



Of all the juice joints he had to bust, this one had to be hers...

In the world of illegal speakeasies, Kate Kirkland has her life running smoother than a Model T. Maybe moving the family bar into the basement wasn't the best choice for her alcoholic brother, but Kate's making them a living—until a local gangster tries to expand his territory. Right into her bar.

Luckily Micah Trent, her handsome and too-suave bootlegger, is ready and willing to offer her a helping hand. If Kate can bring herself to accept it. Since sharing one sensual dance to seal their deal, she can't ignore the delectably wicked way he makes her feel.

Micah is keeping secrets of his own. He's a Prohibition Agent, sworn to shut down the gin mills and distilleries that keep illegal booze flowing. Kate's speakeasy is next on his list—right after he uses her as bait to catch the gangster hunting her.

But even if Micah and Kate can maneuver their way through the gangsters' dangerous underworld, will their love survive the trial by fire?

Warning: This title contains steamy hot sex, big fancy guns that result in just a little bit of brains on the floor, and enough booze to float an armada.

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Jazz Baby
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Jazz Baby

Lorelie Brown

Dedication

To Steven, my husband, first and always. Quite simply, I love you.

To Andi, for enduring my hand wringing and hair pulling.

To the Circle Girls, particularly Carrie Lofty, Patti Ann Colt, and Kelly McCrady. Thanks for your invaluable help in reading innumerable drafts.

Chapter One

Micah Trent rolled up his shirtsleeves. Halfway down the narrow block, housed in a squat building, their target had darkened windows and a plain wooden door. No sign proclaimed it the Wet Your Whistle, but their intelligence should be good. A trio of rough-hewn workers spilled out, walking wobbly. Drunk from all appearances, and in public. One started singing “Danny Boy” and his companions merely slapped him on the back, sending him stumbling into a street lamp.

Pulling back around the corner, Micah cocked a brow at Jacob Sterling. “You want to tell me why we’re bothering with a lousy little joint like this?”

“Would if I could, hot shot.”

“I’m serious. We’re after bigger fish. We don’t have time to chase after a guppy like this place. Every minute we waste here is one we could be chasing one of the mob families.”

Jake only shrugged and tucked his thumbs in his suspenders. “You don’t have to tell me twice. We go where we’re ordered. Maybe the owner didn’t pay his protection money.”

“Not funny,” Micah gritted.

“But true.”

The real malarkey was, it could be true. Micah glanced at the four uniformed officers who were supposed to be his and Jake’s back up. They stared back with thinly veiled sneers of dislike. Another team waited at the other end of the block, along with Murphy and Edwards, two more Prohibition Bureau Agents. Micah had chosen them because they were a pair of the handful of agents who were neither bribable nor among the bumbling idiots who’d earned their positions by virtue of having a well-placed father or uncle.

The Boston cops didn’t like the Prohibition Agency, didn’t see the point, and especially despised being forced to help out. The same dislike echoed in the faces of local cops in every one of the big cities he and Jake bounced around.

He fixed Sergeant Rael, the leader of the local Boston uniforms, with the no-nonsense gaze that had served him well in situations like these before. “You know what the signal is, right?”

“Sure we know it,” Rael smirked. Left unspoken was the fact that they’d like to ignore it. He fingered a fat brass uniform button. “That red flag of your partner’s there. Though we were thinking maybe it should be white. Seems a bit more fitting.”

“Jake, what did I do to the last local who gave us trouble?” He didn’t take his eyes off the Sergeant.

“Wasn’t pretty. Didn’t the doctors say he’d never have children?” With an instinct born of years of partnership, Jake played along without a bobble.

“Now, now, that’s an exaggeration.” He flashed his biggest, most charming smile, the same one he’d used the night before when he’d tried to talk the head Prohibition Agent for the region out of this raid. Sergeant Raels, however, went gratifyingly pale. “They said he *might* never have children. Big difference.”

“The difference that kept your job, if I remember right.” Jake leaned his heavy shoulders against a brick wall.

“I find I’ve been getting a little bored lately in this line of work. Might be time for a change.”

“If you say so.”

“But you won’t force me to make that choice, will you, Sergeant Raels? You’ll be quite observant and see the signal, right?”

“No, sir.” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed repeatedly. “That is, yes, sir. We’ll see it.”

With a tip of his chin, Jake signaled to step away, out of earshot, and Micah followed. “You’re not making us any friends,” his partner said.

“I’m not sure that I care. And at any rate, they’ll get the job done now. We can rely on them.”

“At least until they get away long enough to realize we ain’t got any real authority over them.”

Another uncomfortable truth. Federal Agents were on their own unless a local chief felt like lending support out of the goodness of his heart. Or because the usual bribes had been forgotten. Prohibition Agents enforced the Volstead Act, the federal law that propped up the Eighteenth Amendment. Local chiefs only had to be concerned with state laws, which were sometimes much more lax than the Volstead Act.

“How do I look?” he asked, in an attempt to deflect Jake’s line of conversation. “Will I do?”

The Wet Your Whistle catered to the dockworkers that populated the area, so they both wore work pants with homemade, plain shirts and exposed suspenders. Jake eyed him and gave a snort of disbelief. On the shorter side, and with muscles that came from a hard life, Jake looked right at home in his clothes.

“Be damned if I know how you manage to look like some high flying sheik in a get up like that.” He reached out and roughly tousled Micah’s hair. “I suppose that’ll do. Try not to look so sharp.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll tuck my brain away in my shoe.”

“Wise ass.”

“You know it.” With one more warning glance at the uniformed officers, Micah and Jacob ambled off down the street and entered the Wet Your Whistle as casually as if they did it every day at quitting time.

All conversation dribbled to a halt like the last dregs from a keg of beer, as the pair stood in the doorway and looked around. The bar was a small, square room jam packed with dark wood tables and chairs. There wasn’t much in the way of decoration, just a few fading pictures of prizefighters and the tricolor flag of Ireland tacked up behind the bar, which covered the left wall. Most of the tables were filled with workers, except for one conveniently by the front door. They’d pretend to move to sit there, while

really making an exit. Gin joint owners tended to get unreasonably anxious if a man bought a pint and then headed immediately for the door. Micah made a tiny gesture toward it and was comforted to know Jake would understand him implicitly. One of the benefits of working together for five years.

As they made their way to the bar, men watched with distrust in their eyes, their hands wrapped around earthenware mugs. The air wound thick with the dual tangs of hard-working men and beer. After years in his job, Micah could pick out the specific smell of alcohol no matter what it was mixed with.

Behind the bar were two people, a man and a woman. The man eyed them with the same straight-faced distrust as the rest of the patrons, while the woman wore an open smile. Probably an easier mark, she sat on a stool, knitting a cream-colored bit of fluff.

Micah sidled up to the bar in front of the man. "Set us up, will ya, mate?"

The man stretched his lips into what was supposed to be a smile and ran a hand over his pale, thinning hair. "Would that be tea or coffee?"

"Ah now, you know we need something stronger than that after a long day."

"Then it'll be coffee."

"Bobby MacAfee said this was the place to come to." Bobby was the snitch who sang on the Wet Your Whistle after being taken up on hijacking charges, but this pair wouldn't know that. Micah winked at the lady, who flushed red and dropped a stitch. "Good drink and even better company."

"Coffee or tea?"

"Relax, Willie," said the woman. "They seem like a good sort to me."

"Margie, I don't know them from Adam," replied Willie, in a cranky grumble.

"We'll never be building this place up if you don't relax."

A heavy stone lodged in Micah's gut. These two were the ones who seemed like a good sort. He sure didn't feel like a good anything, unless it was a goodly asshole. Micah thrived on the prospect of going after the big-time bootleggers and the mobs that used alcohol to fuel their larger criminal ventures. Taking out the mom and pop establishments made him feel about an inch tall. He ought to be talking a mile a minute, convincing Willie to sell him some booze. It was his job, his responsibility in their partnership, while Jake made sure no one snuck up behind them.

He couldn't force out a single word.

Instead, Willie caved under his wife's raised eyebrows and gentle smile. Grumbling under his breath, he fumbled around under the bar and produced two mugs. He set them down hard on the counter and they sloshed, spilling amber beer on the nicked and scarred surface. Micah wanted to sigh. Instead, he forced a congenial smile.

"Thanks, bub." Jake picked up a mug, and then made his way to the empty table they'd spotted. But instead of sitting to enjoy his drink, Jake yanked a weighted scarf from his back pocket, opened the door

and tossed it out. It arched slowly over the dimmed street then fluttered to the ground. Willie, Margie, and the patrons all watched it, dumbfounded.

“What the hell?” Willie muttered.

“Sorry my good man.” Micah vaulted the bar, even as he yanked his badge out of a back pocket. “This is a raid.”

Willie tried to run, making for the end of the bar and Margie, but Micah hooked a foot around the man’s ankle and slung an arm around his shoulders. At the same time, he pinned Willie’s wrist to his back and lowered the man as gently as he could. Still, he went down like a felled oak, slamming against the plain wood floor with a resounding thunk.

The stupefaction snapped and chaos reigned. Men made for the back exits, yelling and pushing as they tried to escape. Chairs and tables crashed to the floor and earthenware shattered. Margie screamed and cringed on her stool, clapping her hands to her ears as agents and officers poured through the front door.

“Lemme go, mister. I wasn’t bothering no one. I run a quiet place,” Willie moaned, his voice smothered in the floor.

“You’ll be charged with illegally selling alcohol in violation of the Volstead Act.”

“They’d have all found another place to drink. I was just trying to make a good life for Margie and me. I don’t sell nothing but beer and a little watered rum.”

Micah sighed and slapped a pair of cuffs on Willie. Above their heads, the police sounded like they were cracking skulls. No punishment could be applied to the drinkers, but at raids, they ran like rats from a sinking ship and got rowdy while they were at it. “It’s still against the law.”

Edwards appeared at the open end of the bar. Tall and skinny, with sallow skin, the man had on his customary unpleasant expression. “Not much here. A few barrels of beer, a couple cases of liquor in a store room.”

Micah did a quick appraisal of the shelf to his right as he rose to his feet. He levered Willie up to a standing position. “Even less up here.”

“Not worth our time,” Edwards complained.

“Orders are orders,” he said as he led Willie around the counter and through the room. “You know what to do.”

Margie was already outside, sitting on the curb, and Micah gestured for Willie to sit next to her. “You’re both under arrest and this place is gonna be padlocked.”

“I just wanted a good life for us.” Willie hunched over his sobbing wife as she nestled into his shoulder. “Weren’t no one hurt.”

“You broke the law,” Micah said, but he found he couldn’t look directly at the couple.

Instead, he watched Edwards direct the uniforms in the alcohol disposal. Two officers hatched open the barrels of beer, which foamed and spewed their contents into the street. Edwards cracked bottles of rum into the gutter, and they broke in a crystalline chorus singing about the uselessness of it all.

A raid on one of the big mobs was something he could get behind. Mob bosses were prime example of ruthless lawlessness, ordering killings the same way some men ordered a steak for dinner.

But neither Micah nor Jake had been able to find an edge in on one of the carefully guarded men in months, not since their last big sting operation in St. Louis. Instead they were forced into these pointless, small-time raids that barely made a dent in the flow of alcohol through America's streets.

"Hey, wait!" Willie called, as Micah started to walk away. "What if I had some information?"

Micah pivoted on his heel and stalked back to the watery-eyed couple. "About who?"

"Johnny Vittorelli. Down in New York. Poppa Paulo's son." Willie sang like a canary, but it didn't look comfortable on him. His mouth screwed up into a flat line and his eyes darted every which way.

Johnny Vittorelli wouldn't be much of a prize on his own. But if they could use him to get to his big-time mobster father, that was a whole new ballgame. "Start talking. We'll see what kind of a deal your information's worth."

Chapter Two

“Patrick! Patrick, are you coming downstairs tonight?” Kate Kirkland knocked briskly on her brother’s bedroom door, but got no answer. She muttered under her breath the kind of foul curse that would have gotten her knuckles slapped back when she went to parochial school. Saul Rubio was due downstairs in only fifteen minutes, which didn’t leave her long to update her brother on the latest business about their speakeasy, The Kirk.

“Come on,” she said as she gave another quick pound to the solid oak. Eventually she had to give up. She smoothed down her chin-length bob and gave a short tug to her waistline to straighten the skirt of her dress. The four-inch fringe of beads chattered lightly as she moved down the stairs. Appearances mattered when you were a club owner fighting for position in the halfway world of New York speakeasies and gin joints.

The Kirk was doing well, drawing a steady stream of clientele based on a solid reputation of serving good hooch in an up-and-coming atmosphere. Mostly they had to rely on word of mouth and circuitous reviews that could only hint around the truth, since the Federal Prohibition laws made the club illegal. Still, Kate was luckier than most of the bar owners throughout the country, since New York authorities had repealed the state laws that had once enforced the Eighteenth Amendment.

“Well you look berries tonight, sister.”

Kate gasped and clapped a hand to her chest. “Patrick!”

Through the open sitting room door, she saw him lounging across the horsehair sofa, a thick book open across his legs. His complexion was paler than usual, and his hair was in disarray, the dark strands fanning over his forehead, but otherwise he looked better than he had in a while.

“What do you mean?” she asked, glancing down at her dress, which happened to be one of her favorites. With gathered shoulders, it didn’t display much of her non-existent cleavage, but the rear more than made up for it. It plunged halfway down her back, showing off sleek lines she was rather proud of. Thank God she didn’t have to wear the waist-pinching corsets of her mother’s generation. “I always dress to go down to The Kirk.”

“I know. I was paying you a compliment.”

“Oh. Thanks.” She’d not recognized it since Patrick hadn’t been aware of much outside himself in a long while. “Will you be coming down tonight? You can come meet Saul with me.”

“Meet with our bootlegger? Why should I?” He thumbed a page with indolent slowness. “You have everything under control. You always do.”

“It might be worth your interest. Saul’s retiring. Tonight I’m meeting the men he’s handing over his operation to.”

“I assume you had them investigated?” Without even looking up from the book, Patrick reached for a glass she hadn’t noticed sitting on the end table. It was filled nearly to the brim with amber liquid. Whiskey, knowing Patrick. She was fairly astounded she hadn’t noticed when she’d first walked in. Normally, when she saw her brother, she looked immediately for the nearby liquor. He took a long swallow without even flinching.

