of me and gently lowering my legs back to the floor. He brushes the wet hair back from my face, then rotates me into the spray. He gently shampoos my hair, then washes himself. I'm leaning against the wall, eyes closed, completely blissed out when the water turns off. I open my eyes and see him staring at me with a smirk.

"What?" I say.

"You look good like that."

"Like what?" I ask.

He winks. "Freshly fucked."

I grab the washcloth to throw at him, but he ducks out of the shower just in time. He reappears with a fluffy towel, which he hands to me. I dry off and wrap it around myself.

Sean pats the counter next to the sink. "Let me check your stitches."

He proclaims that it's healing well, but they aren't ready to come out yet.

We stare awkwardly at each other for a minute.

Finally, Sean breaks the silence. "I need to make a call about the situation."

I nod. I'm assuming he's referring to the dead body with brains splattered all over his guest room situation, but I could be wrong. He does lead an exciting life.

After several minutes, he returns and hands me a set of neatly folded clothes. Leggings and a t-shirt, bless him. I dress and work at digging tangles out of my hair with a comb. Exiting his bathroom, I find him sitting on the edge of the bed, also dressed casually. I internally pout at having the gorgeous man covered up again. *Good lord, Rocky, he just fucked you six ways to Sunday. Stop ogling him.* He ushers me out of his room and to the kitchen. I take my customary seat at the island. He picks out a wine and two glasses, pouring both and handing one to me.

"We need to talk," he says ominously.

"As the only vagina in the room, I feel obligated to complain that is typically the female line," I say with a smirk.

Which falls flat. Serious Sean is back.

"Ok." I take a sip of the wine and nod to him.

He proceeds to reconfirm several details about my story that I shared earlier today and then begins to fish for new information.

"Why would you risk your life like this?" he asks.

I take a sip of wine, and then two more for good measure. "Because what's happening to those girls is horrible. Someone needs to do something. Someone needs to tell their story."

"So why didn't you go to the cops?" he asks me.

"What are the cops going to do that they aren't already doing? Besides, NYPD has their murders being handled by an

organized crime guy. I'm not feeling like the girls are a priority to the department."

"So, you basically assumed a false identity, a separate life, went undercover, and hoped to find enough evidence to prove that Popov was involved? You know he would still kill you." A muscle ticks in Sean's jaw. He's pissed.

"Ok, in my defense, at the time I figured the press coverage of the story would trigger a police investigation, something they couldn't sweep away, and between that and the publicity, it would be enough motivation for him not to kill me. Having since met him, I think he'd enjoy killing me slowly just for fun, on live TV if the opportunity presented itself."

Sean nods. He walks into his office and returns holding a bottle of whisky. He pours a glass. Apparently, we've moved past the wine portion of the evening.

"Walk me through everything, and be specific," he says.

So I do. Most of it he already heard, but I add in as many details as I can recall. When I'm finished, he asks, "Do you still have access to the port records?"

I nod. "Yeah, the files are in my Dropbox, so all I need is a computer and internet and I'll have access to all of my notes, photos, everything."

"Ok. I want to see if some dates line up."

He walks me to his office, plops me into his chair, and unlocks the computer.

"Don't make me regret trusting you." He gives me a cold stare.

"You won't." I mean it.

Five minutes later and Sean is holding a stack of port records and I'm watching his face intently. I can tell he's working something out in his head.

"Care to share?" I ask coyly.

He considers me for a while before answering. "Popov has been a worsening pain in the ass for a while now. Your ships

match up with some interesting events that have happened recently. I think Popov is trying to expand his operations into mob territory and doing a shit job of it.”

“How so?” I realize I’ve switched into reporter mode.

“Well, for instance, weapons trafficking. That’s traditionally an Irish operation, but guns are showing up that we certainly aren’t selling, and we sure as shite aren’t selling bloody rockets to MS13.” He takes a hearty drink of his whisky.

“Popov is in business with MS13?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Someone sold them some heavy weapons, and only a lunatic would trust those psychos with them. We wouldn’t. Hell, De Luca is an asshole but he’s not suicidal. He wouldn’t either.”

I remember back to the Spanish-speaking men I saw in the bath house. “I think he might be doing more than just selling weapons.” I tell Sean everything I remember about that day. “Why MS13 though?” I muse.

“Were any of your dead girls Latina?” Sean gives me an icy look.

Well, fuck. “You think MS13 is sourcing girls for him as part of their business deal?”

Sean nods. It seems reasonable to me.

He’s standing by the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the city. He seems deep in thought, and I leave him to it for several minutes. Finally, I break the silence.

“Sean?”

He turns to look at me.

“Are you going to kill me?”

He looks me up and down, with a slight smirk turning up the corner of his mouth.

“It’s a reasonable question, Sean.”

He flat out laughs. “It is. But I’ve never had anyone just casually ask me if I planned on killing them.” He comes to

lean against his desk, next to me, his eyes searching mine. With his superior height, and the fact that I'm still sitting in his chair, he towers over me. The effect should be intimidating, but I'm oddly at ease with him.

"So, I would really appreciate an answer to that, ya know." I'm not usually impatient, but I am a bit invested in this particular topic.

He smiles. "No, lass, I'm not going to kill you." His smile turns almost mischievous. "But I still don't know what the hell I'm going to do with you."

"I suppose that's fair." I laugh. I pick up my empty wineglass and wander back to the kitchen.

When the hell did I get comfortable casually strolling through a gangster's apartment? I refill my glass and walk out to the patio with the beautiful view of Central Park. On the other end from our dining area is a comfortable-looking outdoor sofa, which I promptly curl up on. I swirl the wine around in the glass, watching it almost slosh out before coming back into the center. It's mesmerizing. I'm glad Sean isn't planning on killing me, though it occurs to me that I never really thought he was, even if his mood can be a little... prickly.

I think back to the mind-blowing sex in the shower. No normal woman would jump a man's bones minutes after someone else tried to rape her. There is absolutely something wrong with me. It was just so, so right. Exactly what I needed. I never thought I would get *comfort* from sex, beyond the obvious physical rewards.

*Fucking Christ, we didn't use a condom.* Goddamn it. I clearly remember thinking 'fuck it' at the time, a pure 'holy hell do I need this man inside me right now' moment. In hindsight, not the best plan. Thank God for birth control. A sudden mental image of Sean chasing around little mini-mobsters makes me snort.

I'm lost in my thoughts and don't hear Sean walk up from behind me. He gently lays a fluffy throw blanket over my legs.

"Thank you."

He sits next to me on the sofa, sharing my Central Park view.  
“You’re welcome.”

I finish the glass, when the bottle suddenly appears. “You brought the bottle?”

“I like to plan ahead.” His Irish accent accentuates the playfulness in his voice. “Why does this mean so much to you?” he asks me after filling the glass.

“You already asked me that,” I remind him.

“No, I asked you why you would risk your life. You established that you have an emotional connection to these girls you’ve never met before.” He pauses to take a sip from his drink. “What I am asking you now is why you have this connection?”

“It doesn’t matter.” I push the blanket off and go to stand, but his hand on my shoulder stops me, his eyes meeting mine.

“It matters.” He doesn’t elaborate.

I sigh and flop back on the sofa. On second thought, I down the rest of the wine and hold the glass out for him to refill. I’m pleasantly buzzed, enough to feel warm and relaxed.

“Once upon a time,” I start, and look to see if he’s rolling his eyes yet. He isn’t. Sean’s intense gaze is focused on me, like I’m the only interesting thing in the whole fucking universe. *Shit*. He actually wants to know.

I let out a sigh and rub my eyes. “Ok, look, this isn’t something I just talk about, ok?”

Sean nods.

“I grew up in this tiny little Texas town on a ranch with my mom, dad, and little sister. Nicole. I loved it there, but I wanted to be a journalist, and NYU is the place for that. I studied my ass off and had a scholarship too. My parents did not approve. First off, my mother thought it was a stupid career goal, and my dad thought it was too far away. Plus, Nicole was only two years younger and she was going to the college in Houston to study nursing. It was close enough she didn’t have to move out. So, anyway, fast forward a bunch.

Nicole goes to this party with some shitty friends. They basically abandon her there.”

Fuck. Tasha is the only person I’ve ever told this to. I can feel the tears building and feel the burning in the back of my throat. My voice creaks a little when I start back up.

“Nicole got raped. It was bad. They didn’t drug her. She remembered everything. She called me from the hospital, and I was down there the next day. Took a train, a plane, and a bus but I was there. She was this amazing, kind, happy girl. But when I picked her up from the hospital, she was just not there anymore. After a few days, she was hiding it more, but I could still tell. Anyway, about a week later the sheriff sits the family down and tells us that between him and us, the Houston police aren’t going to do anything with her case. Apparently one of the guys was some bigwig’s kid and her rape kit had some mysterious chain of evidence problem and was now inadmissible.”

I feel the tears running down my cheeks now. I realize that sometime during my story Sean started rubbing soothing circles on my back.

“The next day, she didn’t come out to ride with me like we’d planned. I went into her bedroom and she was dead. There was a suicide note on the nightstand, right next to the fucking antibiotics she was still taking from the hospital. My bright, smart, happy, beautiful sister couldn’t live with the memory of what happened. Couldn’t deal with knowing that nothing would ever happen to them. It destroyed her, and losing her crushed our family. My parents blamed me. Apparently, if I’d gone to school in Houston, Nicole would have been with me that night instead. After the funeral, my mother slammed the door in my face and told me to get out of their lives. So I did.”

“Roxanne, you know that wasn’t your fault.” It’s really nice to hear someone say that. Remarkably nice.

“I know. I blamed myself for a long time too. Sometimes I still do, but not the same way. Cognitively, I know better. Emotionally, I deal with the ‘what ifs’ more than I’d like to some days.”



“So, these girls—” he starts. I cut him off.

“They are someone’s Nicole. One night destroyed my sister, and she was the strongest person I knew. These girls are living in hell. Day after day, and that’s if they physically survive the trip. And no one is going to do a fucking thing about it. Christ, the cops even punted it to organized crime, not even homicide.”

“So your story, what does that do?”

“It shines the fucking light on the monsters. It makes it harder for the piece of shit officials that are looking the other way to keep doing it. It brings the force of public outrage on it. Maybe it even gives closure to a family; at least they know what happened to their daughter.” I pause for a minute to take a calming breath. “Or maybe I’m delusional and none of that will happen. But at least someone gives a fuck.”

Sean pulls me into his lap and wraps his arms around me. He holds me like that for a while before kissing the top of my head and carrying me inside.

## CHAPTER 30



*S*ean

As I hold Roxanne in my arms, I realize I'm incredibly fucked. I've never met anyone like her, not even close. She's the smartest person I've ever met and tough as hell. Jesus fucking Christ, she fought off grown men and sassed them when she woke up zip tied on a goddamned floor. Seeing the pain in her eyes when she told me about her sister made me furious. I wanted to kill every single person who had ever harmed her and lay their bodies at her feet.

I still don't know what I'm supposed to do with her, but I do know that I'm keeping her. I kiss the top of her soft hair and pick her up, carrying her to my bed. I have more guest rooms, but over my dead body does she sleep anywhere besides my bed. She wraps her arms around my neck and rests her head on my shoulder.

"Where are we going?" she asks. I can hear the fatigue in her voice. Between the adrenaline, the orgasms, the emotional mind fuck of spilling your soul to another human, and the several glasses of wine I encouraged to help her relax, I feel the tension slipping out of her body.

"To bed."

I get a soft purr in response.

I push the door open and walk to the bed, setting her down in the middle. The soft glow of the city lights coming in through

the windows highlights her pale skin against her dark hair. I pull her shirt off and thank god I didn't give her a bra earlier. I gently push her back to the bed and peel her leggings down her body. I roll her over, arranging her long hair off of her back. I kiss the small of her back, just above her panties.

"Stay," I tell her, and rise to get a bottle of lotion from the bathroom. She's watching me intently as I return with it.

She looks at the lotion, looks at my face, looks at the lotion, looks at the outline of my swollen cock against my sweats, looks back at me. "Oh, no, you don't." Her eyes go wide. I realize what it must look like to her.

"Don't worry, baby. When I fuck your beautiful ass, I won't be using bloody lotion as lubricant."

"Oh, really?" She raises an eyebrow at me.

"Aye." I give her a wicked grin. "Unless you're being punished. Then I won't use any lube at all."

I barely dodge the flying pillow. I don't miss the blush across her cheeks, or the increase in her breathing. That is something we're going to discuss again. Christ, the idea of this beautiful, strong woman submitting to me makes my cock instantly rock hard. *Fuck me*. I want to make every part of her body mine.

"Just relax, baby." I warm the lotion in my hands before starting to massage her back. I use my whole hands, firm, smooth strokes, using my thumbs to hold pressure on the tight little knots of muscle until I feel them soften. Roxanne moans. I work my way up to her shoulders and start kneading the tense muscles there.

"That feels so nice." Her voice is distant and dreamy. I keep up my massaging, working down her back, over her glorious firm ass and beautiful legs. I flip her back over and massage her feet. She's purring like a kitten and I fucking love it.

"Shirt to sleep in, or naked?"

"Shirt."

I pull mine off. "Arms up, little one."

She smiles but raises her arms anyway. *Fuck*. Roxanne in my shirt is life changing.

“Is there another room I can sleep in since mine is... gross?” she asks.

“You’re sleeping here.”

“I am?”

“Aye, you sleep in my bed from now on.”

She blinks at me. I will not budge on this particular topic. The need to hold this tiny, fierce woman and keep her safe from her enemies is overwhelming.

Finally, she speaks. “Ok. Can I get some things from my room before bed?”

I nod and follow her.

I know the body is long gone, but the mattress and carpet remain. Those will have to go out as well but take a bit longer to dispose of. I watch her reaction as she surveys the bloody scene in front of her. Aside from a slight shiver, she just shrugs. It’s like she looked at the carnage and just went “Hmm, that’s interesting” and carried on with her life. She returns with some toiletry items, collects her phone from the floor, and gingerly plucks the charger out of the bloody mess, wiping it on a clean section of the comforter. *For fuck’s sake, woman, I’ll get a new charger*. I take it from her and throw it back with the rest of the carnage.

“What?” she asks.

“You’re not normal.” Then I realize how it sounded.

“No shit, Shakespeare.” She rolls her eyes.

I grab her chin and kiss her deeply. “It’s a good thing, little one.” I spank her ass as she walks by. The heated look she gives me runs straight to my cock. Again. *Fuck*, this woman is going to give me a permanent erection.

She drops her items in the bathroom and I sit on the bed, watching her brush her long hair. She braids it down her back, before pulling it over her shoulder to finish the braid and tie it

off. She crawls under the covers. I get in behind her and scoot her to the other side of the bed. When she raises an eyebrow at me, I explain.

“I sleep between you and the door.” I expect an eye roll.

“Oh. Thank you.” Wasn’t expecting that. She curls onto her side and I snuggle up behind her, wrapping an arm across her waist. She falls asleep in seconds.

For the millionth time, I ask myself, what the hell am I supposed to do with her. The research she put together is impressive, especially given her relative lack of resources. It will never be enough to go to a trial though, not that we involve the cops in our business anyway. Her idea that the publicity of the article would protect her was naïveté at its finest. No way in hell am I letting her publish anything, or get within five miles of that sadistic Russian bastard. Just the thought of her being in the same room with him brings my blood damn near to boiling. Human fucking trafficking?

I have no illusions about being a good man. I know what I am, and what business I am in. But preying on young girls like that is beyond the pale. The fucking Italians don’t even do that. Actually, as much as I dislike the fucker, De Luca is almost as protective of the women in his life as I am.