“Of course,” she answered, a leaden weight taking up residence in her throat. He must have gotten a late start on his night. He seemed almost sober, still. Certainly she’d been fooled. “They’re out of Boston. Up and comers, but supposedly they know their business. And Saul says he’s turning everything over to them, including his contacts.”

“No reason to get all balled up then. You go, take care of it.” A ghost of his old smile graced his gaunt face when he looked up at her. “I’ve got a big night planned.”

“Do you?”

“Hm. Me and Tolstoy. We’re going to be miserable together.” He lifted the big book. His words were light, and he still smiled, but something dark lived behind his eyes.

“Sure,” she said, because really, what else was there? She and Patrick had said it all before, a hundred different ways. She didn’t think their life was that bad. He did. End of story.

“Hey, sis.”

Kate paused with one foot over the threshold into the foyer and looked back over her shoulder. “Yeah?”

“How are we sitting lately?”

“Fine, I guess. Business is good. Been picking up ever since we got that write up in *New York Magazine*.” When Sally Short had come in the first time, Kate had been as nervous as if the blonde had an entourage of Prohibition Agents with her. But when the review finally appeared, it said only good things about the “social” club on Fifty-Fourth Street, and absolutely raved about Susie Nichols, The Kirk’s resident songstress.

“Do you think...” Patrick picked up his glass from the table beside him and took a bracing swallow. “I was thinking we could open a second bar.”

“Is that right?” She watched dully as he set the glass down again.

“Yeah. A smaller, quieter place.” He looked at his book, his glass. The narrow windows looking out on the busy New York street. Anywhere but at her. “Where...I don’t know, maybe where a more refined crowd could gather.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the crowds The Kirk draws.” She bristled automatically. “Average citizens with a little ready cash. That’s a good thing, for us.”

“No, I didn’t mean that.” He ran a slender finger around the cut crystal edge of his glass, then picked it up for another drink. “I mean a place where people can discuss literature. Quieter.”

“Oh. Well. I’m not sure.” She didn’t want to crush the first flash of interest he’d shown in years, but she wasn’t sure it was possible to open a second club at this point. Business had been picking up steadily as the buzz about The Kirk and Susie grew, but their cash flow couldn’t handle it. “How about you come down with me for this meeting and we’ll go over the books afterwards?”

“Maybe another time.” He took another drink of his whiskey. “It was a silly idea, anyhow.”

“No, it’s a good idea. I’m just not sure how we’d swing it.”

“It’s okay. You go on now.” He shot her a sardonic smirk. “Wouldn’t want to be late, would you?”

He’d obviously dismissed her, returning his interest to his book. She stood for a moment, wanting desperately to say something else. It was hard to know which way to step. With Patrick, the wrong word could easily cause a firestorm of either rage or despair. “I’ll keep an eye out for you anyhow,” she finally said, before letting herself out the front door.

Slowly, she went down the stoop, then made an immediate right through the waist-high gate in the wrought iron fence. At the bottom of another short flight of stairs stood the plain brown door of The Kirk, brass street numbers the only identifying marks. She knocked briskly, and the narrow peep hole slid open as Lucas Petry, one of her two bouncers, identified her. Naturally he unlocked and opened the door promptly, but if she’d been a regular customer it might have taken longer as he evaluated her. Anyone who didn’t set off Lucas’s excellent nose for coppers or who was lucky enough to carry The Kirk’s calling card would be permitted entry.

A phalanx of men wearing the black wool uniforms of the New York Police would cause Lucas to jump for the warning signal, which would flash lights over the bar so Hank Levi could trigger the shelves to dump. The small portion of their inventory kept behind the bar would crash through drains into the sewer but it would be worth it to hold off a padlocking, the usual punishment for a place caught selling hooch.

“Hey, Lucas, how’s it going so far?”

“Pretty quiet.” His thick shoulders shrugged. “It’s early though.”

“Saul here yet?”

“Naw, ain’t seen him.”

“Good.” She flashed him a quick smile. Lucas had been around as long as she could remember, working for her father at The Kirk’s original location. “He should be here any minute.”

“I’ll send him right in.”

“Attaboy.” She crossed the few steps to the interior door, which Nick had opened as soon as the street door had been closed and locked. The two doors were never open at the same time. Hopefully any

Prohibition Agents could be delayed in the entryway before gaining access to the main bar. “Evening, Nick.”

“Evening, Kate.”

She patted him on the shoulder as she crossed the threshold and took a deep breath. The sweet smell of cologne and perfume blended with an underlying tang of alcohol and cigarette smoke. The Kirk. Her baby. Well, it was probably her father’s baby in all honesty, but she’d adopted it as her own after he was gone.

She slipped through the tables with a few easy greetings to some of the patrons, ensuring everything was in order. Most of them were in a mellow mood, enjoying Orinthal’s soft tinkling on the piano. Susie Nichols was nowhere in sight, which meant she was likely in the dressing room preparing to take the stage once the place started to fill up.

Hank caught her eye from behind the long bar and tipped his head toward the entrance. Saul stood there, along with two men. His replacements, she supposed.

One was short, and almost as wide as he was tall. His solid stance said it was probably all muscle. He wore a nice grey suit that was sadly rumpled, and his hair was tousled over a broad forehead that slanted down to a nose that had been broken at least once. Based on the word she’d gotten from the streets, he was Jacob Sterling. The brawn of the duo.

To his right stood the brains. Tall and elegant, Micah Trent’s pose was studiously casual. She couldn’t quite see the color of his eyes, but he had high, slashing cheekbones and a refined mouth. A stylish pinstriped suit jacket was pushed open by the hands in his pockets, just barely exposing a leather holster and a wooden gun-butt along his left side. A frown puckered her mouth. Guns were necessary in their world. Kate had a couple of her own, placed strategically through The Kirk. That didn’t mean she wanted them paraded unnecessarily before her customers.

Approaching the trio, she held out her hand to Saul first. An older man, with short-cropped salt and pepper curls and a physique just beginning to turn to fat, he took it with a wan smile.

“Hello, Kate,” he greeted.

“How’s it going, Saul?”

“As well as can be.” A quick grimace flittered across his round face. “It’s hell, turning everything over.”

“Then why are you?” she gently chided as she clasped his warm, sweaty hand in both of hers.

“Oh, you know.” He glanced over his shoulder at Trent. “The wife’s been after me. She worries.”

“Then it’s good of you to give her a rest.”

“Yeah. Yeah, a rest.” He turned to the pair behind him. “Kate Kirkland, this is Micah Trent and Jake Sterling. Good men.”

“Pleased to meet ya.” Sterling shook her hand with a perfunctory pump, then went back to watching the club. Appraising, Kate thought with a measure of distaste. Well, she was under no obligation to employ these men as The Kirk’s bootleggers, merely give them the benefit of the doubt in respect to Saul’s good service.

“Likewise,” she said.

“Miss Kirkland, I’m quite pleased to make your acquaintance.” Trent had a smile that was a weapon. Sharp-edged enough to get attention, with a wicked glint that made a long-neglected part of her sit up and beg for attention.

“I hope you’re able to say the same after we conclude our negotiations.” She placed her hand in Trent’s and nearly jolted right out of her heels, as she tumbled into a full body awareness of him. Her stomach took a slow summersault, her nipples perked up and it was all she could do not to lean into him. This was inconvenient. Her body hadn’t been this instantly interested in a man in a long time. Coolly suppressing her reaction, she waved toward the back of the narrow bar. “Follow me, please.”

“Gladly,” answered Trent for all three.

Since her office was too small for a party of four, she led the way to a large booth in the back corner. A white tablecloth draped it, sliding across her legs as she slid across the bench seat. Her newfound attraction meant she felt every soft tickle like a lover’s caress. Saul and Sterling slid in across from her, while naturally Trent moved in directly next to her. He sat a respectable distance away, but it wasn’t enough. She felt like her skin was trying to lift off her muscles and get closer to him.

“Saul, I’ll be sorry to see you go,” she said, even as she gestured for Hank to send over a round. “I couldn’t have found a more reliable supplier across the entire eastern seaboard.”

“Not as sorry as I am to be the one going.” A flush of red colored the tips of his ears. Embarrassment, maybe. “But I’m sure you’ll be happy with these two.”

“Will I?” They were interrupted for a moment as Earline appeared and deposited a round of whiskey and water on the table, along with a simper and a flutter nearly in Trent’s lap. Kate would have to have a word with her. For the waitresses to sweeten the customers into a good tip was one thing, but it was another to act like a twit.

Kate hadn’t asked what the men wanted, opting instead to provide what The Kirk was known for—top shelf Irish whiskey. The kind Saul had always acquired for her. She lifted her glass and took a small swallow. The smoky burn washed Trent’s spicy cologne out of her senses. At least for a moment. Ten years ago, she would have been labeled irredeemably fast for drinking hard liquor in mixed company. Now the habit only marked her as an It girl, terribly *au courant*.

“I’m sure of it,” Saul said, resuming their discussion after Earline had moved on.

"Saul's been kind enough to provide us with introductions to his local sources," Trent supplied. A graceful hand toyed with his glass, tracing figure eights on the smooth side, though he didn't drink any. "In addition, we still have plenty of contacts from our time in Boston."

"What brings you down to New York, Mr. Trent?"

"Please, call me Micah."

"Sorry. That's a privilege I reserve for my intimate friends," she purred. Tipping her chin down, she looked at him through her mascara-tinted lashes.

"I have something to look forward to, then." His pupils flared and one side of that sharp smile tilted higher.

"Nope. Sorry," she said crisply, and straightened from her slouch. "Not going to happen."

His eyes narrowed and his head leaned toward her, but he said nothing. Bingo. Micah Trent without a practiced mask. It didn't last long before he slid his careful smile back into place, but it was long enough to take his measure. Mentally agile, quick enough to hold his tongue and a feral gleam of intelligence. What she'd liked best of all, though, was the quick flash of admiration.

"So tell me. Why leave Boston for New York?"

"Bigger market," he answered quickly. "Second only to Chicago in the amount of booze that moves through."

"Getting too big for your britches in Beantown?"

"You could say that."

"The local mobsters are quite territorial about their division of profits." She wasn't quite sure why she felt compelled to warn him. Both Trent and Sterling were big boys and had undoubtedly dealt with plenty of mobsters in Boston.

"Like I said, Kate," Saul interjected. "I'm handing everything over to them. I made sure to clear it with the local families."

"Good." She didn't like dealing with mobsters, but they were an unfortunate necessity lately, like paying off the local cops. Sometimes she longed for the simple days of running an up and up bar, like when her father had been in control. There was nothing she could do about it now. "And you'll be able to provide the same quality product? I'll drop you faster than you can blink if you start bringing me bathtub gin."

"Can't have that happen." The slightest sardonic lilt colored his tone.

Better this way. Trent needed to know she meant business. "Same deal as I had with Saul. Five percent fee based on product."

"Of course."

"Then we're in business, Trent."

Chapter Three

A curious rush of relief swept through Micah. In business. He'd had a series of similar meetings over the past week, all initiated by Saul Rubio. This had been the only one at which he felt a shiver of worry about the outcome. Granted, this was also the one and only of the speakeasies run by a woman. A gorgeous, sexy woman with a mind like a whipsaw.

She'd played him, and he'd fallen for it hook, line and sinker. When she'd aimed those bright baby blues at him, her lush, red-painted mouth ever so slightly open, his mind had gone instantly to sex. To visions of the two of them twined together, to tasting the elegant curve of her neck as he palmed her tight ass.

She looked like she was built for endurance too. Average height, but with long legs that would wrap around a man's waist and hold on tight. She had a heart-shaped face, with bobbed black hair that angled down to an almost too sharp chin. Straight dark brows winged over eyes that looked right through a man and picked apart his darkest, most erotic thoughts.

Down, boy. Kate Kirkland was a means to an end, that was it. Nothing more, nothing less. Johnny Vittorelli was in the process of setting himself up to be bootlegger to all of lower Manhattan. Thanks to a luckily timed bust of Saul, Micah and Jake would be sitting pretty before Vittorelli even got his operation going.

He could hardly believe he was back here, in New York again. He'd grown up here, in the seedy Bowery, and left as soon as he was able, unwilling to watch criminals and the corrupt leadership of Tammany Hall politicians drag it down even further. Only to have life and work drag him full circle to take down a criminal enterprise.

When it was all over, the Prohibition Bureau would wipe through every club involved in the sting.

Not quite the way a man thanked a woman for a lovely romp in bed, and that wasn't even touching on how he'd have to lie about himself every moment they were together. It'd be in his best interests to get his brain out of his pants. Pronto.

"It's a deal, Miss Kirkland," he finally replied.

"You got a bathroom in this joint?" Jake piped up for the first time since they'd sat down.

"Of course, Mr. Sterling. I'll show you where it is." She angled her body to get out of the booth, which left her facing him. "Mr. Trent, if you'd please let me out."

For a split second, he was tempted to force her to push him out. She'd already put him to the test, so it would only be fair. But he slid out of the way rapidly. He needed to keep in her good graces, not piss her off enough to send her shopping for a new bootlegger.

Once again, Kate let them through the small club, this time to a shadowed hallway at the opposite corner. Micah stayed to the rear of the procession, the better to watch her hips sway. Her dress was open nearly to the small of her back, black silk framing creamy, porcelain skin. The soft sweep of her spine curved in exactly at the bottom of the opening, hinting at what was further below.

That whole *keeping his mind out of his pants* idea wasn't going so well.

"There you go, Mr. Sterling. Second door on the right."

Jake nodded briefly and moved toward the indicated door. Kate turned to Micah and propped a hand on her hip.

"Were you going with him? Maybe he needs help to shake?"

"You are a spitfire, aren't you?" He leaned against the turquoise and silver wall.

"Most of us modern girls are."

"To answer your question, no. Jake's a big boy. He's been toilet trained for a good three years now."

"Then why did you feel obliged to follow?" Her tone was dry, but a smile quirked her cupid's-bow mouth. "I'd think you'd be enjoying your drink with Saul. Our business is finished for now."

"We didn't seal the deal." He'd followed to ensure Jake would have a private moment to snoop around, but it wouldn't serve to say so. In his line of work, the truth was seldom the best choice. He and Jake specialized in undercover work. In quickly, get the information, or make the bust and slide out again. No muss, no fuss. Already this was shaping up to be one of the longest operations they'd orchestrated. He couldn't afford to get side tracked by the sexy speakeasy owner.