I think of her tearstained cheeks on the patio, telling me about her sister’s suicide. I think of her powerful, emotional response to the girls being trafficked. Fuck. I already know I’ll be helping her bring Popov to his knees.

## CHAPTER 31



I wake up with Roxanne still asleep, her head on my chest, tucked under my left arm. This I could get used to. I want to get used to this.

Slowly, I creep out of bed, careful not to wake her up. Grabbing my phone, I head into the bathroom. I've got a small pile of text messages and emails to go through, and it's not even daylight.

Contrary to popular belief, the mob isn't all blackmail and back room deals; we do have some legitimate businesses to see to. Admittedly, just about all of them have a layer of shady business in there somewhere. Our construction company may also launder money, but it is a construction company with a solid reputation for quality work. I message Patrick that I need to talk to him. I have to get him up to speed on the Popov situation and run a few ideas past him.

After a very cold shower that does nothing to help with the thoughts of the beautiful woman in my bed, I dress. The navy blue Armani suit and white dress shirt would fit right in in any New York boardroom. The shoulder holster and Glock 23 would probably be less welcome. My jacket conceals the compact gun perfectly. My spare is a Springfield XDS, held snugly in a holster on my ankle. Walking out of the bedroom, I take one last look at the creature in my bed. The shirt has ridden up, exposing her round ass and toned legs. *Fuck me.* I shake my head and try to get some blood flow back up to my head.

Patrick is waiting in my office, two cups of coffee on the table in front of him. He hands one to me as I walk in.

“The situation in the guest room is taken care of. The carpet won’t be replaced until next week though,” he tells me without preamble.

“Thank you.”

“The lads are getting discharged from the hospital later today. So far no more trouble from the Russians, but we should anticipate higher security and retaliation going forward.”

“Agreed.” I take a seat in one of the high-back leather chairs by the fireplace rather than behind my desk. I’ve known Patrick since we were kids. There’s no need to stand on any formality when we’re alone. Patrick sits in the other chair. He gives me a mischievous look.

“By the way, where did the girl stay last night?”

“She stayed in my fucking bed where she belongs,” I growl, sounding more possessive than I anticipated.

Patrick lets out a whistle. “So that’s the way it is? Should have known the woman that finally got your attention would be a ball buster.”

“Moving along,” I give him a pointed look, “did someone meet with O’Malley and pick up the file he prepped for me?”

“Aye, I did.”

“Did you read it?”

“Aye.”

“So you know about her name.”

“Aye. Also where she was born, where she lives, and whether or not she has any parking tickets. Why the fuck does she have a fake identity working for Popov?”

I fortify myself with sip of the strong black coffee. “She’s a reporter.”

“You’ve got to be bloody kidding me.” Patrick is incredulous. I have to say, I do enjoy how often she surprises him.

“You should see your face right now, mate.” I laugh.

“Why the fuck are you laughing?”

I proceed to fill him in on her investigation. I don't share the details about her sister. Her nightmares are safe with me.

“I have to say I'm impressed with your girl. How'd she take it when you told her it was never going to happen?”

“I didn't.”

Patrick gives me a quizzical look. “I'm missing something here, boss.”

“I'm not letting Popov traffic fucking teenage girls through my city. We are shutting him down.”

“Aye, boss, you'll get no argument from me.” I knew I wouldn't. Patrick has a soft spot for broken things. He would rip Popov limb from limb for the sadistic shit he's done. Too bad for him Popov is mine.

“Find out what we know about NYPD's organized crime unit. Specifically a Detective J. Reynolds. Get O'Malley to poke around if you need to. Pick up the customs inspector that's been signing off on those ships. We need to have a chat with him about his future.”

“Aye, boss.”

“Expect a meeting with De Luca soon.”

He gives me a questioning look but nods anyway.

I give him the courtesy of explaining, though we both know I don't have to. “De Luca is a pain in the ass, but he feels just as fucking strongly on the subject as we do. Remember when some of their working girls got roughed up a couple years ago?”

He nods. “Aye, he got a wee bit creative.” He grimaces.

I smile. “Well, the man does make an impression.”

“Aye, that he does. Want me to set it up?”

“No, I'll call him personally. That will make the bastard happy.”



I spend several hours checking in on our more legitimate enterprises, dealing with the same monotonous bullshit that keeps millions of CEOs rich and miserable.

“Morning.”

I look up and see Roxanne standing in the door to my office. She’s got on another of the outfits I purchased for her, which pleases me. Almost as much as knowing about the soft lace she’s wearing underneath.

“Good morning.” I take the opportunity for a break and lead her into the kitchen. “What do you want for breakfast?”

“Just coffee, honestly.”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. I’m just not a breakfast person.” She takes her customary seat at the center island. I pull out the cream, sugar, and a large mug of coffee for her. While she fixes her cup, I decide to rip off the Band-Aid.

“Roxanne,” I start.

“Rocky.”

“What?” I say.

“Rocky. My friends call me Rocky.”

Smiling, I go on. “Little one, I’m more than your friend.”

“Oh, really?” she challenges, crossing her arms over her chest. “How do you figure?”

Coming around the island, I spin her stool so she’s trapped between my body and the counter. Stroking her face, I slowly run my hand down her slender neck. I circle it, feeling her frantic pulse as I squeeze, just enough to have her full fucking attention. Leaning forward, I whisper in her ear, “I know what your lips taste like. I know what you sound like when you come. I’ve buried my bare cock inside you and filled you with my cum. And I’m going to do it again. So yes, I’m more than your friend.” I pull her to me and kiss her. She moans into my mouth and wraps her arms behind my neck.

*Mine. She’s fucking mine.*

I finally force myself to break the kiss. “As I was about to say,” I spin her back to face the coffee, “you can’t publish the story.”

“The hell I fucking can’t.” She shoots out of her chair. “If you think for one second that I’m just going to let this—”

I clamp a hand over her mouth.

“Can I finish speaking first before ya bite my head off?”

She licks my palm and I yank it off her face.

“You can’t publish the story, lass. You also can’t turn it over to the cops. It’s just not how we handle things like this. But we are going to handle them.”

She’s still glaring at me, but she isn’t arguing.

“We’re going after his operation directly.”

After several minutes, she lets out a small huff. “Ok. Let’s handle this the mob way. What’s the next step?”

*That’s my girl.* “I have Patrick tracking down the customs inspector that signs off on the ships and finding out what we know about the organized crimes guy that was assigned to your girls.”

“Why the cop?” she asks.

“Like you said, it’s odd that he would be on a homicide. It’s pretty well known that NYPD’s homicide unit is a tightknit group, and it’s hard as hell to get a man on the inside there. Other units aren’t as touchy.”

“You think he’s dirty?”

“I don’t know. But all the families have contacts in the NYPD. It would be helpful to know who Popov’s is.”

She chews that over for a minute. “Do you have a contact in the department?”

“Yes.”

She nods and returns to her coffee. “What about the inspections guy?”

I pause. When she sees the violence inherent in this world, will she run? Would I let her if she tried?

“Spit it out, gangster.”

“The fastest way to disrupt his shipments is to prevent the boats from coming in. This will affect him financially through his primary incomes but also prevent him from bringing in any more girls. Popov’s father was respected and feared by Moscow and the other families. Popov, no one trusts, including the rest of the Bratva in Russia. If he starts losing money instead of making it, the Bratva may use it as reason to authorize a regime change.”

“Like Popov did when he manufactured the claims used to authorize his father’s assassination?”

I’m impressed. That’s not common knowledge. “Exactly.”

“They will still blame you for disrupting the business to begin with though. They may not like him, but you’d still be the proximate cause to their financial woes.”

I appreciate that she pushes back when she sees something. “True. We’re already doing that though. This is a more targeted approach toward the root of the problem, as opposed to taking out warehouses.”

“So, back to the customs inspector.” She refills her coffee from the pot.

“The lads are going to round him up and bring him by for a chat. At which point he will be persuaded to cease his current career choice and move out of the city.”

“Persuaded?” She raises an eyebrow.

“Persuaded.”

“And if you’re not persuasive?” she asks.

“Roxanne. You’re aware of who I am. And what I am.”

She nods. She sets the cup down and comes to stand in front of me.

“How much do you really want to know about my business?”

She stops for several moments. Finally, her beautiful eyes lock with mine. “All of it.”

Looking at her face, I search for a trace of hesitation or doubt. It’s not there. I’m looking into the face of the woman who dyed her hair, faked her name, and went undercover with the Bratva to avenge the deaths of women she never met and honor her sister’s legacy. Who fought my men tooth and nail. Who was covered in brains and blood and is still standing. This woman is a fucking warrior.

“Are you sure? There’s no going back after this.”

“Yes. Tell me.”

“If he doesn’t agree to get the fuck out of my city, I will kill him.” I’m waiting for the moment that she realizes I’m a monster. It’s one thing to see me kill the man about to rape her. It’s another to realize that this is an unavoidable part of my business.

But the moment doesn’t come. She steps forward, wraps her arms around my waist, and presses her cheek to my chest.

Wrapping my arms around her, I admit, “That’s not the reaction I was expecting.” I kiss the top of her head. “But I don’t want to lie to you either.”

“Good. I’d rather live with the dark truth instead of a glittering lie.”

I kiss her, and hope to god she doesn’t regret it. When we finally come up for air, I take her hand and lead her down the hallway.

“Where are we going?” she asks, slightly breathless from our kiss.

“I have a bit more work to do today, so I thought I’d show you some things in the house you might like.” I proceed to give her the rest of the tour, including the indoor gym, the library, and rooftop hot tub. “Think you’ll manage for a few hours?” I ask her.

“Oh, yeah, I’ve got a date with the treadmill. I’ve had cabin fever something fierce.”

I drop her at her former room to get her workout clothes.

“Roxanne.”

She turns to look at me.

“You should start moving the rest of your things into my bedroom too.”

Her eyes flash, before a tiny smirk appears and she throws me a jaunty, over the top salute and disappears into the closet.

Back in my office, I return to the mountain of monotonous crap I’d run away from earlier. Periodically, some of the boys pop in with various updates on the less legal side of business. Fuck, it would be easier if we could just bloody email.

The computer dings softly, a calendar reminder. *For fuck’s sake*. The bloody charity ball is tomorrow. There was a new wing of the children’s hospital opening soon, and our company donated a lot of cash and construction work to making it happen. Therefore, the charity ball to celebrate the pending opening. It’s good for the company to be seen publicly for stuff like this. I’m half tempted to send Patrick in my place when the idea of Roxanne in a formal gown has my cock growing hard again. I send off a couple of emails arranging for a showing at several different designers in town.

A soft knock drags me out of my daydreaming.

“Enter,” I say, not looking up.

The soft scent of her peppermint shampoo grabs my attention.

“Hi.”

“Hi, yourself.”

She’s dressed casually, her hair still wet from the shower. She comes around to my side of the desk and drops to her knees.

“What are you up to, little one?”

Her eyes burn with pure, hot desire. “Oh? Me? I’m going to get under your desk and suck your cock while you’re working.”

“Oh, fuck, baby.” How my trousers are even containing my straining cock is a mystery to me.

True to her word, she leans forward into her hands and crawls under the desk. She spins, and she scoots forward to wrap her lips around my cock, through the pants, blowing warm air around it. I moan, fisting my hands through her wet hair.

She scoots deeper under my desk, motioning for me to pull my chair in. She undoes my belt and the button of my pants, then slowly slides the zipper down. My cock springs out, a drop of pre-cum already leaking out. She wraps her hand around the base of my cock and licks from the base to the tip, swirling her tongue around the head. She opens her mouth and slowly slides down the length of my cock, her eyes looking straight into mine the entire time.

A shudder runs through my body. "Jesus, baby, you're fucking perfect."

She hums something in response, the vibrations running up my shaft and causing my cock to jerk. She takes my cock deeper and deeper into her mouth, until I feel it bumping into the back of her throat. I feel her gag and she pulls back.

"Oh, no, baby, get back here." With her hair, I pull her forward until I can feel the back of her throat again. I stop my advance, letting her get used to my cock. She's still softly gagging and her big green eyes are begging for mercy.

I shake my head. "Breathe through your nose, Roxanne. Focus on opening your throat for me. I want you to learn to take my entire cock between your pretty little lips."

When I feel the muscles give way, I slowly start to ease down her throat, until her nose is brushing my abdomen.

"That's it, baby. You're such a good girl."

Her eyes show unmistakable pride, but also sparkle with mischief. She starts to bob her head up and down, settling into a rhythm of alternating deep throating my cock and twisting her talented tongue up and down my shaft.

"Oh, fuck, yes, baby!" Between the sensations of her mouth and the erotic sight kneeling in front of me, I can feel my balls starting to tighten.

Just then, Patrick strolls into the still open office door. I still her head and she freezes. I hope whatever the fuck he's telling me isn't important, because I sure as hell am not paying attention. He prattles on, and Roxanne starts sucking, running her tongue in laps around the sensitive bottom of my cock. She reaches up and starts to massage my balls.

"Uh, you alright, boss?" Patrick has a confused look on his face. I can only imagine what my expression is right now.

"Fine. Thanks for the update. That will be all."

Patrick raises an eyebrow at my brusque dismissal. He disappears and I hear the distant sound of the front door opening and closing, I push back from the desk, fisting my hand in her hair and dragging her out with me.

With my mouth next to her ear, I growl, "Were you trying to suck me off with my second in command in the room?"

She smiles. "Mmmhmmmm. Yes. That would be correct." She stands on her tiptoes and leans forward to whisper, "What are you going to do about it?" Her eyes sparkle.

My hand still in her hair, I twist it tighter and pull her lips to mine. It's a raw, possessive kiss that she returns in full. She moans into my mouth, pressing her firm tits against my chest. Her breathing is ragged, her cheeks are flushed.

I run my fingers over her plump and swollen lips, down her throat and rest them against the artery in her neck. Her pulse is frantic. I whisper into her ear, "Haven't we already discussed what happens to bad girls in my home?"

\* \* \*

*Rocky*

*Oh. My. God.* He leans in to whisper in my ear, his warm breath across my skin giving me goosebumps. My nipples are already hard and aching, I can feel my arousal turning my panties wet and slick.

He starts to clear off the top of his desk. Without looking up, he orders, "Take off your clothes."

I slowly start to strip, dropping each article of clothing into a small pile in front of me.

Finished with the desk, Sean locks his eyes with mine. "Now get on your knees."

I do, and start to reach for his zipper.

He stops me, grabbing a fistful of my hair. "Close the door."

I start to get up.

"No," he tells me, "you're going to crawl on your hands and knees to close that door." He steps to the side and points toward the door.

*Good god.* Something is seriously wrong with me, because being ordered to crawl naked across the room to close the door is the hottest thing I've ever heard.

"I can see your wet cunt from over here, little one," he calls to me. I'm pretty sure the blush I'm feeling goes from my cheeks clear down to my toes. I finally reach the door, close and lock it, and turn around.

Sean stands in front of his desk, his dark blue eyes locked on me. Unhurriedly, he shrugs out of his suit jacket, draping it over the back of his chair. Still watching me, he neatly rolls the sleeves of his shirt up his tanned, muscled forearms. He slowly removes his belt, sliding it ominously from each loop. He drops it on the desk, the buckle making a loud thump on the polished surface.

"Were you a bad girl, Roxanne?" He crosses his arms over his chest, resting almost casually against the desk.

I nod my head.

"Say it," he commands.

"Yes."

He raises a questioning eyebrow.

"Yes... sir?"



Sean smiles. “Good girl.”