"We agreed. That's enough for me."

"Not me." He caught her hand in his, loosely holding her fingertips. Every cell in his body popped to life, the same as when they'd shaken hands before. "Dance with me."

"Is dancing often a part of forming new business relations for you?"

"Nope."

"Then why make the exception for me?"

"It's rare I get to do business with such a beautiful woman." He tugged gently on her fingers, aiming her at the postage-stamped dance floor. She took a small step in that direction. Her mouth was saying all the right things, but she was weakening. "Dance with me."

"I have work to do. This isn't necessary."

"Of course not. That's why it'll be fun. Come on, it's a fast one. We'll swing around the floor a time or two and I'll let you get back to work."

With a short nod, she acquiesced. He lost no time in hauling her out to the floor. The instant they set foot on the parquet, the piano player segued into a slow, smoky number. He couldn't have planned it better if he'd slipped the man five bucks.

She considered backing out. He could see it in the rigidity of her shoulders and the brief frown that wrinkled her pale brow. Then she took a deep breath that lifted her small but perfectly formed breasts and raised her arms into waltz position. Micah scooped her into his arms and swept her out into the dance before she could have second thoughts.

And then he nearly lost track of the steps in a raging sweep of lust.

Bare skin. The hand on her back rested on bare skin. As smooth as silk, with sleek muscles moving beneath.

Sure, he'd seen her dress. Logically he'd known he'd be touching her skin if they danced. He just hadn't had a clue what effect it would have on him. Apparently that effect was to stop all semblance of mental processes.

She moved beautifully in his arms. If he even thought about a turn, she was right there with him. She avoided his gaze at first, until he spun them into a swooping series of turns, stopping only when her bright gaze lifted to his, a giddy smile curling her lips.

Involuntarily, his arms tightened, drawing her nearer. The beaded fringe around her skirt brushed his shins and their chests were one deep breath apart. The dance stretched on into the type of extended moment that approached eternity.

But nothing lasted forever, and the piano player finished with a showy flourish. As he deposited her at the edge of the dance floor, he finally thought to look for Jake, to ensure his partner had completed his look-see. Jake stood at the hallway entry, arms crossed over his broad chest as he went nose to nose with a stacked blonde. They didn't look particularly happy with each other. If Jake had managed to queer the deal already, Micah would be forced to beat him bloody.

He was at their side in a moment, interrupting the little *tête-à-tête*, Kate right behind him.

"Susie, I see you've already met Jacob Sterling. This is Micah Trent. They're The Kirk's new suppliers. Mr. Trent, Mr. Sterling, this is Susie Nichols. Our resident blues singer."

"A blues singer." Jake's voice rang with disapproval as they gave the blonde a once over. She was a pretty, curvy thing with doe-brown eyes and round cheeks. Jake had never oozed charm but it wasn't like him to be instantly hostile to a woman he'd just met. "You cussed me like a sailor. I might've guessed."

Micah opened his mouth, about to use his silver tongue to deflect some of the tension but Susie beat him to it.

"Like you're mister high and mighty." She fisted her hands on her hips. "Sneaking around the joint like a second-storey man!"

"Do we have a problem here?" Kate asked.

"I caught him poking his head in your office."

"Door was open," Jake grunted. "I was shutting it."

"A likely story!"

"Susie, I'll take care of this." Kate set a hand on the other woman's shoulder with a level of friendship that betrayed more than an employer-employee relationship. "You go on up and sing."

Her nose in the air, Susie flounced off.

Kate waited until she was only a few feet away before she pounced. Crossing her arms over her chest, she glared at Micah and Jake. "Do we have a problem already?"

"No," Jake said.

What a help he was. Micah whipped out his placating, aw-shucks grin, the one with the innocent head tilt that was accompanied by slinging his thumbs in his pockets. It had worked on Prohibition section chiefs all over the country, getting him and Jake out of several jams involving not following proper procedure. Not Kate. Her expression didn't lighten in the least. For such a little thing, she was fierce. The mistress of her small empire. And based on Susie's vehement dressing down of Jake, her subjects were quite loyal.

"Knowing Jake, he was looking for the back exit," he improvised. "Isn't that right, partner?"

"Course."

"It's only smart," Micah continued. "We wouldn't want to be caught unaware in case of a raid."

Kate loosened up a little, relaxing her shoulders. The argument was sound. When a person was deep in the world of illegal booze, keeping an eye on the escape hatches was for the best. Micah should know. He'd cut off plenty doing busts.

"Rest assured, I'll let you know how to get out, if you ever need," Kate said. "In the mean time, I'd appreciate it if you could keep your partner here under wraps. I will not put up with people nosing around my place."

"Understood."

"But Trent, I don't think you have a full grasp on your place in this relationship."

"What's that?" Under her, he wished. Buck naked.

"To make things simple, you can consider this a trial run. This is my place. My world, built out of what my father left to my brother and me. Piss me off, and you're out on your ear."

"I wouldn't dream of pissing you off." Until he had Johnny Vittorelli neatly tied up, and Poppa Paulo along with him.

Micah suspected shutting down The Kirk would piss her off something royal.

Chapter Four

Dark enveloped the alley at four in the morning. Humid summer air lay heavy on Kate's bare arms. Dawn light slipped skinny fingers between the tall buildings. At this ungodly hour, the streets were quiet. Lucas and Nick shuffled and rustled behind her. Even the most determined revelers had stumbled home. Kate had shut down The Kirk an hour ago.

Headlights turned into the narrow alley. Nick shook off his doze and straightened from the brick wall. Lucas and Kate had already been alert. Lucas because he was always studiously observant in dangerous situations. Kate because she could seldom rest. When the Ford truck pulled even with the weathered door, she moved forward. Lucas stood behind her and to the right.

The driver's door of the battered truck opened and a man slid out. In the dim light, Kate could see only his outline. Tall and lean, he inclined his head to her. Kate's heartbeat leaped into her throat, the same silly reaction she'd had at every meeting over the last three weeks. She didn't move.

"Miss Kirkland." His voice was deep and buttery rich.

"Mr. Trent."

"I wish you would let me call you Kate."

She ignored the urge to say yes and eyed the man who had climbed out of the passenger side, Trent's partner. Jacob Sterling was shorter and stockier than Trent and while Trent managed to look elegant in his dark two-piece suit, Sterling only looked messy. "Hello, Mr. Sterling."

The man nodded, adding no greeting. It was normal for him. The most words she'd heard from him at one time were when he and Susie Nichols, The Kirk's resident songstress, snipped at each other.

Trent pulled a slim case from his jacket that gleamed silver in a stray beam of light. Behind her, Lucas tensed and lifted a hand to his waistband. Kate waved him off. Much about Trent made her nervous, from his wickedly edged smile to the heat in his gaze when he looked at her. The chance of him opening fire on them was not one. Trent smiled and his even teeth flashed pale white. Naturally he'd seen Lucas flinch, but it didn't seem to rattle him. Nothing did.

He held out the silver case. "Would you like a cigarette?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you."

"Always so unswervingly polite."

"I've found it serves in matters such as this to keep a cool head."

He slid the case back into his breast pocket. "I'd been under the impression that all you modern women smoked."

"I can't abide the taste." The dawn illuminated her, though it only backlit Trent, so Kate allowed a wicked smile to tip her lips. "From the source or from my men."

His chuckle was low and genuine. Something low in her belly took a tumble.

"I'll be sure to remember that in the future."

"Why do you believe you'll have a reason to? You've asked time and time again but my answer hasn't changed."

"I am incredibly determined. Like a mule."

She tilted her head. "Are you begging me to compare you to an ass?"

"I don't suppose it would convince you to finally accept my invitation to dinner?"

"Not a chance."

"I'll have to think of another tack for our next meeting."

"You're not determined, you're flat out stubborn."

Dramatically, Trent threw a hand over his heart. "You're starting to know me. I've got no hope now."

She smothered a laugh, even as her heart strummed heavily under her breastbone, and a low-level heat drew a taut sting of awareness through her.

Micah Trent was the one man who tempted her to mix business and pleasure. It was a damn shame that in her business letting her guard down and getting involved with the wrong man could get a body killed. Nick shuffled his feet behind her, always restless. Lucas waited patiently, but guilt flushed through Kate. The man had a wife and child at home, and she kept him out late while she flirted.

She propped a hand on her hip. "Time to show the goods, Trent."

"Are we back to business again?"

"We always were." Trent said nothing and the lie weighed heavy on her chest. She wished suddenly that she could see his eyes as more than a gleam in the dark. "Let's get on with it."

"Your wish is my command."

Trent led the way to the back of the truck. He walked silently, seemingly without effort, while Kate's dress shushed around her shins. She hadn't had time to change, so she still wore her blue silk evening dress over a nude-colored sheath. Open along the sides but for narrow ties, it gave a naughty illusion of near nakedness.

Their helpers followed behind until they got to the doors, where Sterling darted around and opened them. Nick lit an electric torch. The cargo area was crammed with kegs and boxes.

Kate reached into the nearest box. She withdrew a bottle and tilted it so the dim light reached the black label. Irish whiskey, or at least it claimed to be. Kate uncorked it and smelled the potent fumes, then took a small sip. It burned in that smoky way good alcohol did. This stuff had never seen a bathtub.

“Trent, I think I’m going to have to admit you’re outdoing even Saul. Where’d you get this shipment?”

“Ah, ah. A bootlegger never reveals his sources.” He wagged an elegant finger. “Not if he wants to keep them, that is.”

Kate understood. In their business trust was nonexistent. It matched her personal philosophy quite well. “And the beer?”

“German, and very high quality. You’ll love it.” The grin that spread across his face marked him as quite proud of himself.

She stepped to the side, allowing Lucas and Nick to begin unloading. Sterling stepped up to help. “My customers will,” she clarified. “For now, I’d like to get it inside and hidden before any agents show up. I will test it later, of course.”

“You wound me, but I wouldn’t expect any different. Steely eyed Kate Kirkland, scourge of lower Manhattan.”

Kate flinched. Steely eyed? Was that how she was seen? The phrase invoked images of battleships, cold and unforgiving. She shook off the sudden doubt. These days, a woman had to be determined. It was hard enough running a speakeasy if you were a man. Since the Volstead Act had been passed six years ago, what was once a respectable establishment run by her dad had been plunged into the depths of criminals. The customers who flooded The Kirk on a nightly basis were average citizens with a little money to burn. All they looked for was somewhere to wear their glad rags and have a good time. The distributors, mobsters and dirty cops she dealt with were another matter. With them, it wouldn’t do to show even a bit of weakness.

She looked at him out the corner of her eye. There was no way she could allow his easy smiles to twist her in knots. Even if his tall body and lean, carved features were exactly what she liked in a man. When they’d danced together, he’d held her firmly and moved with grace. Everything within Kate had turned warm and gooey. She’d resolved to never accept his invitation again. Far too dangerous to her state of mind. And body, for that matter.

“I’m going to have to charge you ten percent more,” Trent said, into the silence.

Kate’s fists clenched and she pivoted to face him. “It’s not going to happen,” she gritted out. People always ended up trying to gull her. It happened sooner or later.

Trent hadn’t shown any likelihood of trying something like this. A pang of regret at her naivety lodged in her chest. She’d almost been tempted to believe him different. She should have known better. If you can’t rely on family, you sure as hell can’t rely on anybody in the outside world. And she’d learned the hard way not to depend on family.

Trent spread his hands in a *what can I do* gesture. “I got you top shelf whiskey and German beer. My expenses were higher than expected.”

“Then you should have contacted me first to ensure I was willing to pay.”

“You want The Kirk to become known for rotgut? I can’t show you invoices. Ain’t smart to keep ’em in my line of work.” Trent leaned a shoulder against the brick wall and crossed his ankles in a studiously casual pose.

“No, I want you to know I can’t be scammed.” She glared at him. “You’ll get an extra two percent for bringing a superior product and that’s it. It’s your own fault if you don’t cover your expenses. And you’ll get it after I’ve had a chance to inspect everything, of course.”

“Deal.”

Her head held high, she turned to leave. Trent grabbed her by the wrist and gently pulled her toward him.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” he said in a low voice. “I got the shipment unexpectedly and at a good price and you were the first person I thought of.”

He’d brought her near enough they were only a couple hand breadths apart. A pleasant whiff of his spicy aftershave tickled her nose.

She swallowed the thick knot lodged in her throat. “Thanks. But I won’t stand for any high-handed nonsense. The next time you think you’re doing me a favor, check with me first.”

“You can bet on it. I will.” His warm fingers wrapped loosely around her wrist. His thumb traced circles over her throbbing pulse. It sent tingles all the way up her arm, lodging at the back of her neck. “Don’t you ever take a night off? We could take a drive out to the country.”

“If you think I’m ever getting in your struggle buggy, you’re nuts.” She grinned to take the edge off. She was more tempted than she could let on. She bit her lip and Trent’s gaze dropped to her mouth. All trace of humor washed away under his intense stare.

Firing him and getting a new supplier wouldn’t tempt her to mix business and pleasure. There were plenty of rumrunners competing for her business. Any one of them would kill to be the supplier for The Kirk. Unfortunately, that was the problem. Most of them were too frightening to do business with. Besides, most likely it would piss Trent off, thereby squashing his interest in her and defeating the purpose of separating business and pleasure.

“Someday you’re going to say yes,” Trent murmured.

Nick bumped into her with a small keg of beer and sent her stumbling into Trent. He caught her by the waist, his hands sliding in the open sides of her outer dress. Only a thin layer of silk separated his touch and her skin. Her small breasts pressed against the hard wall of his chest. Her breath caught in her throat, and her heartbeat roared in her ears. Dimly she heard Nick apologize as he continued into the club.

Lightly, gently, Trent kneaded her side, so soft a touch she could almost believe she’d imagined it, if it weren’t for his eyes. A liquid deep brown, they flared with something dark and hungry. A feeling as sultry as the New York night spread out from her center. Her eyes widened and her lips opened on a silent

gasp. Considering the strange gray world she lived in, she was no stranger to lust. She'd even indulged a time or two—once with her beau before he'd gone off to the Great War, and once because she could and she'd liked the man. Never before had it felt like this, like something inevitable. Like they were only going through the prescribed steps before the foregone conclusion.

"This. This is why I am so persistent. I can tell you feel it too. I know you do."

"It doesn't matter." She pushed away from his hard body.