I feel the adrenaline coursing through my system, excitement and a twinge of fear making my hands shake and heart race.

“What happens to bad girls in my home, Roxanne?”

I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry. “They get punished.”

I can see the outline of his huge cock from here.

He catches me looking, a satisfied smirk lifting the corner of his mouth. He slowly undoes his blood-red tie, holding it loosely in one hand. Then he points to the floor in front of him. “Come.”

On my hands and knees, I crawl across the floor to kneel in front of his feet.

He holds a hand out, which I take, and pulls me to my feet. He spins me to face the massive wooden desk and steps behind me. His breath brushes across my skin. “Is that tight little pussy of yours sore from taking my cock?”

“Yes, sir.” It’s true. I’ve never been with a man that came close to his size. It was like losing my virginity all over again.

Sean kisses the patch of skin behind my ear. “Good.” He presses the center of my back, and I lie down over the desktop, the cool surface shocking to my burning skin. He positions my hands stretched forward, holding onto the opposite edge.

“I’m going to punish you, naughty girl. Then I’m going to fuck that sore, swollen cunt with my cock until you beg to come. Do you understand?”

I nod. My entire body is trembling.

Behind me, Sean starts to rub my cheeks, the skin warming under his touch. His bare hand comes down on me, alternating cheeks in a flurry of brisk spanks. None of them have been particularly hard, which confuses me. I’d been so distracted I’d forgotten about the belt, even though it was clearly in my line of sight lying on the desk.

Until I see him grab it. I let out a small squeak. *He’s not really going to spank me with a belt.* I realize I’m quite mistaken

when I feel the soft, smooth leather trailing down my back.

And then nothing. No belt, no hand, just the cool air on my warmed skin.

There is no warning. No sounds. Just suddenly the searing pain across my cheek as the belt lands its first strike.

I shriek.

The belt connects across my other cheek. I start to stand up, but Sean's firm hand presses down between my shoulder blades.

"Oh, no, little one, we're nowhere near done."

I whimper. He rains down a rapid volley of strikes across both cheeks, the fiery pain dancing from side to side with each one. I'm crying, my tears dropping onto the shiny desktop. I feel him step back, and suddenly a white-hot band of pain crosses both cheeks and wraps around the edge of my hip. I scream, my hands flying back to protect my ass. I can feel the hot, raised welts crisscrossing my skin.

"Put your hands back and keep them there, or I will make you spread your legs while I whip your cunt." The matter-of-fact way he says it makes me believe him. I stretch my arms back over the desk.

"Good girl." Then he unleashes a rapid series of strikes on my throbbing ass and down the sensitive parts of my upper thighs. I don't immediately notice when it stops. Everything feels so far away, like I'm floating.

I hear the belt hit the floor. Sean is moving behind me. I startle when I feel his hot, wet tongue against my swollen folds.

Oh. My. God. I moan, and spread my legs just a little wider. Sean O'Connell, head of the Irish mob, is eating my pussy from behind. He thrusts his tongue in and out of my entrance, while I moan his name.

"You taste fucking amazing, baby," he says, swiping a finger through my arousal, and begins slowly circling my clit. His tongue dives back inside of me, fucking me with it.

"Oh, god. Don't stop. Don't stop!" I beg.

He increases the pressure and speed on my clit. Wave after wave of tingling pleasure spreads across my body. I can feel my orgasm building.

Sean replaces his tongue with a finger, and then another, twisting them back and forth. The third finger stretches my sore pussy, but the twinge of pain only adds to the overwhelming sensations running through my body. He finger fucks me furiously, alternating between thrusting them in and out and twisting them around inside me, exploring me, looking for the spots that make me moan like an auditioning porn star. I'm seeing stars in my vision when I feel his tongue circle around my sensitive anus.

He starts pumping his fingers faster, and his circling tongue starts to press against the tight ring of muscle. My orgasm builds higher and higher and I forget to breathe, my lips tingling. Just as the first wave of pleasure washes over my body, I feel his tongue push inside of my virgin ass. He finger and tongue fucks me through wave after wave of orgasm.

I'm still having pleasurable aftershocks when I feel his thick cock pressing against my core. The stretching and slight burn as my body struggles to accommodate him is replaced by feeling so overwhelmingly full of his hard cock that it's hard to breathe.

Sean groans, his cock seated fully inside of my cunt. I can feel his body pressing against the punished skin of my ass, the residual pain making every other sensation so much stronger. He starts to fuck me hard and fast. His heavy balls are slapping against my swollen clit, his body hitting my tender ass on every thrust.

The only thoughts in my mind are of the blissful overwhelming sensations spreading through my body. I can't think, the pressure building inside my body as my orgasm approaches. I realize the voice I've been hearing is mine, begging 'please, please' on endless loop.

"Come for me, Roxanne," Sean orders, his breath ragged. I can feel his cock swelling inside of me with his own release.

I scream, tumbling headfirst off the cliff as my orgasm crashes over me. Sean groans, and I feel his hot cum filling me as he continues to thrust, pouring every bit of himself into my pussy.

He stills, and we stay like that, panting for several minutes. I feel him press a kiss to my back before sliding his still hard cock from me. He pulls me up and turns me around. I wobble on unsteady legs. Sean lifts me easily into his arms and carries me out of his office.

## CHAPTER 32



Sean takes us to his bedroom and into the massive shower. He sits us on the bench while the shower fills with steam. I realize I'm so cold my teeth are chattering. Sean is whispering soothing things in Gaelic against my hair. When the water is warm, Sean places me in the spray, standing behind me to support me on my shaky legs.

Sean nuzzles my hair. "Have you ever done this before, baby?"

I shake my head.

"It's adrenaline, the crash. It's why you feel so cold and off balance," he explains without making me ask.

"Oh."

We stay like that until I'm warm and steady on my feet. Sean hands me a fluffy towel to wrap up in.

He walks me to the bed, pulling back the covers for me to crawl under. He gets in behind me, sitting propped up with pillows and holding me in his lap.

We sit like that for a while. My brain is filled with nothing, all my normal chaotic thoughts and worries tucked away somewhere else. Just quiet, warmth, and an odd feeling of safety tucked in the arms of the mob boss.

Finally, he breaks the silence. "There is a charity ball tomorrow night at St. Mary's Children's Hospital. Will you go with me?"

"A ball?"

“Aye.”

“You’re asking your kidnap-ee to go to the ball?”

His voice is husky, his accent rich as he whispers in my ear, “Do you still feel like a captive, little one?”

I’m not sure what I feel like, but I don’t feel trapped. I tell him honestly, “No, I don’t.”

“Good.” His voice is soft, whispered directly into my ear.

“I have nothing to wear.”

He laughs. “That’s not a problem. We’ll go shopping tomorrow.”

“We? You’re coming?”

“Of course. You need protection, and over my dead body does another man see you in a dressing room.”

I giggle. “Possessive much?”

“Over you, yes. You’re mine.” His tone is sincere.

“Could we go to my apartment tomorrow? My real one? I’m going stir crazy with nothing to do. I could work on my laptop. And I’d like to tell my roommate I’m not dead. She worries.”

“What work? You’re a reporter. You know you can’t.”

“Oh, um, actually I have a day job. Freelancing doesn’t always pay the bills. I’m a book editor.”

“You are full of surprises, Roxanne Johnson.”

We fall into a comfortable silence, and I try to come to terms with the confusing mess of emotions I feel.

*There is something seriously fucked in your head. I’m cuddling with the head of the Irish mob. He’s kidnapped me, cooked me dinner, killed for me, spanked me, punished me, and fucked me to within an inch of my life.*

“This is Stockholm syndrome, isn’t it?” I ask him.

He chuckles.

I find myself less amused. “I’m serious! How often do your captives fall—” I cut myself off. Nope. *Fuck off, Freud, and*

*take your slippers with you.* “Do all your captives end up turning to mush around you?”

He shifts me in his arms so he can look at my face when he speaks. “Just how fucking often do you think this happens?” His voice is low and rough.

“How should I know?” *What the fuck am I doing?*

“No, Roxanne, it’s not Stockholm syndrome. It’s chemistry, and passion. I can’t get you out of my fucking head, not since the day you crashed into me in Central Park.”

I gasp a little. “You knew that was me?”

“Aye, I knew it was you the first time I saw your beautiful eyes turn green. The same beautiful eyes that haunted my fucking dreams. Do you have any idea how much time I spent with my cock in my hand, picturing your gorgeous lips wrapped around me? I don’t know why this is happening any more than you do, but it’s not a fucking syndrome.” He kisses me then.

It’s frantic, and passionate, and messy. I feel myself getting wet. We turn, and he’s on top of me. I can feel his hard cock pressed against me. Sean kisses down my neck to my breasts, licking, sucking, and biting my nipples. I spread my legs wider, reach my hand between our bodies and start to stroke his cock. When I put his cock inside me, we both moan in pleasure.

He sinks into me in one long thrust and then fucks me like he’s possessed, pushing forward, crushing my legs against my chest. The position forces his cock even deeper inside me, his balls hitting my sensitive bruised ass. It’s frantic and consuming.

When his hand finds my clit, I explode. Wave after wave of pleasure washes over me. Sean growls, a deep, primal sound, and I feel his cock swell, hot cum filling me. Sean rolls, keeping his cock inside me, until he’s on his back and I’m straddling his hips. He pulls my face to his and kisses me, slow and deep. I feel his cock slide out of me, his cum dripping from my pussy.

He holds my forehead to his, a hand at the back of my neck.  
“It’s not a fucking syndrome.”



## CHAPTER 33



*S*ean

We officially fucked away the entire afternoon, not that I'm complaining. After we've recovered, I pull her to her feet and drop one of my t-shirts over her. It goes down to her thighs. I'm partially disappointed, covering up her naked body, but I'd have to kill any man who saw her naked.

We round the corner into the kitchen and there is a knock at my door. I open it, and find Liam standing there with a pizza box.

"Thank you, Liam." He hands the box over and leaves. I put it on the island and grab beers out of the fridge. I hand one to Roxanne.

"Pizza and beer?"

"You seem shocked."

She smiles, repeating her beer bottle-popping trick. "Sorry, just didn't realize I was inside a college frat house."

I laugh. "Such a brat."

"I try."

I set the TV to internet radio and hand her the remote. She clicks through channels, finally landing on a country station.

"I guess country music makes sense for the girl from Texas."

She smiles. “Yes, but I really do like most music. Tasha and I used to go to nightclubs all the time. But country does have a special place in my heart.”

“Tasha?” I relocate the pizza to the living room table. We settle onto the sofa.

“My roommate. And my best friend. Actually, if you let me get my computer tomorrow you might meet her. If you want, that is. I mean I can just run in if you don’t.” She looks adorably uncomfortable and takes a large drink of her beer.

“You’re adorable when you’re nervous.”

“I am not nervous.” She gives my shoulder a playful shove, which makes me laugh.

Changing the subject, I ask her, “Did you always want to be a reporter?”

“Well, my childhood dream was to be a princess but I realized that ship had sailed. But mostly, yeah.” She’s smiling, relaxed.

“Do you miss Texas?”

She’s just bitten into the pizza and looks like she’s about to have a small orgasm.

“Oh, my god, this is really good pizza. And sorta. But with my family not wanting me there, I don’t know what the point of going home would be.”

“What parts do you miss?”

“Riding, for sure. Nicole and I used to ride damn near every day. And dancing. You don’t find country bars in New York.”

I grab my own slice from the box.

“Do you have family, Sean?”

I’m not sure why it surprises me that she would ask, but it still catches me off guard. “No, not anymore. Not blood family at least. Patrick’s the closest thing I have to a brother.”

She sips her beer and doesn’t push for more.

“My mum and sister were killed in an accident. My dad brought me to the US. To Boston. He was a soldier. He was

killed during some turf war or another. I was about sixteen. Patrick's family took me in. His father was also mob. Then we joined up."

"I'm sorry, Sean." She squeezes my hand. Looking at her, I don't see pity or sympathy. Just compassion from someone who understands loss.

"Thank you."

"Do you like this? This life?" She's folded her feet under her on the sofa and turned to face me. Aside from the beer she's holding, she could be a teacher about to lead story time. No one has ever asked me that before.

"Yes. This is what I am, Roxanne. Some days are bloodier than others. My world still operates on honor, respect, loyalty, and vengeance."

She is still calmly eating her pizza.

"You should understand though, for many, I am the monster they fear at night. This is not a Fortune 500 company, and I am not a CEO."

Looking at her, I don't see fear or revulsion on her face. No tension coiling up in her shoulders. I can tell she's focused on everything I'm saying. She's already seen violence at my hand. For fuck's sake, I've held a gun to her head myself. Which I feel suddenly ashamed of.

"I'm sorry. For the other day in my office, when you told me your name." I run my hand through my hair. "For threatening you."

She smiles. "You don't need to apologize. Don't apologize for protecting your family." She pauses, sips her drink. "And I have to accept responsibility for the choices I made. I knew what I was getting into was dangerous. I was warned by just about everyone who knew what I was planning on doing."

Whatever this woman is made of, it's indestructible.

"What?" she says.

"Huh?"

“You’re giving me the funniest look.” She fidgets in her seat. It’s adorable.

“You’re not like any woman I’ve ever met before.”

She doesn’t respond. She actually looks a little offended.

“Roxanne, that’s a compliment.”

“Oh, thank you.” She still looks confused.

“I’m going to fuck up explaining this, baby. You’re one big contradiction. You’re this tiny, beautiful thing that fights like a fucking hellcat. You care deeply about others, but can handle violence as well as any of my soldiers. You’re something else entirely.”

She smiles. “That’s probably the nicest compliment I’ve ever gotten. At least I think so.”

“Where did you learn to fight, hellcat?” I grab fresh beers from the fridge.

“College.”

“What the hell do they teach in American colleges?”

She laughs. “It was a self-defense class. After Nicole, I took every one I could find, twice. I don’t want to be a victim. Honestly, I think that’s what killed Nicole. Not just what was done to her, but that she felt powerless. Helpless. I never wanted to feel like that. Horrible things happen in life sometimes, but I don’t want to be in a position where they define me. I’ll always know I fought back, even if it doesn’t change the outcome. I’ll know.”

“You are an impressive woman, Roxanne Johnson.”

She smiles again. I stand and pull her to her feet. Turning up the music, I lead her to the open space between the sitting area and the dining area.

“So tell me, Mr. O’Connell, is dancing with captives in your living room a common occurrence for you?” She grins up at me as I give her a gentle twirl.

Pulling her close to me, I look into her mesmerizing eyes. “Trust me, there is nothing common about this.” Then I bend

forward and take her lips for a kiss.

## CHAPTER 34



*R*ocky

I wake up with Sean whispering things in Gaelic to me. When I open my eyes, he smiles.

“Morning, sunshine.”

I look at the clock. Ugh. Seven a.m. It actually *is* morning. I moan and pull the pillow over my head. Sean laughs.

“No hiding, baby. We have things to do.” And then the evil man pulls the covers off my body.

“Hey!” I whack him with the pillow.

“Oh, good, you’re awake.”

I can tell he’s both terribly proud of himself and trying desperately not to laugh. He pulls me out of bed and toward the bathroom, peeling off my t-shirt and smacking my butt playfully.

“Ow!” I yelp and run away, his deep laughter audible through the door. I take care of my more personal matters and turn the shower on. I catch a quick glimpse of my butt in the mirror and scream. Sean bursts in.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Look at my butt! I’m one giant bruise!”

“Jesus Christ, you about gave me a heart attack yellin’ like that.” He exhales with a huff and runs a hand through his hair.

He turns to actually look at my butt. He grins, a dark, mischievous glint in his eyes. Fisting my hair, he roughly pulls my head back.

“Your ass is fucking beautiful. It’s bruised from my belt and my hand, and I absolutely adore seeing my marks on you.” He kisses me. “Oh, and baby, there will be more, and I know you’re wet thinking about it.”

I moan. He’s not wrong.

He kisses my forehead and then sets me on the counter, the cold marble shocking my tender skin. He looks at the stitches in my lip carefully.

“I can take these out now.” He grabs a pair of tiny scissors from the first aid kit. A few snips later and he pronounces my lip healed. He picks me up in his arms and walks into the shower. He washes me from head to toe. It’s the most sensual shower that doesn’t actually involve sex. He wraps me in a towel.

“Get dressed. I’ll make coffee.”

“What are we doing?” I ask.

“Shopping.”

“Shopping?”

“Yep, for your dress for the ball, Cinderella.” He kisses my forehead and walks out of the bathroom.

I grab a pair of skinny jeans, a long turtleneck sweater, and heeled boots. I pull my hair back into a French braid and then tuck the end of the braid underneath, securing it with a few well-placed pins. I put on a super light layer of makeup, just enough to bring my eyes out.

I find Sean standing in the kitchen, dressed in another one of his dark suits. He hands me a paper cup of coffee, and I notice he already added cream and sugar for me. He gestures out the door.

The farther from the front door we get, the more additional men we acquire. By the time we reach the basement, which is apparently private, we have half a dozen men with us and

there are three idling identical black SUVs with even more men and drivers.

“Are we invading a small country?” I gesture at the assortment of large, scary Irishmen.

Sean laughs. “No, but I need to keep you safe.”

*Aww.* I stand on my tiptoes so I can kiss him on his cheek. One of the men snorts. Sean shoots him a look that could melt steel. The man pales and swallows nervously, averting his eyes. Sean opens the back seat door and helps me inside, sliding in after me. I wave at Patrick, sitting in the front seat.

Sean gestures to the driver. “This is Declan.”

“Hiya, Declan, I’m Rocky.” I reach forward for a handshake. He nervously takes my hand for a quick squeeze. Sean looks amused by the whole encounter.

The procession exits the underground structure and every car goes a different direction. As we make our way through the city we cross paths with each other several times. Finally we pull up in front of a swanky boutique off Madison Avenue. Sean helps me out. Patrick and Declan step out, and another man appears from thin air to hop in the SUV and drive away.

Sean opens the boutique door. Two well-dressed, middle-aged women are waiting for us, one holding a note pad and the other a measuring tape. I see Patrick close and lock the door behind us, then take up a post nearby. Declan seems to have disappeared. A high-pitched squeal breaks the silence.

“Oh, my god! She is so beautiful!”

I turn and find the most fabulous man I’ve ever seen, which is a feat in New York.

He turns to Sean and smacks him playfully, his tone turned to shock. “What on earth is she doing with you?” The man is a tall, fit African American with a shaved head, neon pink glasses, a chartreuse green crop top, and black skinny pants that would look great on Tasha.

Sean smiles, a brilliant, genuine smile. “Why do I put up with this abuse, Michael?” He turns to me. “Roxanne, meet



Michael, the most temperamental but talented designer in the city. Michael, let me introduce you to Roxanne.”

Michael gives Sean a dramatic shove out of the way and comes to hug me. “I am so excited to meet you! I can’t wait to dress you. I’ve always wanted to work on a wedding collection.”

My mouth falls open. So does Sean’s.

Before I can say anything, Michael explains, “Because, darling, I have never seen this man with a woman, and if his eyes for you get any hotter he’s going to burn this store down. And that’s not even taking into consideration the Irish gorilla guarding my back entrance that gave me the third degree just to come near you.” He switches to a loud stage whisper, which absolutely everyone can hear. “Between you and me, beautiful, people were starting to wonder if he was batting for my team if you know what I mean. Well, some people wondered, every gay man in the city prayed. But looks like our loss is your gain.”

Sean’s face is turned toward the heavens and he appears to be having some sort of small stroke. I start laughing.

“Now, weddings aside, what’s the dress emergency today?”

Sean appears to have regained his functions. “She’s attending the St. Mary’s Children’s Hospital ball with me tonight.”

More squealing from Michael. I wonder how the glass in the shop holds up to this repeatedly. “Oh, my! How much of the hospital did you build this time, Sean?”

Sean just smiles.

*This time?*

“Well, I’m ashamed I’ve only got a few items in the store that I can tailor in such a short time, but I hope we can find something for you.” He nods at the ladies from earlier and they roll a rack of dresses out from somewhere in the back of the boutique.

I look at Sean.

“It’s your dress, baby. Pick one that makes you happy.”

“I’m not sure what would be appropriate for the event,” I explain.

“Baby, you could show up in a rubbish bag and be the most beautiful thing there.”

Michael dramatically fake faints onto a sofa. I laugh. Sean rolls his eyes.

Every single gown is beautiful, and stunningly different from the others. From a slinky black slip dress to a gold Cinderella ball gown, each one is dazzling. My favorite though, is a black and red mermaid cut gown. The deep, blood-red satin and tulle is overlaid with delicate black floral lace. The strapless bodice closes with a corset back, and fits snugly down to the thighs before flowing out gracefully. I look at Michael. He fans his face with exaggerated hand gestures and squeals again. He points me to the dressing room. Sean stands to follow and Michael smacks his hand.

“You’ll ruin the reveal. Sit.” He points at the sofa he fainted onto earlier. He sends one of the ladies with me to help do the corset back.

The satin is smooth and cool, and the lace and tulle are buttery soft. Once the corset is laced up, she pulls a full-length mirror out for me to see.

“Holy shit.” I give a couple of twirls to each side, looking at the back of the dress over my shoulder. It’s a little long, but otherwise fits perfectly. I gather the extra length in my hand and walk, barefoot, out to the main room.

Sean was in conversation with Michael when I walked out. He stops mid-sentence and scoots Michael aside with a hand. He stands in front of me, gazing down with his deep blue eyes burning.

“You’re beautiful, baby.”

“So it’s a yes?”

“Fuck, yes, it is,” he growls, then pulls me in for a deep kiss.

Michael asks about my shoe size and has me try on a few pairs before announcing that he will have someone bring over a

couple of pairs that match when the dress is delivered. I give him my bra size so he can get a strapless bra for me as well. Michael kisses me on both cheeks before shooin' us out the door.

The SUV is waiting for us. Declan has materialized behind me. Sean escorts me back into the car and asks for my address. I provide it to him.

“Over Mrs. Morelli’s restaurant?” He looks surprised.

“Yeah, not many people know there is an apartment up there. It’s kinda fantastic actually.”

Declan chuckles from the front seat. *What the hell?* Given that I just met the man, I refrain from asking what the fuck his problem is.

We make good time to the apartment, and I direct them to the little alley where my entrance is. Patrick pops out and inspects it before calling Declan to tell him it’s ‘clear.’ I’m not entirely sure what they were expecting, though I suppose crowded alleys are probably a little more stressful for those of us accustomed to being shot at. They do a nifty repeat of driver swapping, though this time Patrick and Declan stay with us all the way up to my apartment.

“Tasha, put some clothes on, we have company!” I shout as I open the door. Tasha darts out of her bedroom, runs to me, and envelops me in a bear hug that almost knocks me off my feet.

“Christ, Rocky, I’ve been so worried. I even went to that night club a couple weeks ago but didn’t see you and I couldn’t exactly ask about you by name. Are you ok? Is everything ok?” She starts patting me down like a nervous mother before realizing that there is a blue-eyed giant in a designer suit standing behind me. I watch her hackles raise up.

“Who the fuck are you?”

I gasp. I’ve never heard Tasha curse. I’ve also never seen her adopt the aggressive, hands on her hips stance she has right now.

“Tasha, this is Sean O’Connell. Sean, Tasha, my best friend.”

Sean smiles at her and shakes her hand. "I've heard great things about you. I'm really glad to meet you."

Tasha looks a little dumbfounded.

"So, anyway, I'm just popping in to get my laptop and some of my things. I'm, well, I'm sorta, I'm staying with Sean for a while."

Tasha looks from me to Sean and back again. She holds up a finger in his direction. "Please hold, Rocky can't come to the phone right now." She snatches my wrist and drags me into her bedroom.

"Jesus Christ, Rocky, do you know who that is?"

I start to tell her, but she doesn't stop for a breath. "He's the head of the fucking Irish mob. And you're living with him? How? Why? Does he know about," she whispers directly in my ear, "the project you're working on?"

"Breathe, Tasha. I know who he is, I'm staying with him for the time being, he knows everything, and I mean *everything*." I blush, which Tasha doesn't miss, if her raised eyebrow is any indication. "I don't know how long I'll be there. I will explain more, but it can't be here, ok? I'll text you and we'll set something up for you to come over?"

She looks unconvinced, but less hysterical. "Ok. But you're sure you're ok? Like blink twice if you've been kidnapped."

I laugh, which does nothing to calm Tasha down. "I'm fine, Tasha. Better than fine actually." This time I can feel my cheeks turning red.

Tasha whistles.

I grab my cellphone, tablet and laptop, and assorted chargers and accessories, plus my headphones for the gym. From the bathroom I grab the tampon that I actually hide my memory cards in. I shove it all in a big purse. Tasha questions my lack of personal items.

"Yeah, um, Sean kinda went shopping for me. He ordered me a whole bunch of stuff." This placates her for now. We hug

and Sean escorts me downstairs, with Patrick in front and Declan following.

The SUV is waiting for us, but just as we step out of the doorway I hear an angry shout.

“Get away from her, you Irish bastard.”

I spin around, but Sean has pushed me behind him and drawn his gun. I peek under his arm.

“Gino! What the hell are you doing!” I shout. Gino is standing there with a gun pointed at Sean.

“It’s ok, Rocky, I won’t let them take you.”

*What the hell?*

“Gino! He isn’t kidnapping me! What is wrong with you?” Now Gino just looks confused, looking between me, Sean, and the other men.

Sean speaks; his voice is low and deadly. “Morelli, put your fucking gun away before I kill you on the front steps of your grandmother’s restaurant.”

Thankfully, Gino puts his gun away. Sean doesn’t.

“Rocky, what are you doing with this bastard?” He’s red-faced and as angry as I’ve ever seen him.

“Insult my mother one more time and being Vincent De Luca’s cousin won’t save you from losing a kneecap.” Unlike Gino, Sean is eerily calm.

“What are you doing with her?”

I’m having concerns about his blood pressure at this point.

“I’m taking her home.” I see Sean give Gino a deadly smile. Keeping me behind him the whole time, Sean escorts me to the SUV. He doesn’t holster his gun until we are several blocks away.

Turning to me, he says, “So can I assume you didn’t know you lived on top of a restaurant owned by La Cosa Nostra?”

I turn toward him and blink. “I’m sorry, please back up and explain what the hell just happened?”

Sean laughs. “Vincent De Luca is the current head of the Italian mafia in New York. Gino Morelli is his baby cousin. And apparently fond of you.”

“For fuck’s sake, how many gangsters are there in New York?”

Sean laughs again. “You’ll actually meet De Luca soon. When we have some more information to go on, I’m going to bring him in on your shipping problem. There is a lot to hate about the man, but he won’t stand for abusing girls.”

I let out a little snort.

Sean raises an eyebrow at me.

“I was just thinking, you’re sitting here cool as a cucumber, and I’m wondering if Gino’s blood pressure is ever going to return to normal.”

Sean smiles. “Probably not. His face when I told him I was taking you home was priceless. Imagine what it would have looked like if I’d said what I really meant.”

“What’s that?”

Sean pulls me into his lap with ease. Into my ear he whispers, “That you’re mine.”

## CHAPTER 35



*S*ean

With Roxanne busy getting ready for the event tonight, Patrick is waiting in my office.

“What’s the latest?” I ask.

He fills me in on the assorted day-to-day shit I ignored today to go shopping with Roxanne.

“Also, I talked to O’Malley about the cop that was looking into the deaths. Sounds like this guy volunteered to take the case from homicide, made some bullshit argument that it was probably related to the Italians. O’Malley says it sounded like shite to everyone but homicide was happy to have the case off their desk.”

“Why does organized crime care about some dead girls?” I ask, though I have a feeling I’m not going to like where this is going.

“Seemed fishy to me also. I’ll do you one better. O’Malley found this dude sniffing around his office after he ran her prints through the system. O’Malley thinks the bugger was able to see what searches he was running, but says he’s got no idea how. Has no other explanation for why this dude is poking around his office.”

I laugh. “Aside from his association with us.”

Patrick smiles. “Aye, true. But O’Malley’s even more paranoid than you are. And that’s bloody saying something. Anyway, it sounds like after his visit to O’Malley, he saw this guy poking around a homicide detective’s office. Some cat named Hensley.”

“Why does that sound familiar?”

“A while back, there was that corruption scandal over at NYPD? Hensley ended up being the only straight cop there. Got promoted when the dust settled. Funny enough, the whole thing was discovered by some reporter at the *Times*.”

“Roxanne?”

“Aye, boss, that’s the one.”

“She’d said she had a contact at the NYPD that wasn’t much help. I bet it’s the same guy.”

Patrick nods. “That would make a bit of sense.”

“What does O’Malley think about this guy?” I drum my fingers on the desk.

“He thinks Reynolds is looking into your girl. He says he’s not sure why, but has a bad feeling about it.” Patrick gives me a dead serious look. “If O’Malley is concerned about it, we probably should be too.”

I rub my temples. “Aye. He’s not on our payroll, I doubt he’s on De Luca’s if he was trying to blame the bodies on La Cosa Nostra. I’ll ask him and see if he tells me to piss off. I think we found Popov’s contact in the NYPD. Organized crime too.”

“What about Roxanne?”

“What about her?” I bristle more than I planned on.

“Easy, brother. She might be in danger.”

He’s right. She’s always been in danger but if Reynolds is on the Bratva payroll and is looking for her, that’s a hell of a boost for Popov. “Aye. Work on a GPS tracker for her.”

Patrick looks surprised. “She going to like that much?”



“Probably not. But I’m not taking chances with her safety.”  
It’s the gods’ honest truth too. Patrick nods solemnly.

“Next up, the lads found the customs inspector. They’ve had a lovely chat. After some persuasive arguments, he admits that he signs off on the two ships anytime they come through. He’s never heard of Dimitri, he swears, but does mention a Boris paying him off.”

“Isn’t that Popov’s henchman?”

“Aye, sure as shite is. I explained to him that the terms of his arrangement are changing. He’s out of the city. Actually, he left the bloody state.”

“Thank you for handling that.”

“Anytime, boss. By the way, what the bloody hell is going on in your bedroom? I could hear Michael squealing from the front door.”

I laugh. “Oh, he’s just playing fairy godmother for Cinderella and having himself a good time of it.”

Patrick exits, shaking his head.

I fix up a drink and dial Vincent De Luca. He answers on the first ring.

“O’Connell.”

“De Luca.”

“I heard you threatened to blow off my cousin’s kneecaps.”

“Yes. Did you hear he pointed a gun at me?”

“Everyone points a gun at you. You’re irritating. Like nails on a chalkboard.”

I snort. “Fair, but he pointed a gun at me and my woman. I won’t let that stand.”

De Luca pauses for a minute. Finally he continues, “I can respect that. I’ll remind my cousin about respecting a man’s woman.”

“Thank you.”

“I hope that’s not all you wanted to chat about, O’Connell.”

“No. I have some business to discuss. Might impact your operations. I’d like to show you the respect of bringing this information to you directly.” Fucking politics.