Trent's eyebrows were straight slashes over his beautiful eyes. One of them rose in a disbelieving arch. "It doesn't? This is an everyday thing for you?"

"Every day? No. But this is a big city. I'm sure I could find another man with whom I'd feel the same thing. And with whom I'm not in business."

"You're not as wild as you would like people to think, are you?"

Kate's head jerked and she stepped back. "I run a blind pig. What do you think?"

He shook his head. "You run your family business. There's a difference."

"Not since the Volstead Act," she shot back, and then darted between Nick and Lucas, who were coming out for another load.

Inside, she dashed down the narrow stairs and through the stacks and shelves of alcohol stored for The Kirk. She was actually below the brownstone next door to her home and business. In the name of the club, Kate rented the basement for storage, in case The Kirk got raided. Her employees could answer honestly that no booze was stored on the premises.

At the west end of the cellar, Kate came to a door built into the brick wall. Made of brick as well, and it was reinforced with steel hinges and mechanisms to ensure it slid open smoothly. After she stepped into The Kirk's basement, she reached for the meat hook kept to the left of the door. She slipped it through a crack in the bricks and snagged the latch to pull the door closed behind her. Kate constantly drilled into her employees that this step could never be skipped. Leaving the door open, no matter the time or how empty the building, would defeat the purpose of having a secret cellar. She certainly couldn't forget it herself, even if Trent had her all turned around.

The Kirk had about a half dozen employees but only a couple knew the trick to the door. Herself, Lucas and Nick, Hank Levi the head bartender and Susie.

Kate moved through The Kirk's storeroom, which was filled with innocent, legal supplies appropriate for the social club it purported to be. A stack of white linen tablecloths here, bags of flour over there. She slipped through a door much less fancy than the hidden one and walked through the back hallway, not seeing the familiar surroundings. She was too busy brooding about Trent, the annoying man.

How dare he think he knew her? She was absolutely honest in the way she presented herself to the world. She wore her dresses short, had ditched corsets at the first opportunity and chopped off her hair to

right below her ears. If she wasn't as wild as Mr. High and Mighty thought she acted, it was because she was too busy. She'd give anything to be as carefree as some of the women she knew.

In her office, she looked around and sighed. It was a shoebox-sized room almost completely filled by two chairs and her desk, which was piled high with stacks of papers. The papers would look haphazard to a stranger, but to Kate they were her life. Inventories, pay rolls, supply orders, sales. The walls were wood paneled, just as her father's office had been in The Kirk's original location, when he ran the place with an iron fist and no velvet glove. Kate had the rest of the club redecorated in silver and turquoise about three years ago, but left the office alone. No patrons ever came back here, so it didn't matter. Between the bar and Patrick, her brother, she barely had time to breathe, much less try to decorate a room that didn't generate income.

She flopped down into the big leather chair and opened the bottom right desk drawer, where she kept a bottle of The Kirk's whiskey and a couple glasses. She poured herself two jiggers and threw it back. The burning fire lit up her chest before turning into mellow warmth in her belly. She dropped her head back and closed her eyes.

For all he was an ass, Micah Trent was a compelling man. Somehow she would have to focus and train herself to ignore him. They would have at least one meeting a week. She kept thinking the effect he had on her would wear off, but if anything, it had gotten worse. What had started out as an inclination to smile more around him had turned into raging lust.

Maybe she should find another lover.

There was a quiet knock on her door and Lucas popped his head in. "We're done, boss."

Kate yanked her head up quickly. It was past dawn but she'd still rather her employees didn't see her lolling around. They relied on her to be on top of things. "Thanks, Lucas. Tell Mary I say hi."

"Will do. Remember, I gotta take her into Doctor Abraham's clinic tomorrow, so I'll be a little late."

Kate nodded. "No problem. You certainly stayed late enough tonight."

"Nick'll be in on time."

"It's fine. Go on, get out of here."

After he left, Kate dropped her head back again. She should drag herself upstairs to her bedroom. Tomorrow, the grind would start all over again. For the moment though, she was too tired to even hold her eyes open.

She drifted off to sleep. And dreamed of a man with dark brown hair and a dangerous, sexy smile.

Chapter Five

Micah pulled onto Fifty Second Avenue and shifted into second gear. The smile on his lips refused to disappear and he hummed “Daddy Ease It to Me” under his breath. He was screwing up the timing, but he couldn’t seem to make himself hum slow and low. His conversation with Kate had him too jazzed up.

It was only a week into their partnership that Micah had convinced himself that if they kept it casual the lies he told wouldn’t matter. He’d asked her to dinner. She’d had a ready, flat no for him. He’d almost wondered, in a fit of ego, if he’d imagined her interest. Tonight had reassured him, a stroke of luck sending her into his arms. There was no way he’d misread her shallow breathing or the way her lush mouth had parted, inviting him in. Those pale blue eyes had focused on him with an intensity he wanted to feel again. While they were both naked.

Micah shifted on the leather seat of his truck, his pants suddenly too tight. The new styles Kate always wore drove him crazy, knowing her body was free underneath their loose shapes. He wanted to fill his hands with her pert breasts, feel her satiny skin to see if it was all as smooth as what he’d felt when they’d danced. Taste her sweet flavor.

Still she wouldn’t spend time with him. While he was reassured it wasn’t for lack of interest, he wondered why. She was incredibly smart, as well as ferociously determined to make a go of her club. Maybe she saw a clue in him that warned her away. It would be best for her to not get involved with him. In fact, if he were truly an honorable man, he’d do the job for her and stay away, hand the assignment over fully to Jake and stay gone. There were several other clubs Vittorelli was said to be considering for his new venture.

But apparently Micah wasn’t a good guy after all, because he was completely unable to stay away from her for more than a couple days. Even when he didn’t have a delivery for her, he showed up at The Kirk to “check in”. When he was lucky, she wasn’t busy and even sat at his table. The dance they’d shared replayed over and over in his mind.

“You’re an idiot.”

Micah jumped. He’d been so lost in thought, he’d nearly forgotten Jake was in the truck with him. “That’s generally agreed to, but what makes you bring it up?”

Jake slung an arm along the window and turned to face Micah fully. He leveled the steady gaze Micah had depended on hundreds of times through their partnership. The one that said *get your head out of the damn clouds and pay attention*.

“Kate Kirkland,” he grumbled.

Micah shifted uncomfortably for an entirely different reason. “There’s no harm in a little flirtation. Means nothing nowadays.”

“I’m not talking about her non-existent virtue and you know it.”

Micah’s jaw twitched. There wasn’t much he could say. He didn’t know if Jake was right. Even if he was wrong and her next stop was a nunnery, it was beside the point. Protesting too much would be the same as lecturing himself on Jake’s behalf. And what was the fun in that? Sometimes, in the darkest stretches of night when Micah’s jokes ran out and he was all alone, he suspected he lived only to bedevil Jake.

Then he hopped out of bed, pulled on his clothes and ran to the next bust.

“I’ve got it all under control,” Micah said.

“In our business we cannot afford mistakes.”

“I know.”

“We’ve got nothing but trouble on every front. The mob wants what they think is our little slice of the pie, then there’s the other bootleggers. And God only knows how long we can keep up this charade without someone figuring out who we are.”

“I know. You don’t have to tell me.” The tiny muscle on the side of Micah’s jaw jumped. He tried to subtly relax it by shifting his bottom teeth. Didn’t work.

“They’re all looking for even a tiny crack of weakness in us.”

“I know already.” He gripped the slender steering wheel too tightly and it cut into his fingers.

“Kate Kirkland is a weakness for you.”

“Jesus H. Christ, I fucking know, okay? I haven’t forgotten a damn thing.”

“You’re sure acting like you’ve lost your brain somewhere down the line.”

“I want to pass a little time with her,” Micah said. “There’s no crime in that.”

Jake’s sigh bounced around the cabin. “You always were a stubborn son of a bitch. Ever since we were little kids, when you get your head stuck on something there’s no changing your mind. Remember your wings?”

He had to chuckle. “I worked hard on those things. Figured if the Wright brothers could do it, I could too.”

“The Wrights built an airplane. You made wings out of your momma’s good sheets and scrap wood.”

“I jumped out of the second floor widow. Ripped momma’s sheets up but good.”

“Broke your leg too. You were laid up the rest of the summer.”

Trying to fly was one of the most foolish things he’d ever done. Those were good times. Momma had scolded him for weeks, even as she brought meals to his bed. Dad hadn’t been anywhere around, but that was nothing new.

“There’s more than a broken leg at stake here, Micah. It’s your career. Maybe even your life.”

When he’d tried to fly, Jake had been inside the apartment, leaning out the other window and yelling at him not to do it. And he’d been right. Steadfast and analytical, Jake had always been his voice of reason, and he’d never steered Micah wrong. They were almost on top of the world, and Micah liked the view. Which would mean giving up all thought of Kate Kirkland and her lithe body and slow-building smile. He could do it. There were plenty of other women he came in contact with every day, many of whom had made it more than obvious he could have them. They’d be half the work Kate would be. And they weren’t speakeasy owners.

“Okay. You win. Happy now?” He glanced away from the nearly empty street and looked at Jake.

“Not really. But it’ll do.”

They arrived at the dockside warehouse he and Jake used as a headquarters for their rumrunning angle. This part of town was much busier around dawn than lower Manhattan. Next door, half a dozen workers in rough pants and shirtsleeves unloaded cargo. The thick smell of stagnant water hung in the air. There was the only building with darkened windows and no sign of activity.

Jake hopped out, unlocked the wide, metal doors and opened one side. Micah pulled the truck in and parked it, then got out.

“What do you mean, not really?” His voice echoed off the bare, concrete walls.

They kept stacks of cheap textiles and coffee beans that weren’t worth the water they’d be brewed in. The same dusty goods had sat there for almost two years, even before he and Jake had rented the place. Cover it if it was ever needed. Their real product came in and went out in a single night. Neither he nor Jake took a shipment if they couldn’t unload it immediately.

“I mean I’m not sure you can stay away from that woman, even if you wanted to.” He swung the door closed as Micah stared at him. “And I’m not sure you do want to.”

Micah could do it. The hand that had touched Kate’s sleek waist, separated from his skin by only a whisper of silk, twitched. Sure he could do it. Not a problem.

Chapter Six

Kate woke late the next morning to a thump and clatter from the next room. Her bedroom faced the street and sunlight streamed in through two windows. With a groan, she pulled cotton sheets over her head. It felt like there was dirt in her eyes and every muscle ached. Her calves throbbed particularly badly from walking around The Kirk all night in heels. She didn't have the energy left to deal with Patrick.

The crashing, tinkling sound of glass breaking whispered through the upper level.

Kate tossed back the sheets and slid out of bed, setting her feet to the boldly colored throw rug. The orange and red abstract shapes were almost too bright to look at in her current mood, so she blinked and grabbed her dressing gown, then her slippers from behind the door. As she marched into the hallway, she thrust her arms through the Chinese-style robe and tied the sash around her waist.

Patrick's door was closed. Kate knocked perfunctorily before she pushed it open. She wrinkled her nose against the smell of booze and cigarettes. The curtains were tightly closed so she couldn't see much. She snapped on the lights. Patrick was slumped over his small writing desk, drifts of paper floating around his feet. Empty bottles of liquor sat around willy-nilly. A cognac bottle had fallen off the desk and shattered, the cause of the noise that had pulled her out of bed.

"Wake up, you dolt."

He barely moved.

She bit her lip. At least she had on slippers. The first time she'd been woken in the middle of the night and ventured into his room, Doc Abraham had to put four stitches in her foot. She picked her way through the mess, kicking a bundle of dirty shirts out of her path.

She set a hand on her brother's shoulder and shook. Once he used to be a powerful man, strong from helping their father stack boxes for The Kirk. Now his shoulders were narrow, little more than skin pulled taught over his bones. All the booze he drank left little room in his stomach for anything sustaining. She shook harder.

"Patrick, get up."

He only moaned and buried his black hair under a dingy shirtsleeve. She poked him in his soft waist.

"Get up now and get in your bed."

Blearily, he raised his head and blinked at her. It was like looking in a mirror at Coney Island fun house. They had the same blue eyes, but hers weren't blood shot with dark shadows beneath.

"Hey, sis," he slurred. His smile was a ghost of the one he used to have.

Tears prickled her eyes. Every day she lost another tiny fragment of him. “Hey, brother.”

“I was thinking. I should move to Paris.” It sounded like his tongue was too big for his mouth.

“You’d get drunk and fall off the boat on the way there.”

“That’s what the railings are for. I’m serious. How am I supposed to write my great novel in a New York brownstone?”

“By dragging yourself out of the bottle and doing it?” When they were kids, Patrick had placed first in numerous citywide writing contests. It was a mortal sin that Patrick wasted his gift.

“Dad never thought I could do it either.”

Words flowed up her throat like bile. She choked them back. When he got in a mood like this, it did no good to let him drag her down. They’d end up screaming at each other. One time he’d put a fist into the plaster wall. “Let’s get you to bed, all right?”

He nodded and hair tumbled into his eyes. “Yeah. Bed’s good.” When he stood, he stumbled over his own feet.

She socked a shoulder into his side and swung an arm around his waist. Together they made it to the bed. He swayed for a moment, until she planted a hand in the center of his chest and pushed. He went over like Jack’s downed giant and a small cloud of dust puffed up from his filthy sheets. She wondered when they’d last been changed. They’d once had a cleaning woman, Mrs. Domino, who came down from Harlem twice a week to clean but six months ago she’d refused to step foot in their home again. She was tired of dealing with Patrick’s destruction. Kate didn’t blame her.

She unlaced Patrick’s shoes, took them off, and pulled the sheet up over him. He seemed to have already drifted off to sleep, so she pushed the hair back off his forehead.

She didn’t know what to do for him anymore. Every day he seemed to sink farther into the hell he crafted for himself. Prohibition hadn’t solved his problems, not by far.

Sometimes she thought she should shut down The Kirk. Living above a speakeasy didn’t help. At least when selling alcohol was legal, the bar had been three blocks away. When the Volstead Act passed, providing Federal criminal enforcement of the Constitutional Prohibition amendment, Kate had made a show of closing the bar and bowing to the law. In truth, she’d moved it into the ground level of the family brownstone and called it a private social club.

Unfortunately, she knew no other way to support them. The skills she’d learned watching their father were all she had. If she went to work at a factory or as a shop girl, they’d end up cramped in a single room at a boarding house in a bad part of town. Call her shallow, but she liked their solid life.

There had to be some way to get him better. She just had to find it. If there was another person she could rely on for help, she would. She and Patrick had no one else in the world, but even if they’d had other family, that was no guarantee of help.

She turned to leave but Patrick grabbed her wrist. When she looked back at him, his eyes flared in a desperate light. "I'll do it, sis. I'll write my book and put that hack Fitzgerald to shame. They'll beg me to write for *The Post*. And then we'll be on easy street for life."

"Things aren't so bad now, Patrick." She cupped his skinny shoulder. "This life isn't so bad you should need to run away from it." But he'd already drifted off into sleep again.

Kate let herself out, shutting the door gently behind her. She went down the hall to their white tiled bathroom and took a steaming shower. For long minutes, she let the water of the ribcage shower hit her from all sides and drive the exhaustion away. Back in her own room, she put on a drop-waist dress made of soft jersey that went to her shins. She combed her damp hair so her bob curled smoothly along her jaw and used a tiny bit of lash darkener. Hopefully it would pull attention away from the light purple smudges beneath her eyes. What she really wanted was to crawl back in bed, but there was always work to be done downstairs.

With all the lights on, The Kirk looked like any old place, not the late night hot spot it was after ten o'clock. The tables were bare, the white linens that would drape them later out to be laundered. Susie and Orinthal stood on the tiny stage, framed by a small swag of green brocade curtains. Susie quietly ran through "Walking Blues", a Ma Rainey song, while Orinthal plunked out accompaniment on the piano. When Susie spotted Kate, she waved but kept on with practice. Hank polished glasses at the huge chrome-and-oak bar that dominated the east side of the room. Everything seemed to be running smoothly.

Kate made her way over to the bar, straightening a couple chairs as she passed. "Got enough goods for tonight?" she asked.

"Yep. Stuff Trent brought last night was right prime. Got a different problem though." Hank had large, soulful eyes set over an even larger nose. He set down his rag and glass and rested his elbows on the bar.

If Kate had thought she was exhausted before, it was nothing compared to this. It became a Herculean effort to keep her shoulders from bowing. If Hank said they had a problem, she would absolutely despise what he was about to say. He was normally unflappable. "Give it to me straight."

"Earline sent 'round a note. She's not coming in."

"She's sick again? That's not so bad. We can make do for one night."

He shook his head mournfully. "She said she quits. She'll be by in a couple days to pick up her stuff."

"I only had two waitresses to begin with. What in the world did she quit for?"

"Word on the street is she's taken up with Johnny Vittorelli."

"That little idiot." Johnny Vittorelli was a small-time gangster with delusions of grandeur who was trying to muscle into businesses all over the city. If it weren't for his father, Poppa Paulo Vittorelli, his mouth would have gotten him rubbed out long ago. The women he put up in this apartment never lasted long either. "What's she think she's going to get out of him?"

“Jewels, silk dresses and maybe a Daimler?” Hank deadpanned.

Kate rolled her eyes at the older man. “Rhetorical question, thanks. We’ll have to think of something to do tonight. This place is too busy for two girls to work the floor, let alone one.”

“I already called home. Coral’s gonna get her mom to watch Tommy.”

Coral was Hank’s wife, a round ball of energy with pink cheeks and a huge smile. She wouldn’t like to be away from their two-year-old son long, though. “You’re a doll, Hank. It’ll be temporary, I know. I’ll hire a couple girls as soon as I can find someone smart enough to tie her own shoes.”

“You bet you will.” Hank winked. “No Earlines this time though, okay?”

“You betcha.” She patted the bar and turned away. Susie and Orinthal were done and Susie’s dark blond hair bounced around her ears as she hopped down the stairs. Her brown eyes were bright and a mischievous smile curled around her lips as she pulled Kate away from the bar. “I met Ricky for lunch,” she said.

“Oh yeah? How was it?” She tried to keep a happy smile on her face but it was tough. Susie had a habit of picking losers.

“Marvelous. You shoulda seen the joint he took me to. I bet it cost a fortune. Spent two hours just talking over our food.”

“Isn’t he a junior-level accountant?”

“What’s your point?”

Kate hitched her hip on a table and folded her hands in her lap. “How could he afford that place?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Susie said blithely. “Maybe he saved up. It’s a great story to tell our grandchildren.”

“Your grandchildren?” Kate blurted.

“Maybe.”

“What’s he gonna want in trade for taking you places like that?”

“He was a perfect gentleman. You are a cynic, darling.” Her smile didn’t waver.

“No one goes courting like our parents did. It’s tit for tat. And if you ask me, most men aren’t worth tat. Especially the ones you hook up with.” She shrugged.

“I know I haven’t had the best track record. But you’ll see Ricky’s different. And speaking of most men, didn’t you see Micah Trent this morning?”

“He had a delivery for The Kirk.” Her stomach fluttered at the mere mention of his name and her teeth clicked together in annoyance at the involuntary reaction.

“And?”

“And what?”

“Did he flirt with you again?”

“Of course. Trent flirts by breathing. It’s a part of him, he can’t help it.” Kate realized she was picking at her cuticles. She took a deep breath and forced herself to stop. The truth was unfortunate but life was easier if you faced it head on. Less disappointment that way.

“Um-hum.”

“What’s that mean?” Kate felt a frown draw her brows together. At the rate she was going, she’d have a permanent line there before too long.

“It means we’ll see.”

“It’s kinda hard to see nothing.”

Susie shrugged. “So I’m a romantic. Even if it’s not Micah Trent, one day you’ll meet a man who’s right for you.”

“And what? I’ll put a little white picket fence around the brownstone? I don’t think so.”

“It’s possible. Okay, maybe not a picket fence around The Kirk, but love can happen for anyone.”

“Maybe.” It was easier to capitulate, or Susie would go after her until she was worn down to a raw nub. And the sooner this discussion was over, the sooner she could get back to work. Work being both the club and getting Trent out of her head. She could do it if Susie stopped prattling on. “Now go on, practice. Can’t have my singer flat on a Friday night.”

Susie stuck her tongue out, then giggled as she flounced off.

Chapter Seven

One in the morning at The Kirk was entirely different than one in the afternoon. The lights were turned down low but what there was gleamed off chrome trim like sunshine off jewels. Couples cozied up in the high back booths along the walls, half-concealed by giant, strategically placed ferns. Those who wanted to see or be seen sat in the center tables or danced the Charleston on the postage-stamp-sized dance floor. Bare knees flashed, exposed by flying skirts and rolled down silk hose. Susie's bourbon-low voice floated over the hum and chatter of the patrons.

Kate perched on a barstool. She'd changed into evening dress before opening, a turquoise dress with beaded fringe at the hem. The beads slid around her calf as her foot bounced. With one hand she spun the glass of iced tea next to her and the other drummed out the rhythm to Susie's song. She had no idea where this sense of anxiety came from. An ominous feeling prickled the back of her neck where tiny hairs stood on end. It was going to be a bad night. Her father had the same feeling the night he died.

Nick opened the inner door to the foyer and Kate's gaze flew to it. It was only Sally Short and her small entourage. Sally glided over to Kate. The tall blond wore a Chanel dress. A staff writer for *New York Magazine*, flitting about town was a large part of her job. As a result, many of the major department stores gave her free clothes in hopes of being mentioned in her latest column. Kate had no idea why they kept doing it when Sally almost never kept up her end of the bargain. She was known for being scrupulously unbiased when it came to what she reported about the nightlife. If Sally gave you even two lines of type, you were set for a good six months.

Catching Hank's eye, Kate subtly jerked her head toward the incoming group and pointed to the stage. He tapped Billy, their gangly assistant bartender, who darted out from behind the bar and wove his way to the back room.

Sally bussed a kiss through the air over Kate's cheek, leaving sweet perfume in her wake. "Darling," she cooed. "The Kirk has been the bee's knees lately, hasn't it?"

"With a big boost from you." Kate grinned. "That write up last week was great." Sally couldn't exactly give directions, but those who followed her column knew how to read the clues.

"What you really need to do is expand, darling. Why you can't hardly fit a hundred people in here. Triple this place and then you'll see how much business we can rake in for you."

"I don't think that's going to happen any time soon," Kate said. She wouldn't mind expanding, actually. They were full to capacity almost every night, and when she'd chatted up her next door neighbor

they'd been all for renting their cellar out. But the contractors she'd talked to would need a good three months for construction and Kate simply couldn't imagine closing down The Kirk for that long. Patrick's plan for a second bar was more likely, and even that was a stretch. "But thanks anyway."

"Don't mention it." She fluttered a hand adorned with sparkling bangles. "Unless it gets us a free bottle of cognac, that is."

"Anything for you, Sally." She glanced over the crowd. Billy had worked fast, bringing out an extra table and snagging unused chairs from surrounding groups. He was setting out an ashtray and a small vase with a single iris. Perfect timing. "Let me walk you to your table," she said to Sally.

"You're always so good to me."

"Anything for you." And The Kirk.

Kate led the way and saw Sally and her entourage installed at the place of pride, there by the stage where no one would miss them. Coral took drink orders, her wide smile in place. Screwdrivers, boxcars and the promised cognac would be up in two shakes.

Sally rattled the beaded fringe on the bottom of Kate's dress. "I love this," she said. "You should go to Paris with us next time. The shows have amazing new things every season. I live for it."

"Oh you should," chirruped Helen Cowley, a charming brunette who was one of Sally's regular hangers-on. She had bright blue eyes and a winsome smile that was currently turned on Kate at full volume. "You've the perfect shape for the clothes they're trotting out now. All slim and willowy, unlike me. I've got too many curves to be packed in some of those dresses."

"Sorry, Helen, I'm afraid someone has to keep an eye on things around here."

Helen laughed a high-pitched trill that grated on Kate's nerves. "Do be serious. Surely you've a father or brother who runs this place. You just look lovely and greet people, right?"

Kate's teeth ground together but Sally intervened before she could say a word. She lightly popped Helen's wrist. "You bad girl, teasing us working stiff. Not everyone's as lucky as you, to have Daddy paying our bills."

Her pert nose trembled. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Sometimes I don't think. Daddy says I have fluff between my ears. Please don't take offense."

Kate shook her head, sending her hair sliding along her hot cheeks. "None taken," she lied.

Arnold Woodward leaned across the table and grinned at her. "Surely you get an evening off now and then. The Kirk's closed Sunday and Monday, isn't it? Paris is out of the question, but maybe dinner?"

He was a good-looking man with sandy brown hair, a strong jaw and kind brown eyes. His white suit jacket was immaculate, fitting him so finely that it had to be tailored. Best of all, he had nothing to do with her business other than buying the occasional round of drinks. Arnold worked for a midtown advertising agency.

“Maybe,” she hedged, drawing the word out with consideration. Unfortunately he didn’t make her stomach flutter in the least, but he might be a ripe distraction from dangerous Micah Trent.

Arnold pounced, his face lighting up with a wide grin. “Next Monday. I’ll come round for you at eight.”

She took only a moment to make up her mind. “It’s a date. I’ll let you guys have fun. Susie’s in rare form tonight, you’ll love her.”

She kissed Sally’s cheek and made her way slowly back to her self-appointed post at the bar, hoping she didn’t regret her decision. She never tried to live as a nun since she figured it was bad for her health. She just hoped it wasn’t unfair to Arnold, using him to distract herself.

As she wove her way through the tables, quite a few people waved her over so they could later tell their buddies how they personally knew Kate Kirkland, manager of the up-and-coming Kirk Club. Even as she smiled and shook hands, her thoughts were still back at Sally’s table. In a way, she envied them. Some of the group had jobs but most were carefree. Walking into a speakeasy and ordering a drink was the most dangerous thing they did, and even that wasn’t so bad. The laws punished those who made booze or sold it, not the average joe who had a pint.

Even Arnold was another quandary. If she could develop an interest in a man like him, she’d have another weight off her shoulders. He was an all around good guy, a man who would expect a certain amount of affection in return for whatever he lavished on her, but a couple dates with him wouldn’t make her doubt her own body and the way she felt weak around a certain pair of brown eyes. Micah Trent was ten times more danger to her than the Arnold Woodwards of the world. With Arnold she would know the score. With Trent she would be flipped inside out and shaken for good measure. It wasn’t worth the risk. Surely she could develop something worthwhile with Arnold.

So why did her heartbeat triple whenever the door opened?

Trent would be by tonight. He’d have to come because he needed to get paid. It was amazing enough that he’d let her take possession of the shipments without payment. Kate figured he must have methods of getting his own from people who tried to welsh on him. Sterling, his burly partner, looked capable of breaking a few kneecaps. She wouldn’t know, since she’d never made the mistake of testing him. It had been almost twenty-four hours and she’d inspected everything before opening. When he showed up, she’d pay, including the extra two percent.

She forced herself to watch people come and go at the bar. Money changed hands at a gratifyingly dizzy rate and all sorts of drinks were passed back. Hank and Billy never stopped, their hands whizzing between glasses and bottles and the till. Women draped themselves over the bar, hoping their skimpy costumes would get them served quickly. Men postured grandly, trying to impress the women.

All in all, it was shaping up to be a good night, profit wise.

A faint breeze blew over Kate’s shoulders. She turned, cursing herself even as she did so.

It was only Johnny Vittorelli and two of his bodyguards, anyway. Johnny was a tall man but soft from lack of exercise and his mama's spaghetti. The two goons with him were burly with matching black suits and flat expressions. Johnny stood in the entranceway, grandstanding as he fingered his narrow lapels. Not only would he make Kate come to him, he knew it was bad form to block the inner door so that it stayed open. If coppers made it past the street door they'd be inside in a flash, before Lucas could warn Hank and Billy with the signal lights. Her bartenders would have no chance to trigger the rigged shelves to dump the booze.

She held out a hand as she moved toward Johnny. Either a girl went on the offensive, holding him at arm's distance, or she got his hands on places she didn't want. The first time they'd met, Johnny had managed to get a hold of her knee. She couldn't get to water fast enough to scrub the hint of slime off her.

"Johnny. It's good to see you again."

"It's Big Johnny," said one of his flunkies.

Kate had to choke back a laugh. Big around the waistline, maybe. It would have been funny if Johnny weren't a sad case with a big, fancy gun tucked in his jacket.

She made the mistake of looking directly at the flunky who'd spoken. There was nothing in his eyes. They were empty of any semblance of a soul. A shiver worked its way up her spine, killing her incipient giggle.