“Thank you. I’ll have Angelo contact you tomorrow. The same number?”

“Yes.”

The line goes dead. *Lovely chatting with you too.*

I check the time and rise to get dressed myself.

## CHAPTER 36



*R*ocky

After lunch, a nap, and a delightful wake-up from Sean, I start to get dressed for the *ball* that he's taking me to.

Wrapped in a towel and blow-drying my hair, I hear a knock followed by a high-pitched squeal. Michael sashays into the room, holding a large box and several matching gift bags.

"Michael! I didn't expect you to be bringing it by personally."

"Darling, if you thought I'd miss seeing you in all your glory, you're crazy. Also, Prince Charming thought you might need some help with hair and makeup."

"You're such a doll, thank you."

He hands me a satin dressing robe, the strapless bra, and a rather risqué pair of lace panties, to which I raise an eyebrow.

"Tell Sean he's welcome." Michael winks conspiratorially at me.

I laugh and walk into the bathroom to get dressed.

"How do you know him anyway?" I shout from the bathroom.

"Sean O'Connell saved my parents' lives."

I come out of the bathroom with my jaw open. "What?"

"A few years ago, Sean had just assumed command. Well, my parents had a little restaurant. Everyone thinks the mafia deals in protection money, and they do, but street gangs are worse."

So this gang is hassling my folks. They didn't have much money anyway, after raising us kids and the restaurant. Finally one night they come in and tell my momma she can pay them in *other* ways. My dad doesn't let this stand of course, and my scrawny ass tried to help. They beat my dad unconscious, gave my mom a black eye, and broke my nose and eye socket. Then they say they will be back tomorrow and tell my mom to be prepared to pay up."

"Jesus Christ," I say, sitting down on the bathroom counter. Michael opens up a makeup kit alongside all of my makeup. He gets to work on my face.

"So anyway, I call an ambulance and they take my dad to the ER. My mom and I are sitting there, waiting for the doctor to tell us if my dad is bleeding in the brain and I hear the nurses whispering that Sean O'Connell is coming to see his men that got shot up. They say his name like he's the good lord crossed with the boogie man. I start poking around and find the man himself walking into the hospital. I see him visit with some of his men, hug a few of the women. Then he tells the hospital staff that they get anything they need. He posts fucking guards around their beds. Then this police captain shows up, and I think some shit is gonna go down. He shakes Sean's hand and asks what he needs. I was so dumbstruck, I never heard the answer. He leaves, and I grab one of the beat cops that was just hanging around. I ask him who that dude was. He says to me 'Brother, that dude is the head of the fucking Irish mob.'"

Michael has finished my makeup and waves at the mirror for me to inspect it. He's given me a retro cat eye and matte red lip, with a very Marilyn Monroe vibe to the whole thing. "I figure a vintage vixen look will make the mermaid cut dress pop."

I nod. His talent appears limitless.

"So anyway, Doc says they're keeping Pops overnight but he will be ok. I take my momma to my sister's in Jersey. I'm sitting there wondering what I'm supposed to do and I think of this scary Irish giant I just saw. I figure there's nothing left for me to lose at this point cause my family is everything to me. I

walk back into the ER and right up to the biggest one of them I can find. Scary-looking fuck with a red beard.”

“Patrick?”

“That’s the one. Anyway, he tells me to piss off. Just like that, ‘piss off.’ So, I’m this scrawny sixteen-year-old-kid with a busted-up face, I square right up to him and say ‘you first.’ I tell him I need to talk to Sean O’Connell and I’m not leaving until I do. He laughs at me, but I hear this deep laugh from behind me.”

“Sean?”

“In the flesh, baby girl. He tells me to take a drive with him. We get in this big-ass SUV and just start driving. I’m pretty sure I’m going to die. He says, ‘ok, kid, talk.’ I spill everything, from my dad in the hospital to them threatening my momma. He asks why I came to him. I look him dead in the eye and say ‘Because you’re the scariest mofo I’ve ever seen in my life, and if I don’t do something they are gonna kill my family.’ I tell him my parents ain’t ever done anything wrong, they don’t mess with gangs or drugs or anything. They just want to run a restaurant and this gang decided to charge them taxes. I tell him that my family means everything to me, and if he can save them from this, I’ll do anything he asks of me forever.”

Michael is going to town on my hair with a curling iron and industrial-size can of hair spray.

“He looks me up and down. Looks at my busted-up face and asks what I want to do with my life. I’m a little shocked. I tell him I don’t know. He says, ‘You sure as shite do. You want my help, tell me the bloody truth.’”

Michael starts brushing the curls into soft rolls and pinning them up.

“So, this scrawny gay kid looks at the mob boss and says ‘I want to design clothes and have my own store, but that’s never gonna happen, so I don’t know what I’m gonna do to pay the bills and take care of my parents.’ And Sean just stares at me for a while, with those icy blue eyes of his. Finally, he says,

‘ok.’ I give him the address of the restaurant and he starts saying stuff to the other guys in Gaelic. The next day when those guys showed up to hurt my momma, this whole swarm of Irishmen was there. I’m watching these guys who were all big and tough a minute ago almost wet themselves. Sean walks out of the kitchen. He asks which one threatened to rape my mom. I point him out. Sean shoots him dead right there. He looks at the other two, tells them this restaurant and this family are off limits. If he ever hears that we get hassled again, he will do some very unpleasant things I will not repeat to a lady. Then he shoots them all in each knee and his guys apparently dump them back in their territory.”

*Holy shit.* My hair is now twisted into a gorgeous victory roll, and Michael is taking out the ozone layer with hair spray.

“The next day, he shows back up in the restaurant. He hands me a letter from a charter high school for fashion design and a letter from NYU. I’ve been accepted into both and all four years of college are paid in advance. He tells me he expects to hear from me when I graduate.”

Michael’s eyes are teared up. He sniffs. “My boutique was a graduation gift from him. He didn’t have to do any of that, he didn’t even have to help my parents. We’re not Irish, it’s not their territory. He saved their lives. Saved all of us. I still don’t know why he did it, but I’m grateful to him for the rest of my life.”

I’m speechless. My eyes tear up a little too, and I blink rapidly.

“Oh, no, you don’t! Don’t even think about making that mascara run!”

I laugh. He tucks some tiny black pearl pins into my hair and pronounces me a masterpiece. He spins me around so I can see.

“Holy shit! Michael, I love it!” I look like a glammed up ‘50s starlet. After a grateful hug, I wiggle into the dress and he laces up the back. The simple black leather pumps fit me, and the vintage look, perfectly.

Michael squeals and claps his hands repeatedly. “Oh, my god, it’s so perfect!”

A faint knock announces Sean’s arrival. He’s wearing a black tuxedo with a blood-red tie. His dark hair is freshly cut. His blue eyes give me a soul-searing look.

His voice is hoarse. “Jesus, baby, you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” He steps to me and gives me a tender kiss on the forehead. He withdraws a box from a pocket and produces a necklace of rubies and black diamonds. The rubies sparkle in the light, and a thin trail of diamonds drips down my back.

“You’re not too bad yourself, gangster.” Even when I’m in my heels, he towers over me; I have to get on my tiptoes to steal a kiss. He holds out his arm to escort me out.

We repeat our procession out of the apartment, this time to a waiting limo. Declan sits in the driver’s seat again.

“Thank you for all of this.” I gesture vaguely around.

He pulls me into his lap and kisses me. I’m impressed by the staying power of the lipstick Michael put on me. “You’re welcome, baby.”

“So, Michael still doesn’t know why you helped his family.”

Sean laughs. “I should have known better than to leave him alone with a reporter.”

“Why did you?”

Sean watches the buildings go past the windows, as if far away in thought. “Because I came around a corner and saw this little kid sashay up to Patrick and start making demands. He was shaking so hard I could see it across the room. He was terrified but stood his ground. Then I saw his busted-up face and realized someone had beat the shit out of him already today. So he’s terrified, beat to a pulp, and still busting Patrick’s chops.” He chuckles. “It takes a lot to be that scared and still man up. I was impressed. So I heard him out. He’s begging me to save his family’s life and offering me anything he can give in return. And he’s still shaking like a leaf. I can’t say no to that.” He pauses for a minute. “I’m not sure I would have been

as brave as that scrawny kid was. So I took care of his problem.”

“And school?”

Sean smiles. “Yeah, I just wanted to see the kid have a future where he wasn’t begging the mob for favors.”

I just look at him for a while.

He smiles. “Why are you looking at me like I’ve grown a second head?”

“Because I’m just blown away by you. You’re the head of the fucking Irish mob. I’ve seen you kill people. You’re scary as hell when you want to be. You also dance with me in the living room, wrap me in blankets and hand feed me chocolate, and fuck me until I can’t remember my own name. You’re the most dangerous man I’ve ever met and the only place I’ve ever felt this safe.”

“Jesus, baby.” Sean wraps his arms around me and kisses the top of my head. I feel myself melt into his embrace. He murmurs something into my hair in Gaelic.

“What did you say? It was pretty sounding.”

He chuckles. “If I tell you, you’re not allowed to run away.”

“Ok.”

“Loosely translated, I said you’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met and I’m never giving you up.”

I twist to look into his eyes.

“I meant what I said, baby girl. You’re mine.”

I search his dark blue eyes. I know without a doubt that he is absolutely sincere. It thrills and terrifies me.

“Ok.”

I see the flash of fire in his gaze before his lips crash into mine.



## CHAPTER 37



*S*ean

It's a short drive from my apartment to the venue and Roxanne seems to enjoy the limo. It's a better fit for the occasion than one of the SUVs, and just as armored. Declan is driving again. He's one of my best men, both as a driver and a bodyguard. I'm planning on assigning him to Roxanne. It's unrealistic to think that I'll always be around to protect her, a fact that drives me a little insane.

"Where is this thing at anyway?" Roxanne asks, peering out the window at the passing buildings.

"The Met."

Her eyes light up. I love how expressive her face is. She doesn't hide her reactions; she lives her life in the moment. We join the line of luxury SUVs, limos, and sports cars in front of the building. When we approach, a uniformed usher opens the door. I exit, buttoning my jacket as I stand. Reaching into the limo for Roxanne, I take her hand.

"By the way, little one, the press is here."

A tiny flash of terror runs over her face before she swallows, steels her nerves, and steps confidently out of the car. Reporters and cameras line the literal red carpet and the area is bathed in bright lights. The hospital board chairman is standing at the top of the steps greeting guests. I stop to introduce Roxanne, also to allow the press to get several

photos of the three of us, my left arm wrapped protectively around her lower back.

“Mr. O’Connell, thank you so much for your continued support of St. Mary’s. The work your company did on the new wing was fantastic. I’ve already heard wonderful things about it from our staff. Of course, your financial donations to the children’s cancer center are valued immensely as well.”

“Of course, Chairman Jones. Please contact me if you need anything at all.” We both stop to shake hands with several other board members and department heads as we make our way inside.

“You’re good at this,” Roxanne whispers to me.

“What?”

She gestures around generally. “This. The politics, the handshakes. The photo ops.” She pauses for a minute. “But I get the feeling that you do actually support this cause, don’t you? It’s not just good PR.”

I hand her a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. “Yes. One of the lads had a son, Tommy, with a nasty case of cancer. We paid for the treatment of course, and they took fantastic care of the boy and his family, but we overheard the staff mention they lacked a certain amount of funding. Tommy also had to be sent to another hospital for a few specialty treatments that St. Mary’s didn’t have the equipment for. Now they do have it.”

She looks at me with that odd bewildered look again. “You take good care of your men, don’t you?”

I nod. “Always, loyalty is rewarded. It’s good business. It’s also the right thing to do.”

She wraps her free arm around my waist and leans her head against my shoulder. “You’re a good man, Sean.”

I tip her chin up to me and gently kiss her lips. I’m not sure I believe that. I’m not sure some good things cancel out the many very bad things I’ve done. I take care of my men and their families, and to some degree the community, with money made in often questionable and downright illegal ways. Does

paying for Tommy's cancer care make up for selling weapons all over the world? Or laundering money for other organizations that do far worse things? I'm not sure this world can be clearly defined into good and evil. Is it possible to be a monster with morals? Or are morals just relative to the situation, therefore rendering themselves moot? There are certainly worse ways to lead an organization like this, Popov being a prime fucking example. The thought provides little comfort.

I look at Roxanne, her cheerful smile as she takes in the glittering and glamorous surroundings. Her strength of character and commitment is astounding. She is by far the strongest woman I've ever met. If I were a good man, I'd protect her from Popov and set her free. She deserves a normal life with a safe, dependable man. Even as I think it, I know that over my dead body does anyone take Roxanne from me.

She finishes her champagne and swaps it with a passing waiter.

"Do you want to meet with De Luca when I speak with him?"

She ponders my question, sipping on her champagne. "I'm torn. I want to be there, but I'm not sure how I would be received, being an outsider. I don't want to weaken your position because of my curiosity."

As usual, I'm impressed with her observation. "You're not wrong; the Italians are also a bit old-fashioned on the women in the business concept. Want me to meet with him now, and bring you in as you get more familiar with, and known by, the other families?" I pause for a minute. "That's if you want to be involved. You'd said so before, but if you changed your mind it would make perfect sense. I'd still keep you up to date and involved on our end of it all."

"No. I'm all in. This is my baby and I'm going to see it through." Her eyes flash more green than hazel, a sure sign that she's fired up.

I grab her around the waist and pull her to me. I whisper to her, "You're sexy as hell when you're bloodthirsty, baby." I let her feel the hard press of my cock.

She smiles. “You’re going to soak my panties before we even get home. And there isn’t much to them.”

*Fuck me.*

“Fuck this party, I’m taking you home.” I mean it, but she plants her heels and laughs.

“Gangster, you have business here. Handshakes, politics, PR, the works.” Her smirk is mischievous.

“Fine,” I growl, “but I’m ripping those panties off you the second you get in the car.”

“Sold.”

We make a few more leisurely laps around the ball. Roxanne is a natural. She strikes up conversation with the wives. Her jokes are polite and well timed. She’s a force of nature. A passing waiter collects her empty glass and I pull her onto the dance floor.

“You’re magnificent, baby. I don’t know how I made it through these without you before.”

“Thank you.”

I give her a gentle twirl. I watch her lush hips sway to the music. She’s in front of me, back to my front, when I lean down to whisper to her.

“It occurs to me, little one,” I smile when she sticks her tongue out at the nickname, “you never asked for birth control pills.” I think of the times I’ve come deep within her over the last several days. Irrationally, my hand moves to splay over her flat abdomen, and a sudden desire to see her growing with my child inside her overwhelms me. I’m shocked by the idea, and my reaction to it. I kiss her neck and spin her again to face me. I want to look into her eyes when she speaks.

She’s blushing a deep red. “Oh, umm, yeah. I have the implant in my arm.”

I’m oddly disappointed.

“Do you want children, Sean?” She’s searching my eyes when she asks.

I answer honestly. “I hadn’t considered it until recently. Until you.”

She blinks, surprised. If it’s at what I said or my blunt honesty, I’m not sure which. “Hypothetically, if I was on the pills, would you have gotten them for me?”

“Knowing what I know now? How we would feel, this…” I gesture back and forth between us when I can’t find the right words.

She nods.

“In this hypothetical, would you need them to treat any other condition or improve your cycle?”

She shakes her head.

“Then no.”

She gasps. Her mouth opens and closes. I can feel her heart speed up.

“So then you would wear—”

“Not a bloody chance.” I growl, cutting her off. I bring my lips to her ear. “I would continue to bury my cock inside your sweet, hot cunt and fill you with my cum.” The raw violence in my words shocks us both. But it’s the gods’ honest truth.

She’s speechless. For that matter, so am I. I can’t explain my brutal desires, or why I am unwilling to lie to her, even knowing the insanity of the declaration. I can’t explain the possessive need to have this woman. I can’t rationalize it. It’s all consuming.

We dance silently for several songs. I worry about the effect my words had on her. My only reassurance is that other than the initial shock, her body remains soft and relaxed in my arms, her face free of worry, and her eyes brilliant green. I pull her off the dance floor, snagging us both champagne as we go. Tucked into a quiet corner near some questionable sculpture, I cup her face with my hand.

“Talk to me, baby. I need to know how you’re feeling.”

She lets out a puff of air and shrugs her shoulders. “I don’t know, Sean. Overwhelmed? I mean, you basically just told me you would try to get me pregnant. Or at least wouldn’t be upset if I got pregnant. Do you realize how insane that sounds?”

I have a sense she isn’t done, so I keep my mouth shut.

“For fuck’s sake, we just met. And—” She stops and lets out another exasperated sigh, shaking her head in the process. “And I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m supposed to feel.”

I realize during this speech she’s unconsciously started to rest her hand over her lower belly, almost protectively.

“Baby, I can’t explain it. I need you. I’ve never in my life needed to be inside a woman like I need you. I’ve never needed to hold a woman like you. To wake up with you in my arms. I would never force you to carry my child if you truly don’t want to. I will not force you to stay if you truly want to go. But until you tell me otherwise, I’m all in. Stop worrying about what you’re supposed to feel and just feel.” I put one hand over the one that’s resting on her belly and crush her lips to mine. I try to pour every ounce of my irrational feelings into it, praying she feels the sincerity of my touch and my words.

We finally break the kiss. She looks at our joined hands and back to my face. For the second time tonight, her eyes meet mine and she nods.

“Ok.”

## CHAPTER 38



*R*ocky

I wake up in the warm, soft bed with significantly less hangover than I was expecting. But while my head isn't sore, my vagina certainly is. Images flash through my mind from last night. My panties ripping off in the limo, his hot mouth sucking my clit while he finger fucked me. Sean ripping the tulle skirt of the dress up to my hip. Him carrying me into the elevator, setting me onto his rock-hard cock as soon as the doors closed. I lost track of the orgasms I had. The evening is one giant, hot, pleasurable blur.

“Good morning.”

I roll over to see Sean standing in the doorway, holding a cup of coffee. He's dressed in his typical work attire. He comes to the bed and sits on the edge, handing me the coffee.

“Hello, my love,” I say, reaching for the coffee.

“I don't even get that nice of a greeting in the morning,” Sean grumbles.

“Hey, me and coffee have been together a long time!”

Sean laughs. “I'm going to be out most of the day. The boys finished with your new phone.” He fishes a shiny new iPhone out of his pocket. “They transferred all your old data onto it, and added some additional programs that improve its security.”

“Oh, no! Did the boys look at all my naked pictures?”

Sean’s face is priceless. I wish I had a camera for this exact moment.

“Kidding, I’m only kidding.”

Sean flips me to my stomach and quickly lands a spank on my ass. “You’re lucky I don’t have time to punish you for that, naughty girl.”

I stick my tongue out at him.

“Sean, I’m getting cabin fever. Can I go out? I want to meet Tasha. And see the sun. Other humans. The works.”

Sean nods. “Of course. I was actually wanting to talk about that. How do you feel about Declan?”

I consider the burly driver I met yesterday. “He’s fine? I guess? I don’t really have an opinion. Actually, he raised the privacy divider last night when you ripped my panties off without being asked, and I do appreciate that. Why do you ask?”

“I’m assigning him to you. As a driver and a bodyguard. He’s one of the best men in the organization.”

“Why do I need a bodyguard?”

Sean appears uneasy. “Roxanne, the press coverage of the event last night means everyone, good and bad, now knows you’re mine. They could hurt you just to devastate me.”

Damn. It’s a little different just hearing that out loud.

“One of the things I’m doing today is meeting with De Luca. I’ll fill you in when I get back.” He looks uncomfortable about something.

“What’s wrong?”

“Remember the organized crime detective that was working the dead girls’ case?”

I nod.

“My contact in the department seems to think he may be looking into you. I’m concerned that he may be working with



the Russians.”

*Well, shit.*

“Delightful.” I flop back down. “I really bit off more than I could chew, didn’t I?”

Sean chuckles. “Aye, ya did. But relax, love, this is just business for us. We’ll get it sorted out.”

“How do you not have a million gray hairs and a heart condition by now?” Seriously. *Just business.*

“Because we’re good at it.”

I roll my eyes. “Modest too.”

He leans forward and kisses my forehead. Then a mischievous gleam shines in his eyes and he kisses my throat, right over my pounding pulse. He stands, headed for the door. “I’ll let you know how the meeting goes. Be good, baby. Have fun with Tasha.” As an afterthought, he reminds me, “Don’t forget Declan.”

And then he’s gone.

Declan. My bodyguard. Because I now live in a world where that’s a fucking thing. I text Tasha.

*Me: Freedom! I’m going for coffee at the Hippie Bean. Wanna?*

*Tasha: sure! It will be like an hour or so.*

*Me: I’ll save you a seat.*

*Tasha: awesome*

Clicking through my contacts, I see a new entry. Declan. I send him a quick message and get a brief ‘aye’ in return. That’s going to take some getting used to.

I shower, and dress in skinny jeans and black riding boots that go over my knee. A warm black cowl neck tunic matches

nicely. On a whim I grab my large purse and laptop. I might have time to kill and can start working on a new manuscript.

I stop by Sean's office, but it's empty. The meeting must be happening wherever it is gangsters meet other gangsters. I head out the front door, jumping slightly to find a man standing there.

"Hello, ma'am." He's young, his accent barely a trace. "Declan is waiting for you in the garage." He gestures to an elevator.

"Oh, thank you..."

"Liam, ma'am."

"I'm not old enough to be a ma'am. I hope not at least? Am I?" I'm a little horrified about it.

Liam looks intensely uncomfortable. "I'm not actually supposed to answer that, am I?"

"No, we're good. But call me Rocky, ok?"

He smiles and nods.

In the garage, I find Declan leaning against a black Range Rover.

"What? No limo?" I ask.

Declan smiles. "Just be grateful the boss isn't making you use *The Tank* as your car." He gestures over his shoulder at a SUV with bars over the windows, obvious armor plating, and a fucking snorkel coming from the engine.

"Noted." I hop into the passenger seat. The new car smell hits immediately.

"Is this new?" I eye Declan.

"Aye. Boss wanted you to have a nice car. Still as close to bulletproof as a car can get without becoming *The Tank* though."

I must be staring at him, as he continues, "I've never seen him like this, by the way."

I shake my head to clear the cobwebs out. "Like what?"

“Like he is with you. He’s not a bloody eunuch, but I’ve never seen a woman spend the night with him. The ball, and this,” he gestures around the car, “is something I didn’t expect.”

I’m not sure what to say. Declan doesn’t seem offended by my speechlessness.

“Declan?” I say finally. He makes a little mumble noise so I know he heard me. “I’ve never been like this either. This is...” I think about how to express myself clearly without blubbering. “Different. Powerful.”

Declan nods, seemingly satisfied with my confession.

The *Hippie Bean* is an adorable coffee shop run by actual hippies. They have amazing coffee and great atmosphere. And really good muffins. Probably because the owners are perpetually at least a little stoned.

We take a table in the back, with Declan facing the door. I set up my laptop and connect to the Wi-Fi. A waitress named Star comes to collect our orders. I get a dirty chai and a muffin. Declan declines, so I order him an americano and a muffin, because everyone needs to have their muffins at least once in their lives.

It’s been an hour, and I haven’t heard from Tasha. Odd, but not uncommon for her to get caught up with a client, and today is a work day for her. My phone beeps. It’s from Tasha.

*Check your email and don’t say a word to the Irishman.*

*What the fuck?* I pull open my email and find an unread message I don’t recognize. Opening it, I come face to face with Tasha, tape over her mouth, crying, and lying in the trunk of a car. A new email flashes.

*If you speak, she dies. If you tell anyone, she dies. Leave your phone on the table, and go to the bathroom. Go out the back into the alley. You have two minutes.*

A new photo comes through. Tasha, with a gun pressed to her forehead. *Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck*. I don't know who took her, but a sneaking suspicion tells me that it's my fault. Fuck. Tasha.

I close my laptop and stand up.

Declan looks up at me.

“Bathroom.”

He nods.

I set my phone on the closed laptop. I try not to run. My heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest. I walk past the ladies' room to the fire exit. I notice that the alarm was disconnected, probably courtesy of the pot-smoking hippies. I take a deep breath, which does nothing to calm my nerves. Pushing through the door into the bright light, I come face to face with Boris and a man that looks suspiciously like a cop, a fact that does nothing to reassure me.

“Hello, Rebecca. Or is it Roxanne? It is difficult to keep up.”

“Where is Tasha?”

“Do not worry, Dimitri is keeping her company until you arrive.” His smile is sinister, his black eyes glittering. Something crashes into the back of my head. I fall to my knees before the world goes black.

## CHAPTER 39



I wake up groggy, cold, and with a raging headache. Again. *How many hits to the head does it take for brain damage?* I should really start wearing a helmet.

I look around. I am in a rather bare-looking room. The tile floor is dingy, the grout discolored. An ominous drain is in the middle of the floor. Racks of cleaning supplies line one side of the room. A metal table and more chairs sit on the other. I realize, rather belatedly, that I am currently tied to this chair. Fantastic. A beat-up metal double door with round windows, like what you'd see coming out of a kitchen, is centered in front of me.

A face appears in the window, watching me. Shit.

The doors swing open, hinges creaking. Several large, burly men walk in. I don't recognize any of them, and I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not. I do recognize the familiar pattern of tattoos on the backs of their hands and knuckles. One of them drags a chair over and sets it in front of me. He's being needlessly loud. I assume it's to intimidate me, which is working, but I'll chew off my own fucking arm before I show fear. Yet. I'm sure it's coming. You can only fake it when you're actually terrified for so long before the act comes crashing down.

Boris strides up to the chair.

"Boris," I say with as much cheerfulness as I can muster, "please, sit." I tilt my head at the chair in front of me. The evil look in his eyes darkens slightly. We stare at each other for

several minutes. Finally, he shakes his head slowly, almost disappointedly.

“You have been a very, very bad girl.” His accent is thick, voice raspy but with a disturbing cheerfulness to it. “Dimitri does not appreciate being lied to.”

I keep my mouth shut.

“I must say, you are holding up much better than your friend. Much less tears. I appreciate that. I think a woman’s tears are beautiful, but the noise of crying can become irritating.”

We do some more staring at each other. Boris chuckles.

“Tell me, Roxanne Johnson of the *New York Times*, what do you sound like when you cry?”

This is going poorly. I clear my throat so my voice doesn’t squeak. “What do you want from me?”

“Me? I want to hear you beg me to stop. But that is not an issue for now. Dimitri wishes to speak with you. He has many questions for his former assistant.”

“Where is Tasha?”

Boris chuckles again. “Don’t worry about her right now. The men are making her feel right at home.”

My stomach turns. *Tasha, I’m so sorry.* How did they even find her? It occurs to me I accepted that I was risking my life, but I didn’t expect to be risking hers as well. I hope Sean is able to destroy Dimitri’s network, burn it to the fucking ground.

I picture Sean’s face in my mind. Knowing I’m not going to see him again is devastating. I wonder if I did the right thing by walking out the back door of that coffee shop. I know Sean would move heaven and hell to protect me. But I didn’t have time to explain it to Declan or make a plan. I couldn’t just abandon Tasha, not when I’m the reason she’s in danger to begin with.

I realize belatedly that Boris was saying something to me, which I had tuned completely out. I realize this, as his meaty palm slaps across my face. It stings like a bitch, but doesn’t

cause actual damage. Which is good, since I highly doubt my new captor will carefully stitch my lip back together while I'm sitting on his bathroom counter. Another sharp, stabby feeling pangs in my chest thinking about it.

Boris says something in Russian. One of the brute squad comes toward me, smiling. He slaps a piece of duct tape over my mouth, then cuts my wrists and ankles loose. He brings my wrists to the front and wraps them in another strip of duct tape. Leaning forward, he leers down at me. He says something in Russian, which makes the others laugh. Gripping my hair, he pulls my head back and kisses right over my taped mouth. He whispers something into my ear. I don't speak Russian, but I'm pretty sure I don't want to know what vile threat he just issued.

Then he's shoving me through the swinging metal door.

## CHAPTER 40



Sean

“What do you fucking mean she’s gone!” I roar into my phone, in Gaelic, as I’m standing outside Vincent De Luca’s office. If anyone other than Declan had called I wouldn’t have answered.

“She said she needed to go to the bathroom, left her phone, purse, and laptop sitting on the table. After a few minutes when she didn’t come back I went to check on her. She wasn’t there.” Declan is upset, I can hear it. I don’t think it’s just because he’s afraid I’ll kill him. “Boss, I’m sending you a picture of what’s on her computer screen right now.”

My phone buzzes and I find myself looking at the tearstained, terrified face of Roxanne’s roommate. With a gun pressed to her head.

“Fuck.” I hear Declan curse and put the phone back to my ear. “I’m reading the emails. They took her friend and gave her two minutes to meet them out back or they would kill her.”

*Jesus, baby. Why didn’t you tell Declan?* Then I remember who I’m dealing with. She wouldn’t hesitate to trade her life for her friend’s.

“Get everyone back to the apartment. Call Liam and tell him we need to borrow his brother for a bit, he might be able to get information from the computer that we can’t. I want her fucking found.”



“Aye.” Declan ends the call.

*Fuck.*

I walk back into De Luca’s office. He’s still casually lounged behind his glass-topped desk, but I can tell he senses the change in the mood. “What’s happened?”

All things considered, the meeting had been going well. I confirmed that the cop in question wasn’t on De Luca’s payroll, which means he probably is on Popov’s. De Luca was as outraged by the human trafficking as I thought he would be, and vowed to do everything he could to shut it down.

De Luca wouldn’t piss on me if I was on fire, but it seems we found common ground after all.

“Roxanne was kidnapped.”

De Luca lets a stream of curses in Italian flow. “By who?”

“Well, it wasn’t me, and it wasn’t you, who the fuck do you think has her?” I snap. Then I take a breath and try to calm my racing heart.

De Luca sends out several text messages. “I’ll see what information I can find for you. If I hear anything about her, you will be my first call.” He’s genuine. He’s always protective of the women in his life; apparently he extends that to my woman as well.

“Thank you.” I show myself out.

Patrick is waiting by the car, engine idling already. I call O’Malley, who answers on the first ring.

“The organized crime detective that has been poking around, Reynolds, can you find out where he’s been recently?”

“Oh, maybe. Let me see.”

I hear typing in the background.

“He took a department car. I’m pulling the GPS. Looks like he went to some restaurant in little Italy a few hours ago. Then he drove around the city for a while before turning the car back in.”

Fuck. “Ok, thanks, O’Malley. I’ll be in touch.” I hang up the phone and throw it on the seat. Patrick’s eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror.

“Popov has her,” I tell him.

“Bloody hell. Do we know where?” he asks.

“No.” Fuck. I start to imagine what might be happening to her, and a wave of nausea passes over me. *Stop. Don’t go there.* I call Declan.

“Have the lads start checking on all of Popov’s properties. Look for anything unusual. Maybe we get lucky.”