Johnny waved a hand and gave a congenial smile that was about as fake as the diamonds wrapped around Kate's throat. Brittle glass. "Me and Kate go way back, don't we? You'll have to excuse Pietro," he said. "He's new to my employ."

"I understand. How's Earline?"

"Who? Oh, yeah, she's fine. She's staying in a hotel for now. I had to ah, clean up a little difficulty with the apartment I got her." Johnny gave a little tug to his tie. He probably had to kick some other woman out of the place before he could move Earline in.

"Let's get you a seat, shall we?"

Hank caught her gaze as she turned and nodded toward the stage. They had room for two more tables to be slid in front of the crowd without encroaching too badly on the dance floor. She shook her head in an infinitesimal no and breathed a sigh of relief when Hank caught it and turned away. It was a small snub to put Johnny at the back of the room but she'd take all the digs she could. As much as she didn't like him, Kate couldn't afford to kick him out all together. Johnny might be a small time hoodlum but his father had pull.

"I wish you'd sent word you planned to come by," she said, loading her voice with sugar. "I only have one table left." It was dark, near the hallway that led to her office and the back rooms.

"This is no good. Kick someone out up front." Pietro knew what it meant to be seated near the dressing rooms and restrooms.

Again Johnny waved like a feudal baron at one of his subjects. The gesture became more affected every time he used it. "This is just fine. In fact, it's more than fine. It's perfect, so near your office and all. Kate, there's some business I'd like to discuss with you in private."

Her smile almost dropped off her face. She kept it in place through sheer force of will. She had no business with Johnny and she liked it that way. People who did business with him ended up floating down the Hudson. Let a man like him get his foot in the door and there was no getting him out. The families had been trying to get into the speakeasies for five years now. There was no way Kate would ever let a pissant like him be the one to ruin her.

Still, careful stepping was called for. "Of course. Let me get you something to drink and I'll be right with you. Johnny, I have a very nice bottle of burgundy I've been saving for a special customer. Would your men like anything else?"

"No, no, that'll be fine. They have to stay alert, you know. There are many who'd like to take an important man like me out."

In her experience, the only men who had to brag about their status were the men who had none. Poppa Paulo and Joe Masseria, another big time gangster, never said things like that. Anyone who angered them disappeared. End of story.

As she turned away, Johnny made an ineffectual swat toward her bum, but Kate moved too fast. He caught nothing but empty air. Her fists clenched even as she knew it was a useless gesture. If it came down to sheer muscle and manpower, she'd lose hands down. She'd have to keep her wits about her. She made a beeline for the bar, this time giving only quick smiles to anyone who tried to talk to her. With a crook of her finger, she called over Billy. "Get Lucas, tell him to meet me in my office. And take a bottle of burgundy to Johnny's table."

"Good stuff?" Billy was a nice boy, eager to please. He was nearly bouncing on his toes to be able to help.

Kate shook her head. "Mid level. He won't know any better. He's got the palate of a chicken."

"You're mean, Kate. I hope I never make you mad." His eyes twinkled.

"I hope you don't either." Kate patted Billy's skinny hand but didn't know which of them she was trying to reassure. She took a couple deep breaths to calm herself and mentally squared her shoulders. Time to get on with it. Sweeping by Johnny's dark, hidden seat, she waved him toward her office. It was rude enough to push his buttons, but she had to get to her office first. Otherwise he might be cheeky enough to try and sit in her desk chair.

She got there right ahead of him, slid around the desk and sat. Her hand sneaked into the generous side seam of the overstuffed leather chair and touched cool gunmetal. Loosely, she curled her fingers around the slender grip of her Derringer. It wasn't much, only a .22 caliber and wouldn't stop a full-grown man. But it would stun him long enough for Lucas or Nick to move in.

With a smile, Kate looked up at Johnny. He wouldn't sit in the small, unpadded guest chair. Instead, Johnny stood, holding onto his lapels. He probably thought the gesture made him look important. It failed. He looked like an overstuffed Napoleon.

"While I'm always pleased to chat with you, I'm afraid I don't know what business we have to speak of."

"More of a business opportunity, you could say."

That smile was getting harder and harder to keep in place. She wasn't going to like this, not in the least. At least the fine hairs at the nape of her neck had finally smoothed out. This was the bad night part she'd been anticipating. "What kind of opportunity?"

"I know Saul Rubio retired, and it couldn't have been at a better time. I have recently developed certain connections which would enable me to provide the necessary alcohol for The Kirk."

Her skin crawled. She just loved how he spoke, like it was a foregone conclusion that she would switch over to him, now that Saul was gone. "While I wish you luck in your new venture, I'm afraid I'm quite happy with my new suppliers." Despite the temptation Trent provided to her emotional state, that was.

"You haven't heard the best part yet. I can give you an amazing price." He named a set of rates that would increase her profit margin by twenty percent.

Of course he could sell the booze that cheap. It was likely hijacked. Besides, she knew how this went. It was a standard racket. Men like Johnny offered prices so dirt-cheap that many owners jumped at them. Then little by little they jacked the prices up until the club owner couldn't afford to pay anymore. The oh-so-kind gangster in question would offer to do them a favor by buying into the actual ownership. Because they were already in league with the mobsters, and scared for their necks, they'd say yes and it was down into the depths of hell from there. Kate could practically whiff the brimstone in her office.

She touched the cool metal of the gun barrel. She would give anything to boot him out on his ass, but that wasn't how the game was played. A shadow shifted across the open doorway and she flicked a glance toward it. Lucas hovered in the hall, waiting for her cue. He meant well, but her men were trained for kicking out unruly drunks, not going toe to toe with junior gangsters. For now, she'd settle for getting Johnny out of her office, if not her club. "I'm going to have to think about it."

"Don't think too long." Johnny inspected his cuticles. "Working with me has its perks. Protection is included in the deal."

"I don't need any more protection."

"No? I've heard about some awful things happening lately. A couple blind pigs on the east side burned last week. Such a shame. The owner was in one of them. Heard a burning beam fell on his head." He raised his head and looked at her. Hungry, his gaze burned through her. Johnny wanted and Johnny would get. This was nothing like the hunger she felt roll off Trent. This was dirty and it would destroy her.

"I'd hate to hear something like that happened to a pretty little thing like you."

Kate's vision tunneled down until there was blackness, with Johnny in his blinding white suit at the center. Her ears filled with the roaring throb of her pulse and it was impossible to swallow. She was in a huge load of trouble. All the minor ducking and weaving she'd done around gangsters and crooked cops before paled in comparison. Rage ripped through her, red and rough and ugly.

"I get your point." She was proud to note her voice didn't tremble. It was as smooth as twelve-year-old scotch. "Like I said, I'll think about it."

He nodded. His smug expression hadn't wavered a bit. "Like I said, don't wait too long." He swept out with another imperial wave of his hand.

He was sure she'd cave. She must look like an easy target with a drunk for a brother and only two bouncers who were more experienced with customers than mobsters.

She stared blankly at the empty air where he'd been and spread her hands on the smooth wood of her desk. Her father's desk. One more symbol of the legacy she'd hand over if she allowed this travesty to happen.

Lucas came in with a tentative step.

"Everything okay, boss?" He shifted nervously from foot to foot. Obviously he'd heard enough of the talk to worry him.

"Yeah. Just fine." Or at least it would be. She only had to figure out what to do. "Get back to work. Don't mention it to anyone else, all right?"

"Sure, boss. Whatever you say." He paused for a second, mouth opened like he was about to speak. He must have thought better of it because he nodded and left.

She waited until her breathing calmed and her blood stopped roiling. Too many thoughts tumbled through her head. There was no way she could sort this out now. In a daze, she headed to the main room. Johnny's table was empty, thank God, and she saw no trace of him. The bottle of wine stood untouched so she poured herself a glass and slugged back a big gulp. It sent a warm glow out from her center.

Empty glass in hand, Kate looked out over the crowd. Everyone was having a great time, her job done. Now she only had to find a way to keep doing it. She poured another glass and slammed it back. Maybe it was chicken of her but she wasn't going to think of it tonight. Pulling a page out of Patrick's book and getting spifflicated sounded just Jake to her.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to dig herself out of this hole.

Chapter Eight

Micah stood outside the nondescript brown door of The Kirk and smoothed down his suit jacket. The warm night was relatively quiet. Only the faintest buzz of music and voices drifted to the cracked cement sidewalk. If a body didn't already know better, they'd have no idea an infamous speakeasy was right in front of them. The building looked like any other New York brownstone, a tall, narrow building with a set of brick stairs leading to the first floor and what looked like the front door. Micah ignored it and went to the small door set half a story below ground level.

"I knew it," Jake grumbled beside him. "I told you there was no way you could stay away from her."

"Relax, would you? This is business. We need to get paid."

"Business? Really, now?" Jacob arched an eyebrow. "Then why are you wearing your best suit and why do you have your hair all slicked back?"

"It's important to make a good impression on customers. As you obviously don't know." Jake was as tumbled and messy as he ever was, wearing the same tan suit he'd had on this afternoon.

"Yeah, sure. Then we can get this over with quickly and head somewhere else." Jake rapped quickly on the door.

A small window set in the middle opened and Nick peeked out. Jake flashed the small white card that signified they had membership to the supposedly private club. It was a joke, just a run around the Volstead laws. The only people who didn't have cards were supposed to be the police. Unless they wanted a drink. Because New York's attitude was so lax, all the gin joints were open secrets. Micah and Jacob entered the small entryway and waited for Nick to lock the front door and open the inner one.

The place was packed. Just inside, Micah dodged a couple that staggered arm in arm past him. Twisting out of their way brought him face to face with Susie. Objectively Micah realized she looked good, miles of curves poured into a skimming pink dress. But she didn't make him want to push and pick at her until she hissed at him and fire snapped in her eyes.

Only Kate did that to him. He was absolutely in trouble.

"Hi, Susie," he said. "Good night?"

"Great! I tried out a new song and they ate it up."

"What song?" Jake asked. His voice was snappish and his brows were lowered. For some reason Jake always seemed to be on edge around Susie. Micah tried not to smirk. He had a feeling he knew what Jacob's problem was.

“‘Farewell Daddy Blues’,” Susie said. She dropped her voice and gave the barest wiggle. Pushing Jake’s buttons seemed to be a favorite hobby of hers.

“Why do you sing that trash?”

“You’re awfully high in the instep for a rumrunner, aren’t you?”

A muscle ticked in Jake’s jaw. “You’re a little girl asking for trouble.”

“I’m twenty-two, bub. Don’t take it out on me if you’re feeling every long year of your age.”

Micah chuckled quietly to himself and walked away, letting their bickering fade into the general noise. Those two were constantly at each other’s throats.

He found Kate near the hallway to her office. Even in the dim lights, she looked flushed. An empty wine glass dangled from one hand. In the other she had a half-empty bottle of wine. Micah knew exactly when she spotted him. She stood upright from her slump against the table. Her cupid’s bow mouth pinched tight as her straight, dark brows lowered. Jesus, she was beautiful, even when annoyed. Especially when annoyed. It added a dash of hectic color normally absent from her pale, porcelain skin.

“*You*. I do not need to deal with you tonight.” Her words were slow and rounded at the edges.

“Are you sloshed?” Micah’s jaw gaped open. It didn’t seem right that carefully controlled Kate should be tipsy.

She paused for a moment and tipped her head. “So what if I am? It’s been a really bad day.”

“It’s nothing to me. I’m just a little surprised.” Another couple passed by, leaning on each other, so close that one wrong stagger would send them crashing into Kate. She didn’t flinch. He angled his body so he blocked her from view.

“I guess you don’t know me half as well as you thought,” she said. “Regret chasing me now?”

The light in her eyes was hard to read. She seemed on edge despite her slightly drunken state. She kept looking around for something. “Let’s go in your office.” He felt like he should get her away from the crowds. Big bad day or no, she’d regret this tomorrow.

“You too, huh?”

“What?”

“Everyone wants to get me in my dang office. You got a business proposition for me also?”

“We already do business, remember? I’d like to be paid.” Micah flashed his most charming smile. It had never really worked with her before, but drunken Kate seemed slightly more manageable.

“Oh, yeah.” She kept the wine bottle and headed for her office. He followed, scratching the back of his neck. This was completely out of character for her. He wondered what had upset her so badly. Not that there weren’t certain compensations, he thought, watching the exaggerated sway of her slender hips, encased in a curve-skimming dress.

In the office, she hopped up and sat on the front of her desk, then leaned over to unlock a drawer the hard way. Her hem drew all the way up to her knees.

He could see the sleek curve of her calf glimmering in silk stockings. His mouth went dry and his fingertips itched. He could practically feel how smooth those legs would be. Oh, yeah, there were definite advantages to her having an edge on.

Mentally, he shook himself. She did not need him to turn into a drooling leech, not now or ever, for that matter. He was on the verge of disgusting himself. He'd never been this obsessed with a woman before.

She waved a fat, white envelope in his face. "Halloo," she crooned. "I'm up here and I'm barely smashed, not oblivious. You'd think you'd never seen a woman's legs before."

"Oh, I've seen quite a few." He chuckled. "I've found myself pretty astonished at how often I see them lately."

"A closet prude, are you?"

Micah grinned. Was that a speck of disappointment in her tone? "Not at all. Would you like me to prove it?"

She a delicate pink blush spread over her pale skin and she ducked her head. Then she looked up at him through the thick screen of her lashes, and the corners of her mouth turned up in that wicked smile that always caught his attention. "I wouldn't like to shock your tender sensibilities," she purred.

Every inch of skin over his body flared to life. This was not good. He had to think of something, anything to derail this before he made an ass out of himself. If she kept teasing him like this, there was no telling when he'd snap and take her up on the offer. "Who else wanted to talk business with you?"

She planted her hands behind her hips and leaned back. "You would ask, wouldn't you?"

"That's me, obnoxious to a fault." He added in a wink, just to prove his point.

"And if I don't want to tell you?" She crossed her legs and the top foot started bouncing.

"I could keep pestering you." Her foot kept bouncing faster and faster. "Or I could kiss it out of you." Dead stop. He didn't want to think about what that meant. His ego might not survive.

"Why do you even want to know?"

That was the kicker. He wasn't even sure. "Let's call it curiosity."

Kate leveled a measuring look at him. Suddenly he wasn't sure how drunk she was. Then she took a swig straight out of the bottle. "Johnny Vittorelli."