“Aye, boss.”

*Hang on, baby, I’m coming.*

## CHAPTER 41



*R*ocky

Boris's minion is still dragging me down the hall when I realize I'm in the back of the nightclub. My satisfaction of knowing where I am is short lived. The back door opens, and I'm shoved into the bright light. The cargo hatch on an SUV is open. My new friend shoves me inside and zip ties my wrists to the D-rings in the floor. Then he pulls the cargo cover over and slams the hatch. It's preferable to the trunk of a car, but not by much.

We drive. And drive. And drive. The familiar sounds of the city fade away. Wherever the hell we're going, it's not close. I feel the car slow down and turn, the tires thumping when it leaves the paved road for the gravel crunching underneath us. Finally, the car stops. The door opens and another Russian is standing at the back door. He quickly cuts the zip tie, and throws me over his shoulder.

Wherever we are is beautiful. It's quiet, with birds chirping and a stream nearby. The grass I can see from my upside-down position is green and thick. I can smell the unmistakable aroma of horses, and it sends a pang of sadness through my chest. I suppose this is at least a pretty place to die.

We enter a building. From the wood floor, it seems more residential than commercial. After several long hallways, I'm dropped rather unceremoniously on a hard sofa. He rips the tape off my mouth.

Dimitri is leaning against the wall. Arms crossed over his chest, his dark eyes are radiating hatred. He grinds his teeth, as if he's taking great care to show restraint.

“Where is Tasha?”

He glares at me.

“Where is she?”

He smiles. It's slow, sinister, and makes my skin crawl. “We need to have a little chat.”

“Fuck you, Dimitri.”

He laughs, then shouts in Russian. A few minutes later, the goon comes back, dragging Tasha with him. She's scared, her tears are dried on her cheeks, and her skin is pale.

Dimitri grips her by the hair and wrenches her head back, making her whimper behind the duct tape over her mouth.

“Now you've seen her. If you behave, she stays mostly this way. If you do not, I tell the men to use their imaginations.” He nods his head toward the door and the goon drags a crying Tasha away.

“What the fuck do you want?” I snap.

“I want to make you scream until your voice is too hoarse to speak. I want to make you bleed. But mostly, I want the last thing your Irish boyfriend sees while he bleeds to death on my floor to be me fucking you in front of him.”

“You're overestimating his interest in me.” I try for a casual laugh. “He's not going to notice I'm gone.”

Dimitri smiles. “No? So the Irishmen crawling all over my city are just out for a stroll? They are just suddenly very interested in my businesses? Trust me, he noticed. Do not worry, I made sure to have Boris leave enough clues, even those idiot Irish fuckers will figure it out.”

*Fuck.*

Motion out the window catches my eye. A small caravan of sleek black cars pulls into the driveway. A dozen men pour out of the vehicles and head toward the house.

Dimitri laughs. “I guess I’ll have to wait my turn for you.” He turns and strolls out of the room, leaving me alone with my pounding heart and guilt.

The goon returns and roughly grabs my taped hands. He leads me down the hallway and deposits me in an office. In other circumstances, it would be considered a pleasant room. The rich mahogany furniture screams luxury, and the leather chairs are soft and supple. An unlit fireplace and small sitting area off to one side would probably be cozy during the winter. The entire room is wrapped with floor-to-ceiling windows, showing stunning views of the lush green fields and horses. He shoves me into a chair.

Sitting across from me is a man I’ve never seen before. He’s older than Dimitri and the rest of the goon squad, perhaps in his late forties. His hair is a thick, dark gray. He’s well dressed, and sits quietly regarding me while smoking a cigar. He sips from a glass of clear liquid and ice.

“You are Roxanne Johnson, reporter, and love interest of Sean O’Connell.” His Russian accent is thick. He swirls the liquid in his glass before locking his steely gray eyes with mine. “Do you know who I am?”

I shake my head.

“I am Nikolai Volkov.”

I stare blankly at him. Finally, he seems to understand that I have no fucking clue who he is.

“I am the Pakhan.”

Oh, the boss. Dimitri’s boss. The one Sean thought might give authorization to have Dimitri killed.

I nod my head and keep my eyes down.

“I have traveled from Russia because you and your Irish friends are costing me money. Did you not think there would be consequences for interfering in our business for so long? Destroying warehouses? Harassing my soldiers? Did you think this would be unpunished?” He drums his fingers on the shiny wood desk. “The Irish have been a thorn in my side for years, but do you want to explain to me why he is suddenly so

interested in my shipping? Why my port inspector has gone missing?”

I take a minute to consider my options. Then I realize I have no options, I’m going to die, and with any luck they kill me before I can be used against Sean.

“Because Sean O’Connell is a good man who objects to human trafficking and the dead girls that keep washing up on the shore.”

The drumming fingers stop. His eyes narrow briefly before his face returns to his neutral expressionless gaze. He stares at me for a while. I’m not entirely sure what he’s trying to accomplish. I’m already pissed off and scared out of my fucking mind.

“What dead girls would those be?”

“I assume they were live girls when you shoved them into that box and left them to starve to death. Surely they appeared on a spreadsheet somewhere.” I let a little more sarcasm and disdain seep into my voice. “Twenty-five shipped from Ukraine, received twenty-three alive. Tossed two into the dumpster like garbage. End of report.” I’m playing with fire, and I know it. But I sure as hell don’t want Dimitri to kill me, or worse, keep me alive. I’ll take my chances that I piss Volkov off enough to shoot me outright. *Fuck. What about Tasha?*

Volkov goes back to swirling his drink and scrutinizing me. I lean back in the chair and casually cross one leg over the other. It’s a farce. I’m about one more angry Russian away from peeing my pants. When his eyes make another rotation from contemplating his drink to looking at me, I see it. A tiny, brief flash of doubt.

“You don’t know what Dimitri has been up to, do you?” It’s a leap, but a reasonable one.

“By all means, child, enlighten me.” He gives a gentle wave of his hands, as if to say the floor is mine.

I shake my head. “I’d love to, but I’ll need something from you first.”

He glares. “You’re not in any position to make demands.”

I shrug. “Looks like I am.”

We go back to staring at each other for a while. Finally, he gives a curt nod.

“Tasha goes free. I want one of your men, not Dimitri’s, to take her to Sean. When I get a call from him or one of his men, that she’s safe, I will tell you everything I know.”

“What motivation will I have to keep you alive after that?” he muses. The drumming on the desktop has resumed.

“None.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You don’t care if you live or die, child?”

I shake my head. “I care very much. But I care about other things more.” My voice squeaks slightly at the end. I blink rapidly and look out the window, waiting for the tears to subside.

More drumming. More staring.

Finally, he shouts in Russian. The goon appears, listens to a spell of rapid fire Russian, and leaves. A few minutes later, I see Tasha being escorted into one of the sedans that arrived earlier.

I turn my attention back to Volkov.

“Now, we wait,” he says. He pulls a bottle of vodka out from a liquor cabinet. He fills his glass, tosses it back, then pours me a glass over ice. Reasonably sure that it’s not likely to be poisoned, and absolutely fucking positive I don’t want to die sober, I toss it back, then hold the glass out for a refill. This one I sip, my duct-taped hands making it a bit of a ridiculous show each time I raise the glass for a drink. Watching me, Volkov finally comes around the desk and peels the tape off.

“Thank you,” I tell him honestly.

We sit in uneasy silence, sipping vodka and watching the horses frolic. Then the phone rings. He answers in Russian, before putting it on speaker and placing it on the desk.

“Roxanne?” I recognize the thick accent. *Declan.*

“I’m here. Is Tasha ok?”

“Aye, she’s in one piece. Worried about you.”

“I’ll be ok. Declan?”

“Aye?”

“Will you tell Sean I love him?”

Declan doesn’t respond for several long seconds. It might as well be hours. “Tell him yourself.”

I sniffle. My voice squeaks. I don’t care. “Please, Declan.”

Another pause. “Aye, lass, I will.”

Volkov ends the call. “Now, speak.”

So I do. Every moment, from the beginning, minus most of the details about Sean, Tasha, and Pierre. At least an hour and one more vodka later, I’m done. He regards me for a while.

“You wouldn’t happen to have any proof, would you?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, really?” He makes an exaggerated show of looking me up and down, as if to say “*Where, exactly?*”

“Yes. All I need is a computer. It’s in my cloud.”

He shouts in Russian. A young man comes in with a laptop. “You will tell him. He will access it. If you lie or try to trick him, he will know. Then I’ll give you back to Dimitri.”

I nod. I give the young Russian my username and password, as well as the address to the Dropbox. He hands the computer over to Volkov and leaves. For the next several minutes, I’m silent while he reads over my notes and photos. He begins to ask clarifying questions, which I answer. He doesn’t comment on the obviously made up source names. My real sources will be locked away forever in my brain.

He shouts in Russian again.

Dimitri appears. My blood runs cold.



*Fuck.* I swallow. It does nothing to relieve the dryness in my mouth.

“You have been selling women. You have been putting the organization at increased risk, and you did it without authorization. You’ve also not shared in the profits, entered a partnership with an unstable street gang, and attracted the attention of police and the other families. Your side project has negatively affected our primary goals.”

Dimitri seethes. “This lying Irish whore isn’t reliable. Don’t trust a thing she says.”

Volkov casually walks around to the front of the desk, his vodka loosely in his left hand. He leans against the desk, the picture of relaxation.

Dimitri is yelling in Russian and gesturing wildly.

*Lost your cool, buddy.* I can see that Volkov sees it too. I hear Boris’s name mentioned. Is he trying to pass the blame?

“You know, Dimitri, I was always so shocked when a man who had been as loyal as your father turned out to be a traitor to the organization. What, exactly, would I find out if I sat down with Detective Reynolds for a little chat?”

I see the briefest flash of fear in Dimitri’s black eyes. It’s fleeting, but it’s there. I see the nervous swallow, the sweat gathering on his forehead. I look back to Volkov; he might as well be carved from stone for all the emotion he shows.

Then all hell breaks loose. Dimitri pulls a gun.

Before he can even get it leveled at Volkov, a dark red stain is spreading across his chest. For some reason, my brain doesn’t actually register the sound of the gunshot until after I see the effect. Volkov stands there, his vodka still in his *left* hand, and his gun in his right.

“Holy shit,” I blurt.

He gives me an incredulous look. “That’s not the reaction I expected from a woman.”

“Probably brain damage setting in. You people keep hitting me over the head.”

He laughs. Setting his gun on the desk between us, he holds out his glass of vodka to me. Gratefully I step closer to reach for it.

The door slams open, and Boris bursts through, yelling in Russian and holding a gun, which he points in our direction.

I don't think. I just react. Instead of grabbing the vodka, I drop my hand to the gun. I haven't fired a gun since I left Texas. But I am a born and raised Texas girl.

I don't fucking miss.

Volkov looks at a very dead Boris, then at me. I set the gun back down, return to my sofa, and flop down.

"Nice shot."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

I lose track of time. I'm intently staring at the ceiling. Some of Volkov's men cycle through, presumably taking orders from the man himself. A phone rings.

"Da?" Volkov answers. He gives a low chuckle. "Da." I hear him set the phone down. "We should go to the porch. It seems the entire Irish Republican Army just turned down the drive. I'd hate for your Irishman to shoot up the house looking for you."

## CHAPTER 42



It doesn't take long to find them. Between the details Tasha remembered, the rough geolocation off the brief phone call, and satellite maps, there is only one location that makes sense. A horse farm about an hour out of the city.

*Hold on, baby.*

Fuck. I prayed for the first time in a very long time. *Don't be too late.*

We load up every man we have, and the vast majority of our considerable weapon supply. Declan and a few of the other lads with more military experience handle most of that. I need every man operating at his peak, which includes acknowledging that others might have knowledge about a tactical raid that I don't.

We turn off the main road and drive for fifteen more minutes. I know we aren't being stealthy, with the massive dust cloud kicked up off the gravel road by our convoy of vehicles. In lieu of stealth, we're going as fast as we possibly can.

We round the last turn in the drive and skid to a stop, everyone taking cover behind the armored vehicles.

Roxanne is sitting on the fucking front porch. She's lounged in a cheerful, brightly painted Adirondack chair, drinking from a glass of lemonade. In the chair across from the small shared table sits Nikolai Volkov, the fucking Pakhan himself, looking equally relaxed.

*What the fuck?*

I pop out of the tank, gun raised, and move to Roxanne. She smiles.

“Hi, babe. It’s ok, I’m ok.” She gestures to Volkov. “Have you met Nikolai?”

*Nikolai?*

I’m sure my face is an odd mixture of shock and confusion, because Roxanne continues her reassurance.

“Sean, I’m ok. Put the gun down. We’re all friends here.”

*Friends?*

“You’re not hurt?” I can see some bruises on her cheek that beg to differ.

“No, not really. Boris and Dimitri slapped me around some, but Patrick hits harder.”

“Where are they?” I ask.

“Dead,” Volkov answers. “I killed Dimitri for treason and being a general piece of shit excuse for a man.” He sips his lemonade and nods at Roxanne. “She killed Boris.”

I look at Roxanne. She just shrugs.

Volkov continues, “You have a formidable woman, Sean O’Connell.” He seems genuine. “I’m sure you would prefer to be on your way. When you’ve settled Ms. Johnson, I would appreciate a meeting. I would like to discuss some future business arrangements that would be more mutually beneficial.” He stands, shakes Roxanne’s hand like he’s at a fucking board meeting, and walks inside.

Roxanne stands, and then she’s running into my arms. I carry her bridal style to the tank, knowing Patrick and Declan are covering our exit.

“I love you too, baby.”

She turns her beautiful hazel eyes to face me. She kisses me. “So Declan gave you my message.”

“Aye, he did.”

Her head is tucked against my neck.

I kiss her hair. “Baby, what the hell were you thinking? Why didn’t you tell Declan instead of running off? I would burn the city to the ground for you.”

I feel her snuffle. “I couldn’t risk Tasha’s life. She’s innocent, Sean. She didn’t ask for any of this. I couldn’t let her get hurt because of my choices.”

*Fuck.*

“You can’t do that to me again, baby. I can’t lose you. Promise you’ll ask for my help from now on. These aren’t your battles to fight alone.” I feel her nodding her head against my chest.

“Is Tasha ok?” she whispers.

“Aye. She’s shaken up, but almost as tough as you are.”

“Where are we going?”

“Home. Tasha is there. I was going to set her up in one of the guest rooms for as long as you two want. It’s easier to protect you both if you’re in the same place.”

“Thank you.”

We sit in quiet for several minutes.

“So, would you like to explain to me how you became on a first name basis with the head of the Russian Bratva?”

Roxanne giggles. “My sparkling personality, obviously.”

“Obviously.”

“You were right thinking that there would be no love lost between Dimitri and the rest of the Bratva. Volkov also seemed to have lingering suspicions about his rise to power. It turns out that Dimitri’s whole trafficking business was not sanctioned. Volkov was a bit miffed about that.”

I hear her stomach grumble loudly. I pull out a backpack with first aid supplies, bottled water, and PowerBars. Her eyes light up at the sight of the PowerBars.

“So, anyway, he brings Dimitri in and calls him out. They then argue in Russian for a while. Dimitri pulls out a gun, but before he gets it halfway up, Volkov shoots him.”

I nod. Roxanne takes a minute to down another half of a PowerBar and a bottle of water.

“So, he puts the gun down. Boris storms in with his gun drawn. I take Volkov’s and kill Boris.”

I stare at her. Holy hell. “So you saved the life of the fucking Pakhan?”

“Well, mine too. I’m pretty sure Boris wasn’t going to stop at him.”

I realize with dead certainty that I’m holding my soulmate in my arms. I tell the driver the change of plans in Gaelic. I’m not waiting another fucking day.

Roxanne falls asleep in my arms, which is just about the best thing I’ve ever felt in my life. As we pull over in front of the Cartier store in Manhattan, I kiss her forehead. She blinks and looks around in confusion.

“Where are we?”

“Making a stop. Close your eyes.” I carefully step out, cradling her across my chest.

Patrick and Declan are already inside, as are most of the men. Everyone is still decked in head-to-toe black tactical gear, though the exposed weapons have been left in the vehicles. Declan called ahead and had the store cleared out. Maurice, the owner, stands patiently behind a display cabinet.

I set her on her feet.

“Keep your eyes closed, baby.” I gently kiss her lips. My forehead pressed to hers, I whisper, “You are the most amazing, strong woman I’ve ever met. Please don’t make me go another day without you.”

Because she deserves it, I settle down on both knees, and hold her hands in mine.

“Open your eyes, baby.”

She does. I see the overwhelming sparkle of millions of diamonds and jewels reflected in her eyes as she looks down at me.

“Roxanne Johnson, will you marry me?”

Her mouth opens and closes. Tears well up in her eyes. *Oh, shit.* Then she’s on her knees, knocking me over with the force of her arms wrapping around me. Her kisses are deep and frantic.

“Yes. I’ll marry you, gangster.”

## CHAPTER 43



*R*ocky

The image of Sean on his knees in front of me will be burned into my retinas forever. Rationally, a sane person would not make life-altering decisions with a person they've known for days, on the heels of an emotional day.

But fuck rationality. I knew without a shadow of a doubt the truth in my words when I told Declan to pass that message. I'm not fighting this. Looking into Sean's eyes as he kneels on the jewelry store floor, I know in my soul he feels it too.

The owner, Maurice, is a gem of a man that reminds me of every grandfather I've ever known. He takes great pride in carefully showing me ring after ring, before I finally fall in love with a cushion cut solitaire on a platinum band. Sean finds a matching band covered with intricate Celtic knots. When he slides the ring onto my finger, the men gathered in the store start cheering. Sean kisses me and whisks me back to The Tank.

Sean holds me in his lap the entire way. When we park, he carries me into the elevator and all the way up to the apartment, setting me down only so I can run squealing to Tasha.

She looks like hell. Her normally neatly woven hair is disheveled, her blouse and slacks are dirty and ripped. She has no shoes and the soles of her feet are black. She has a black eye and red, raw marks on her wrists.



But she smiles like she's the happiest person in the world when her eyes meet mine.

"Oh, my god, Rocky!" She hugs me. "I'm so sorry."

I startle a little. "What? Why are you sorry? You only got wrapped up in this because of me."

She shakes her head. "No, I should have known there was something wrong with that detective that showed up."

I hold her face between both of my open palms. "Babe, that is not your fault. None of this is. They took you to get to me. It's my fault."

"What happened? This big Russian dude just loaded me into a car and brought me here."

"I had information he wanted, so I made a deal." I shrug. The light catches on my ring. Tasha doesn't miss it.

"What is that?" she asks, grabbing my hand.

"Oh, ah, so we're getting married." I point at Sean.

Tasha just blinks, looking between us. Then she holds up her hand to Sean. "Please hold." She yanks me into the kitchen.

"Engaged? Is this what you want? You barely know this guy. I've never seen you in a relationship that lasted longer than three months." I can see the genuine concern in her eyes.

"Tasha, I can't explain it. I love him. I just know."

She searches my eyes for several moments before sighing and wrapping me in a hug.

We walk back to Sean. Declan, Patrick, and Liam have gathered.

Tasha's face gets serious. She adopts a power stance, almost managing to look like she wasn't run over by a truck. "Look here, Irish, you take care of her, or I'll kill you."

Sean nods somberly. The guys snicker.

"I'll love her until the day I die, and I'll die to keep her safe." He wraps his arms around me.

Tasha nods. “You better.” She turns and gives me another tight hug. “Congratulations, babe.”

“Thank you!” I wave at her general state. “Do you want a shower?”

“Oh, my god, yes.”

I show her to my former bedroom, which has since finished the crime scene cleanup. The gorgeous bathroom is spotless, the cream carpet is back and another undoubtedly comfortable bed dominates the room. “I’ll leave you some clothes and a towel on the counter.”

Tasha just nods, looking exhausted.

I return several minutes later with a pair of sweats, a t-shirt, and a thick pair of socks. I also take a play from Sean’s book and leave ibuprofen and bottled water on the counter.

Heading to our bedroom, I walk straight for the shower, stripping off my clothes and once again wishing for a biohazard bag. I scrub twice, knocking off the dirt and foul sweat that only comes from being absolutely terrified. I gingerly wash my hair, trying not to disturb the painful lump from being knocked unconscious. What is it with these mafia types and knocking me over the head?

Finishing, I dry off and dress in similar PJs to the clothes I left Tasha, though my shirt I steal out of Sean’s drawer. I comb out my wet hair and walk back to the living room. I find the men in Sean’s office, gathered around the fireplace, each holding a glass of whisky. I detour to the kitchen to grab a beer for myself and return. I plop down on the plush rug in front of Sean’s chair. I lean my head against his leg. He starts rubbing my neck and shoulders absently. I try not to drool on his pants.

“So Popov and his little henchman Boris are both dead?” This comes from Patrick.

“Aye.” Sean swirls his whisky in the glass. I’ve noticed he does that when he’s working something out in his brain.

“Who does that leave in charge of the Bratva?” Declan asks.

Patrick looks at Sean expectantly. Sean looks at me.

“What?” I say.

“Lass, you’ve spent more time with Volkov than the rest of us combined.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know anything about Bratva transfer of power. Popov took over after his father. Does Popov have children?”

Patrick swallows the rest of his whisky. “No, that sadistic bastard would probably kill any woman he knocked up.”

I shudder. “Siblings?”

“None.”

I shrug. “Volkov didn’t mention anything about it. Though admittedly, he killed Dimitri, a few minutes later I killed Boris, and then you came. So we didn’t really talk about it.” I think back to the conversation that he’d had with Dimitri, right before he made his attempt on Volkov. “He was, ah, displeased with Dimitri’s actions. He didn’t like being out of the loop, thought his side project was risky, and didn’t appreciate that the profits weren’t being shared.”

The men seem to ponder what I’ve said for several minutes. Finally, Sean finishes his drink and stands, pulling me up with him.

“Well, Volkov wanted to talk soon. I guess we will have to wait and see for now. Patrick, have the boys keep an eye on the Russians.”

Patrick nods and files out.

Declan stands and clears his throat awkwardly. “I’m sorry, Rocky. I should have realized what was going on.” He looks like a whipped puppy. “Boss, her safety was my responsibility and I failed.”

Sean starts to speak, but I walk over to Declan and hug him. “I take responsibility for my screw-ups, Declan. What happened was a result of my decisions.”

Sean looks from my face to Declan and back. “Well, if you are all sorted out,” Sean scoops me into his arms, “I’m taking my fiancée to bed.”

## CHAPTER 44



*S*ean

I wake up still holding Roxanne in my arms. I'm positive I never want to wake up without her here, safe and warm in my bed. It's been almost a week since she was taken. We've spent most of it in bed. It's fucking perfect.

Roxanne doesn't want Tasha alone in the apartment, so she's staying in the guest bedroom for the time being. We finish eating dinner, and I start the dishes when my phone rings. Patrick.

"Aye?"

"Boss, we've been keeping an eye on the Russians. Well, one of Volkov's men just walked up to the car and knocked on the bloody window. Crazy wanker handed me a bloody business card with Volkov's name and phone number on it. Says 'Call me' like we're all a bunch of teenage girls."

I snort. I can picture Patrick's incredulous face.

"What's the number?" I ask.

"You're calling him?"

"Not sure why you're surprised. We expected to make contact."

Patrick starts to mumble but then reads the number out to me.

"Alright, I'll call you when I've got something."

Roxanne and Tasha look at me expectantly. “Volkov wants to talk.”

Roxanne nods. Tasha pales a bit. I nod to my office and Roxanne follows me.

It takes a few minutes to get my secure phone up and running. Volkov answers on the third ring.

“Good evening, Mr. O’Connell,” he says formally.

I don’t return his cheerful greeting.

“I trust Ms. Johnson and her roommate are both well?”

“What do you want, Volkov?” I ask him.

“Oh, a bit testy for a newly engaged man aren’t you? Regardless, I’d like to set up a meeting. To discuss the mob and the Bratva and the changes in leadership following Dimitri’s abdication.”

“Abdication?” I say with incredulity.

“Abdication.” Volkov sounds certain.

“Fine, where?”

“I’ll allow you to pick the location.” Trusting chap. “Though,” he continues, “I would appreciate if you brought your lovely fiancée with you.” I start to say over my dead body, but one look at Roxanne’s face and I know she wants to be there.

“Fine. I’ll be in touch.” I hang up the phone.

Roxanne is calm and her posture relaxed. “What do you think he wants?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why do you think he wants me there?”

“Maybe he feels indebted to you for solving his problems for him. Maybe he wants to shoot me and take you with him. I don’t fucking know.” I scrub my hands over my face and groan.

My phone rings. It’s Liam.

“Boss, one of Volkov’s men just showed up at the front door with a fucking engagement present for you. And a note. Haven’t read the note. Did go through the box, it’s clean.”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

Roxanne gives me a confused look.

“Send it up.”

“Send what up?” she asks.

“Volkov’s engagement gift.”

“Oh. He works fast.”

One of the boys appears with an ornate gift box and a gilded gift card. I hand the box to Roxanne to open. She pulls out a polished wooden case. Nestled inside a bed of dark blue velvet is a stunning Fabergé egg. I snort. “How very Russian of him.”

Roxanne turns the egg slowly in her hands, the light reflecting off the gemstones and casting sparkling reflections across her stunned face. “This is worth a small fortune, isn’t it?”

“Knowing Volkov, that egg is probably one of the Romanov Imperial eggs. It’s probably not a small fortune.”

She whistles and sets the egg back inside its case. She nods at the card I’m holding.

“Volkov sends his best wishes for our wedding and future children.”

Roxanne blushes. “When are we meeting with him?”

I’ve pondered that myself. “We have a safehouse in the warehouse district. I’ll set it up there for tomorrow. I’ll call the fucker an hour before the meet to tell him where.”

Roxanne nods. We head back out to the main room and settle in for a movie, Roxanne in my lap and Tasha sprawled across the other sofa. It’s amazing how quickly I grew accustomed to having not one but two women in my apartment. I know Roxanne loves having her here, and I love their easygoing camaraderie. It’s good for her to have her support network close. This life isn’t for the faint of heart.

The next morning, Patrick and Declan are back in my office. We've set up the safehouse and coordinated multiple evacuation routes. We are as prepared as we are going to get. I call Volkov.

"Mr. O'Connell," he says by way of greeting.

I give him the address. "Noon today."

"Excellent. We have much to discuss." He hangs up.

Roxanne strolls into my office shortly after. "When is it?"

"Noon. Are you sure you want to be there?" Part of me hopes she declines. It would be easier to keep her safe locked in the penthouse.

She snorts. "No fucking way am I sitting this out."

I sigh. It would be easier, but it wouldn't be her. This woman will be the cause of my ulcer. Maybe I'll name it after her.

I pull a box from the drawer. She watches me retrieve a boring braided bracelet with a small wood heart.

"Your taste in jewelry is slipping, dear fiancé." She giggles.

"But my taste in tracking devices isn't. It's less likely to get stolen if it looks like a cheap souvenir store castoff."

She gives me a puzzled look.

I sigh. "Roxanne, I can't lose you."

I see tears welling up in her eyes when she nods. Gently, I put the band around her delicate ankle and crimp the connection with a pair of pliers.

The safehouse is a nondescript warehouse fortified with bulletproof glass and Kevlar-reinforced wall panels, as well as a hidden tunnel exit behind a large shelf off the office. There are beds, a bathroom, a small kitchen stocked with nonperishable food, and a small medical care area.

Volkov pulls up at noon precisely. He arrives with three others. One stays at their car while Volkov and his minions go through the time-consuming process of removing their weapons,

followed by an enthusiastic pat down by the men. When everyone is satisfied, they enter the living room.

Volkov smiles warmly at Roxanne, which makes my blood boil.

“Ms. Johnson, lovely to see you again. Let me congratulate you in person for your upcoming nuptials.” He gives her a brief handshake before turning to me. “Mr. O’Connell, thank you for meeting with me.”

I give him a small grunt in response.

He chuckles. “The reason I asked to meet with you both is to discuss the changes to our organization given the recent restructuring, locally.” He pauses for dramatic effect. “Before I forget my manners, allow me to introduce Yuri Petrovich, my second in command.” He nods to a behemoth of a man standing behind him. The behemoth inclines his chin slightly but otherwise doesn’t react. Volkov continues, “And this is Mikail, my son.” The younger man steps forward. Not as large as the behemoth, he’s not small by any stretch of the mind. His dark hair and lashes frame a familiar set of intelligent steel gray eyes. Handshakes are exchanged before everyone sits.

“Mikail is taking over the New York section of the organization. This business with Dimitri has shown that clearly Moscow needs to be more involved.”

Volkov looks briefly at Roxanne. “I called you both today because I want to establish a truce between our organizations. You would be well within your rights to seek revenge over the ordeal that your fiancée experienced, but I would like to make some assurances.”

He turns his attention to Roxanne. “Ms. Johnson. I want to assure you that I was unaware of the human trafficking that has been conducted under Dimitri’s leadership. This has stopped, and will not restart. Regrettably, we did find several more girls in a warehouse here in NYC. I have provided them medical care and offered to send them wherever they wish to go. Most chose to go home, though I do have several who want to stay in the US. I understand that your good friend



Tasha works with refugees and thought perhaps she would be able to assist in this?"

Roxanne smiles. "Yes, that's right up her alley."

Mikail looks at me. "Mr. O'Connell. I realize the betrayal of my predecessor is too recent to discuss an alliance, but I would like to assure you that the Bratva wishes to have no conflict with your organization. In the future, I would like to meet again to discuss the potential for a more formalized arrangement that is mutually beneficial to both parties."

I nod. "I would be interested in exploring this possibility."

"Excellent," says Volkov. "I won't take up any more of your time today. Thank you for meeting me. Please contact me at the same number at any time." He turns to Roxanne again. "Ms. Johnson, my organization owes you a great deal, as do I."

Roxanne nods. The Russians file out.

"You know," Roxanne says, "this was a lot of prep work for a five-minute meeting."

I laugh. "Well, we can't exactly email each other."

The ride back is relaxed. Roxanne sits next to me, her head on my shoulder.

"You do realize that you accomplished everything you set out to do, right?" I ask her.

She smiles. "Not exactly the way I planned on it. But beggars can't be choosers."

"What would Nicole think?"

She stills for a minute before looking at me. "I'm not sure she would approve of the methods, but she'd sure as hell be happy with the results."

The End

# AFTERWORD

Stormy Night Publications would like to thank you for your interest in our books.

If you liked this book (or even if you didn't), we would really appreciate you leaving a review on the site where you purchased it. Reviews provide useful feedback for us and our authors, and this feedback (both positive comments and constructive criticism) allows us to work even harder to make sure we provide the content our customers want to read.

If you would like to check out more books from Stormy Night Publications, if you want to learn more about our company, or if you would like to join our mailing list, please visit our website at:

<http://www.stormynightpublications.com>