"What?" Micah's brow drew down even as excitement lit within him. This could be the break they'd been waiting on.

"Johnny Vittorelli wanted to talk business with me."

"I didn't think you dealt with him."

"I don't. He wants to change that."

"How?"

“Wants to be my bootlegger. Well, the club’s.” She took another generous drink of wine and that foot started bopping again. “Offered a damn fine price. Thirty-four bucks per barrel of beer.”

Micah’s mind started churning, spitting out the possible paths. This was exactly what he and Jake had been waiting on, based on their information from Boston. Johnny wasn’t much on his own, little more than a vicious hoodlum and hardly worth the trip from Massachusetts. It was Poppa Paulo who was the top dog, running the Vittorelli family with an iron fist. Jacob would shit kittens when he heard Johnny had finally made his move.

There were several ways to play this in their favor. Micah could see the possibilities spinning out like a spider’s web. Hundreds of twists and turns, not all of which led to the center of the spider’s lair. Johnny was a turd but if they could use him as a stepping-stone, his father would be a big fat fly of a prize.

“That’s all he said? Booze?”

“That’s it for now,” she said. “But you know how the old saying goes. Give him an inch, he’ll take a mile.”

He clasped her cheeks in his hands and laid a fast smacking kiss on her. “You’re the top, doll. The absolute best.” Pulling back, he stared at her. The impetuous kiss he’d given her had sent his body zinging far more than he’d expected. He blinked, trying to shake off the dazed feeling flooding him. Jake needed to hear about this as soon as possible. He started to leave.

She grabbed his lapel and tugged. “Hold it just a hot second, mister. Aren’t you angry at Johnny?”

“Maybe. Not sure how it’s going to shake out.”

“I can tell you exactly how this is going to go. I’m not using Johnny. Period. You seem a bit too strangely happy at the idea. And lemme tell you, bub, if I have to find a new bootlegger all together, I will. You guys are swarming all over the city like cockroaches.”

“I don’t want you to work with him. But Jake and me have been looking for a way...” Micah hesitated. These were very delicate operations opening before him. There were things Kate was better off not knowing. Oh, like everything. “A way to open up a dialogue.” That wasn’t quite right. It sounded like something those psychology-obsessed old birds like Freud would say. Kate wasn’t buying it, either. Her finely arched eyebrows rose even higher and she tilted her head.

“A dialogue? What does that mean? There are only two types of people in this town. Those who want to work with the families and the mooks who stay as far away as possible.”

There was a third type, but far be it from him to remind her of law enforcement. Her alcohol seemed to be wearing off as the conversation went on. He was half disappointed. “And which are you?”

“I’m a mook, through and through.”

A full-throated laugh broke from him. He was glad she wasn’t quite as drunk as he’d originally thought. It would soothe his conscience when he did what he was about to. He cupped her face again, this time tracing the high lines of her cheekbones with his thumbs.

“You really are the best.” Slowly, he bent his head and gave her every opportunity to pull away. Instead, heat flared in her eyes and her pink tongue darted out to dampen her lips.

He kissed her. Gently, so lightly he made her strain forward for more. Her mouth was soft and yielding as his moved over it. She smelled of something so quietly sweet he wasn’t sure if it was really there. Pear blossoms. Everything but Kate disappeared, the noise of the bar floating away, the news about Johnny dissolved into a puff of smoke. There was only Kate and the magic she effortlessly wove around him. He delved deeper, pushing the kiss, tasting her lips to see if the magic lasted. It did. In fact, it only got stronger when she buried her delicate hands in his lapels and leaned into him. His cock swelled at her small acquiescence and he stepped between her legs, insistently slid his thigh between hers.

He pulled back.

The door wasn’t even closed and he’d nearly tried to get under her skirt.

He’d lost his mind.

His breathing was rough and every bit of his body had hardened, to the point of being painful. The sounds of the bar had disappeared because his blood had set up a furious rushing in his ears. He stared into her unblinking blue eyes.

He realized he’d never let go of her face and hadn’t even touched a single inch of her body. He was almost afraid of what would have happened if he had. For sure he’d go off his rocker. They’d have to be pried apart with a crowbar if he had anything to say about it.

“Tomorrow.” His voice was rough and gravelly. “We’ll discuss this tomorrow.”

“You mean Johnny?”

“Yeah, that too.”

Mutely, she nodded. She looked shell-shocked, which he could sympathize with. He’d known they’d be good together but that was nearly explosive. He nodded also. Why, he had no idea, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

Jacob. He had to let him know what was going on with Johnny Vittorelli. Jake would be out of his mind about it.

Micah looked at Kate’s heart-shaped face and her damp lips. Or he could stay here and find a way to pass the time.

No, he had a duty and quite a few obligations hounding him. He had to follow through with his commitments or he’d end up no better than his father. Father had also been a master of lying to women. “Tomorrow,” he said again.

He had one foot out the door when she spoke up.

“Trent.”

A hand on the frame, he looked up at her. She was still disheveled, with her normally sleek black hair tousled around her jaw, but that sharp look he always associated with her was back. “Trent, still? I’m sure you can do better than that.”

“Nothing has changed, Trent.”

“We’ll discuss that tomorrow.” He ducked out in a weak attempt to avoid her response. Because if he didn’t hear it, he wasn’t actually ignoring her wishes. Yeah, right. He knew exactly what she was about to say. Yammer about taking care of everything by herself. It was in Kate’s best interest to let him help. She needed him more than she could imagine, but she didn’t know it yet.

The next question was what he should tell her. All his wishful thinking aside, it would be hard as hell to get her to let him and Jake help. He had no doubt she could find a solution if he left her alone long enough to sort it out. He just had to make sure she saw the benefits of including them without revealing too much.

In the main room he found Jake still nose to nose with Susie.

“How dare you?” she spit, and poked him in the chest.

“Not my fault if you can’t handle the truth,” Jake smirked.

“You wouldn’t know the truth if it popped you a good one in the damned nose.”

“Tut-tut. Is that anyway for a woman to talk?”

Micah tapped Jake on the shoulder. “I hate to interrupt but I need to talk to you. Now.”

“Fine.” Jake couldn’t resist one parting shot. “You better smarten up, kid, before it’s too late.”

“Kid!” she screeched as she balled her hands on her hips, but it was too late. Jake was already leading the way to a relatively quiet spot. Micah shook his head before they could get there and pointed to the door.

“What’s up?”

“Wait,” Micah grinned. “I’ve got great news.”

Outside, Micah made for their car, the sharp little Daimler they used when they weren’t hauling goods. A deep, glossy black, it could go a whopping sixty on the open road. They’d confiscated it from a small-time hijacker who’d been busted elbows deep in stolen cargo outside of Pittsburgh. Micah slid in the driver’s seat. “Come on. We’ve got to go make plans.”

“Spill it already.” Jake glowered at him.

“This is so good you may kiss me. I kissed the person who told me, after all. I do, however, ask you to restrain yourself.”

Jake got in the passenger’s seat with a sigh. “What did Kate tell you?”

“Just what makes you think it was Kate?”

“You’ve been looking for an excuse to kiss her for months.”

“Jesus, are we back to that again?”

“Oh? Was it someone else?”

“You’ve sucked all the fun out of this, I hope you know.”

Jake settled in his seat as Micah pulled away from the curb. “My job is done then. Tell me.”

“Johnny Vittorelli is trying to move in on our territory and take over deliveries to The Kirk.”

Jake laughed and clapped his hands. “Bub, I tip my hat to ya. You’re right, this is great, exactly what we hoped for. We tie up baby Johnny and we’ll be able to lead Vittorelli right where we need him. Poppa Paulo hates any of his men getting out of line, even his son.”

“We’re almost there, Jake. All our plans, all our work.”

“The end’s in sight.”

Micah breathed a sigh of relief. It was probably premature but at least they had a point to plan from. For too long, he and his partner had been flying by the seat of their pants, at the mercy of the higher ups. He’d been starting to feel like a duck paddling in a vat of molasses, getting nowhere fast when this chance to take a stab at the Vittorellis had fallen into their laps.

A slow grin spread over him. “You can say that again. The end’s not only in sight, I can reach out and touch it.”

Chapter Nine

Johnny dipped his fingers in the brass font set next to the church's front doors. He crossed himself slowly, properly. Forehead to chest, left shoulder to right. Anything to avoid slipping into the hard pew next to his father. He'd go to the altar and piously bow his head, maybe say a rosary, if he thought Pop would buy it.

Only a handful of people sat here and there in the pews of the church. Two widows in black in the front row. A mother and her daughter near the confessionals. Poppa Paulo Vittorelli sat in the next to last row, near the banks of short, white candles. Paulo wasn't particularly tall, but he was an intimidating figure nonetheless. He was rotund, with the same thick, dark brown hair he'd had twenty years ago, plus bushy eyebrows over dark eyes. At the back of the church, in the shadows, Snake and Tiny hovered, keeping an eye over Paulo.

The air was thick with humidity and the cloying smell of old incense and sweat. Johnny sat. His father didn't even turn his head to look at him, keeping his on the larger-than-life plaster crucifix that hung over the altar. His mouth moved silently in prayer. The pew was hard without a cushion, so Johnny shifted. Twice he opened his mouth to speak. Bad idea. Until he was good and ready, Pop would ignore Johnny. And then it would go worse once he lit into him.

Johnny turned his attention to the other churchgoers. The two old ladies were nothing, widows wrapped in yards and yards of boring black wool. The girl was another matter. While her mom piously knelt with folded hands, the girl peeked around, bored. Her dark hair wrapped around up at the back of her head in a knot and her narrow shoulders fluttered and twitched with impatience. She turned nearly all the way around and revealed fine features, an up-turned nose and a lush rose of a mouth. Johnny figured she was about fifteen.

He winked.

Her jaw dropped, her sweet pink mouth opening on a gasp, and then she whirled. Johnny had to suppress a chuckle. It was a shame she'd caught her mother's attention and earned a smack on the knuckles. No more shocking the little schoolgirl. He could have had fun with that soft mouth.

Poppa Paulo leaned back in the pew, showing he was done with his devotionals. Snake and Tiny stepped forward but Paulo waved them back. A small flick of his hand, the gesture said everything he needed it to. *No, we're fine. Dinner was satisfactory. Kill him.* Johnny watched the motion with the same

fascination he had at seven. He'd been sure one day his father would show him everything he knew, including how to control grown men with a tiny gesture.

Instead the bastard had shoved him out. Sure, no one messed with Johnny, and no two-bit punk would dare kill him, but Pop had saddled him with a small crew of useless men. Everyone knew he didn't have his father's backing for business ventures.

"Guisseppe, where were you Sunday?"

"I was busy, Pop. Work." More like he'd slept off Saturday night's drunk and tried to figure out where he'd met the blonde draped over his bed. It was a good thing he hadn't established Earline in his apartment yet, or the screeching would have been too much for his aching head.

"And just what type of work is this?"

Johnny shrugged. His father's dark eyes had always felt heavier than fists. "You know, the usual."

"Apparently I do not know. Tell me, will you not?"

"I have an arrangement with Leo the Lizard. Him and me are going to go into bootlegging."

"He and I."

"Yes, Pop, he and I." Poppa Paulo had come over from the Old Country with his parents when he was six. Unlike many of the old timers, he'd worked mercilessly to scrub the Italian out of his speech. His thick hand had smacked upside the back of Johnny's skull many times when he'd spoken wrong. What Pop didn't know was that his over-careful speech marked him out as a foreigner as easily as if he'd refused to learn English.

"I do not like you working with this Leo. He is not to be trusted."

"That's bullshit."

Pop cracked Johnny's knuckles with a prayer book. Just like that girl had gotten popped. A time-old tradition for maintaining discipline in church, it smarted like hell. Johnny's fist balled up and his chin tipped down. Snake and Tiny had seen every second of that. They'd be telling everyone in the family just as soon as they dropped Pop off at the house.

"You wish to hit me." Pop waved that fucking hand, telling Johnny he didn't fear his son in the slightest. "You will not." Pop looked toward the altar. "You're a good Catholic boy. Why do you wish to work with some nasty Jew?"

"Because we can make good money."

"We've always done quite well for ourselves staying in the neighborhood. I've always dealt with our kind of people. I protect them; I make my money off them. It is sufficient."

Not for Johnny. Not by half. "It'll be worth it, you'll see. Hand over fist, we'll be raking it in, I'm telling ya." It wasn't so bad to want a little respect in this town.

Pop turned back to study Johnny. He always felt like he ought to be in short pants whenever Pop looked at him like that—steady and patient, mouth pinched, with a deep furrow between his brows. “And is money the only thing of importance to you?”

“Of course not.” There was always power. “Loyalty, family. I care about many things.”

“I have heard you have been in the bars and restaurants all week. Every night.”

Pop had eyes and ears everywhere. If a shoeshine boy or a busboy sent a good tip up the chain, money came down. Funny how Pop couldn’t see the world ran on cold, hard cash.

“It’s work, Pop, I’m telling you. Leo and I are setting up our territory.”

“This better not end up like that truck hijacking you set up.”

Johnny pulled at his collar. The hijacking had been a disaster. Both the driver and his companion had been armed and they came out shooting. In the end, both of them lay on the asphalt dead, but so did three of Johnny’s men. The take after they’d sold the load had only been around a thousand. The stink had taken forever to die down.

“We’ve already got an in at The Kirk. We’ll own it in no time. It’ll be fine, Pop.”

“How do you know this?”

“I just do.”

“What does Leo the Lizard bring to the table?”

This was worse than being interviewed by a Prohibition Agent. “He has the connections. Knows a bunch of different ways to get the booze in.”

“So why does he need you? Why does he not go rake in this money on his own?”

“He needs protection. Muscle.”

Poppa Paulo snorted in disgust. “You are merely a hired thug.”

“No, Pop.” He ground out his words for fear of saying something he’d regret later. “I’m making the deals with the club and restaurant owners. I am no one’s hired thug.”

Poppa Paulo flicked his hand again. Swear to God, someday not too far off, Johnny was gonna grab that damned hand and break it. He’d snap the finger bones first, one by one, starting with Paulo’s diamond ring bedecked pinkie. Then he’d move on to the slender bones in the palm. A ball-peen hammer could crush them each separately. Painfully.

“What will you do about the other bootleggers?”

“What?” Johnny jerked his gaze away from his father’s fragile, pudgy hand and blinked.

“Surely you do not imagine the other rumrunners will quietly turn over their territory.”

Actually Johnny hadn’t worried much about it. He figured he’d muscle them out when the time came. Maybe kill one if he had to, to serve as an example. “I’ve got a plan.”

“Good. Good then. I look forward to having a drink you supply in this Kirk place.” Rising, Poppa Paulo clapped him on the back. “Stay, say a prayer. Light a candle.” Pop cranked the pressure down on his

shoulder, pinching a nerve even through three layers of clothing. “Maybe you should say a prayer for this plan of yours. There is only so much failure I will tolerate. Even from my own son.”

Johnny gulped and nodded. His pulse thudded heavily under his tight necktie. “Sure, Pop. I understand. You won’t be disappointed.”

Paulo smiled. White and even under his close-set eyes and hooked nose, his smile had always been his best feature. “Your mother will be looking for you in church on Sunday. It is her you should worry about disappointing.”

“Okay. Tell Ma I love her and I’ll see her soon.”

“I will.” With that Paulo left, bodyguards trailing behind him.

Johnny waited until the heavy doors shut behind his father before heading down the side aisle to the rows and rows of flickering candles. One of the little old ladies bumped into him on her way out of the church, a fragile bundle of rags and bone. Johnny snarled at her. She squeaked and fluttered like a bird as she scuttled away.

Up front, Johnny dropped a coin in the offering box and struck a match. He’d say a prayer all right. He cupped the weak flame with a hand to keep it steady as he found an unlit candle. He touched the flame to the white wick and prayed.

He prayed he’d someday be powerful enough to kill his father.

Chapter Ten

Kate groaned and adjusted the cool washcloth draped over her eyes. A steady bang, bang, bang behind her temples felt like lumberjacks were swinging away in there. She could almost understand why Patrick stayed constantly drunk if this was what he faced every morning. Her stomach felt uneven, as if it had been twisted around and stuck back in her upside down. At least the house was quiet. Patrick was presumably passed out upstairs and it was still too early for anyone to be working down in The Kirk.

She should have known better than to drink last night. Her father's deep, rolling voice sounded in her mind. "We Kirklands run from nothing. Hold strong and fight 'til the bitter end."

She sighed. It didn't seem to be true now, if it ever had. Mama had hidden in her room, sick with fainting spells. She had often suspected mama had laced her corsets too tight on purpose, so she could stay tucked away in her private haven. Father was constantly at the bar, working. Patrick hid in a bottle, and last night Kate had joined him there.

Holding strong was damn tough. Five years on her own had taken just about every scrap of energy she had. Now there was Johnny. The thought of him set her personal lumberjacks working double time. Pain spiked down to her cheeks.

And Trent had kissed her. She balled up the memory of his hot, beguiling mouth, and booted it far, far away. There was no time for him. Not now, and maybe not ever.

Part of her wanted to give up. Over the years, she'd gotten a few offers for The Kirk. She'd make a pretty penny if she took one now, before anyone discovered Johnny knocking at the door. It'd be enough to move out of New York. Bundle Patrick up and move to the country. While she was at it, she could lock Patrick in a closet and dry him out. Who knew, without The Kirk slung around her neck, maybe she'd have time to find out if she wanted a husband or not.

All she'd have to do is find a buyer. Hell, maybe she could even sell to Johnny. That would be one way to get him off her back. She and Patrick would move upstate. Poughkeepsie was a nice little town. She'd strap him down to sober him up...and then what? What would she do with herself? Sitting idle had never suited her. After three months she'd be bored out of her mind.

Besides, there was no way she could live with herself if she gave up the family legacy. Patrick sure wasn't fit to carry on. The idea of someone like Johnny Vittorelli running her father's bar left ashes in her mouth. Father would likely rise up out of the grave to haunt her. And his ghost would have as hard a right as he'd had in life.

That meant she'd have to find a solution. A way to wipe Johnny Vittorelli off her slate. It shouldn't be too hard to do. The man was a two-bit flake, a loser who'd never be able to take over the Vittorelli operations. Everyone in the city knew it. All she had to do was find a way to yank the rug out from under him. Easy-peasy.

Or it would be, as soon as her head stopped pounding in time with her pulse.

The bell on her front door chimed, as loud as St. Peter's bell tower.

"Sweet angels in heaven," she moaned, and put her hands to her head to hold her brains in. Maybe if she ignored them, whoever it was would go away. She wasn't expecting anyone.

They cranked the bell again.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming," she muttered, and pushed her way up from the sofa. Tossing the cloth down to the cushions, Kate put a hand over her eyes to block out the sun and stumbled into the foyer. She yanked open the door. The tall, shadowy outline of a man loomed as yellow sunlight stabbed her vision. She shaded her brow.

"What the hell do you want, Trent?"

"You sure do know how to greet a man, don't you, Kate?" Trent turned, shifting so golden rays slanted across his honeyed skin. He flashed an easy grin at her, the one he trotted out every three minutes. This time, however, there was a twinkle of amusement in his deep brown eyes.

She raised an eyebrow. "What are you doing here? The Kirk doesn't open for eight hours. Not to mention, you're at the wrong door."

"I told you I would come by to talk about your little problem with Johnny."

"And I do believe I told you I would handle it."

"Oh? Got a plan yet?"

"No, I've got a hangover instead."

Trent's chuckle was warm and low and lit low down parts of her body she'd thought long atrophied by disuse, making her remember the heavy, delicious feeling of a man's body along hers. She sighed and stepped back from the doorway.

"You might as well come in. I'd rather all the neighbors didn't see you hanging around on my step."

He stepped in and shut the door solidly behind him. The thump made her flinch as it echoed in her skull.

"You run a juice joint out of your basement and you're worried about the neighbors seeing me on your stoop?"

Leading the way down the narrow hallway to her kitchen, she shot him an annoyed look over her shoulder. He looked good in his brown suit, clean and well pressed, as if he hadn't been out until all hours. As usual, his brown hair was combed back from his forehead, displaying the amused twinkle in his dark

eyes. It wasn't fair at all. She surely looked like hell, as even thinking about grooming had made her skin hurt.

"That's different. The Kirk is business. Little Miss Barker, three doors down, for one, will assume we have a personal connection."

"Don't we?"

Her cheeks flamed hot. Instantly she was back in her office, kissing him again, with the hard thump of his pulse under her palms. Her mouth was dry as cotton and she couldn't swallow. "No, we don't."

The kitchen was a small but airy room at the back of the house, filled with black and white tiled counters and glass-fronted cabinets. Kate took down a cup and filled it with water from the tap. She drank down half of it, and then turned to lean against a low counter. Trent had made himself quite comfortable, sitting at the table. His hands were folded and he gazed at her steadily, the corner of his mouth quirked up.

"Look, Trent," she said. "I appreciate your concern. Really, I do. And I don't want you to worry. You're not going to lose The Kirk as a client. At least not because of this."

"This?"

"Because of Johnny trying to muscle in."

"Oh, good. I thought you meant last night's non-personal connection for a minute. Though if that didn't qualify, I think I'd like to find out what's personal to you."

Kate narrowed her eyes and planted her feet apart. "That's what you came here to talk about?"

"That? Can't you call it what it was?" He leaned back and hitched his arm across the chair back next to him. His every move was cruelly fluid, tempting her to lustful thoughts. "I dare you to say it."

"Fine," she spat. "That kiss. It was a mistake. No, it wasn't even important enough to qualify as a mistake."

"You wound me." His cocky grin gave lie to the words.

"I don't have time to deal with it now."

"So you agree there's something complicated between us?"

"I didn't say that at all!"

"You don't have time to deal with it," he echoed. He tipped his head to the side. "That implied it."

The man was utterly frustrating. She set her fists on her hips and ignored the adorable twinkle in his eyes. "There's nothing to deal with. Nothing to happen. We are going to pretend it never happened."

"Are we?"

"Yes," she said firmly, with a decisive nod.

"Great." He sat forward and clasped his hands on the enameled tabletop. "Now that you're not feeling sorry for yourself and your miserable hangover, can we get on to the real reason I came by? Johnny Vittorelli?"

Kate's jaw dropped open and she stifled the sudden urge to throw her water glass at his thick skull. Her stomach tumbled into her knees as she realized how foolish she seemed. Aggravating, frustrating man, to get her all wound up and then pretend last night meant nothing, that bringing it up was merely a means to an end. Fine. Just fine. They'd talk about this Johnny mess and she'd happily see him on his way.

"There is no problem with Johnny. Nothing you need to involve yourself with, at any rate. I don't need your help."

"I'm sure you're perfectly able to handle this on your own. But why should you have to?"

She shook her head, and her headache wasn't nearly as bad as it had been ten minutes ago. "I've been in this business since I was big enough to be away from my mother for more than an hour. Johnny's small time. I can handle him without your help."

"Can you maybe put your pride aside for a minute? I've already said you can deal with him. All I'm saying now is that you don't have to." Trent leaned forward, an earnest expression on his handsome face.

She crossed her arms over her chest. At this moment, she trusted him less than she ever had before, which wasn't much to begin with. There was a set to his wide eyes that reminded her of a slick-mannered grifter she'd once seen working five hundred bucks out of a rube on Coney Island. He seemed awfully set on involving himself in the situation, and she wasn't sure why. He wanted to sleep with her, that much she simply had to admit. But that was no reason to ride in on a white horse.

"If you're not worried about keeping The Kirk as a client, what's in it for you?"

"Something has to be in it for me? I can't just want to help?"

"These are busy times and we're all busy people. Including me. Spit out your reason so I can smile and say 'thanks but no thanks', and you can go on your way."

"Jesus, you are one tough cookie."

"Thanks."

"But no thanks?"

She had to stifle a smile, and twirled a hand in a *get on with it* gesture.

"In case you've missed it, there's not one solid reason past your stubborn pride why I should not help you out. My business is growing and I like it that way, but I am relatively new to the area. I don't want to lose even one customer, particularly not to Johnny Vittorelli. And more than that, I particularly like keeping you as a customer." His voice dropped with silky emphasis and he pinned her with a sharp, hungry stare.

Her mouth opened and closed a couple times. Finally, her jaw set and her teeth clinked together. "I've told you, I can take care of my own business."

"And I've told you I understand that. But it's not a reason for me to stay uninvolved. It's in my best interest to make sure you retain control of The Kirk, for my business. Plus if you're run out of town with your tail between your legs, it'll be damn hard to seduce you."

"Not going to happen anyway," she automatically snapped.

“No?” He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his lean waist. He couldn’t look more arrogantly confident, even if he’d been wearing a crown and sitting on a gold throne. “Then you’ve got nothing to lose. And I have everything to gain. Respect among my fellow sort of business man, primarily.”

“You won’t get much respect for winning over Johnny. He’s an annoying fly.”

“With a very big father.”

“Who you shouldn’t anger.”

He shrugged, a nothing gesture that his wide shoulders and finely cut coat managed to turn sensual. “Not if we handle it right.”

“We,” she echoed.

“Yes, we.”

“I thought your goal was to ride in and fix everything, while I sit in my office and worry about what the big bad men are doing.”

“Then you thought wrong. I didn’t say anything like that. I want you to let your pride bend. I don’t want to break you.” Lush with promise, his voice dropped an octave on the last two words.

The flesh above her breasts goose pimped and an unwelcome heat bloomed low through her body. She kept her expression impervious. “And if I still say no?”

A small smile tipped his lips. “I still go to work on our friend Johnny for trying to muscle in on my territory. Anything’s easier if you have enough allies but I’ll manage.”

Kate studied the man who looked so at home at her kitchen table. She had a feeling she could watch him for years and not know exactly what was going on in his head. Even more disturbing was the idea that maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, to watch him for years. “I’ll think about it,” she said. Anything to get him out of her house, out of her kitchen.

He nodded, a slow deliberate dip. “Good enough. For now.”

“Great. Then you can—” Kate cut off as a loud thumping came from the front of the house, accompanied by the musical tinkle of shattered glass. She heard it so often, she was beginning to think she’d know that sound if a bottle fell on the other side of the Hudson. She dashed for the stairs.

Patrick lay crumpled halfway down them, surrounded by the fragmented remains of one of his bottles. Pungent whiskey fumes drifted around the entryway.

“Damn,” she muttered.

It would be hard as hell to get a good grip on him on the narrow stairs. She’d have to slip her arms under Patrick’s shoulders and slide him up stair by stair, if she even could. A hand on her elbow stopped her, just as she stepped foot on the bottom riser.

“I’ll do it,” Trent said. There was no surprise in his eyes, but then she shouldn’t have expected it, shouldn’t have felt grief twist her at its absence. Half the city knew about her drunken lout of a brother. It

was likely why Johnny had chosen her to be one of the first recipients of his offer, thinking her alone and vulnerable.

Automatically, she shook her head. "I can move him. I've done it before."

His mouth set in a flat line and something lurked in the back of his eyes. Pity? Disgust? She didn't know and she wasn't even sure if she wanted to.

"I bet you have," he muttered. "Your feet are bare. You'll cut yourself."

She looked down at her feet, suddenly dumbfounded. Her naked toes looked pale against the dark red of the carpet. If Patrick had reached another level of oblivion, she would have to start keeping slippers on the lower level.

Mute, she nodded and he bounded up the stairs. He swung Patrick up over a shoulder in a move laden with his usual grace. A few years ago, it wouldn't have been so easy. The two men were matched in height, but Patrick had wasted away.

"Where to?"

She hesitated and chewed her lip. "Upstairs. First door on the right." It was the spare bedroom. She'd take the opportunity to shovel out Patrick's room, just as soon as she got Trent away from this embarrassing situation. She'd have to pick her way around the glass. It had never occurred to her to keep a pair of shoes downstairs, but it seemed like Patrick was making a new habit of shattering glass everywhere.

Trent was only gone for a minute before he reappeared on the landing, without Patrick. "Do you have shoes down there?"

"Um. No."

"Which room is yours?"

Kate's cheeks heated and she tried to remember if she'd left out anything. A shift draped over the foot of her bed, probably. He wouldn't even notice. "Right in front of you. My slippers are behind the door."

He was back in a flash again and picked his way over the glass and down the stairs to her. With a flourish, he handed over the goods. She told herself the heat in his eyes meant nothing, but her blood charged in response anyway, her skin flushing with it.

"Thank you for your help. You didn't have to."

His expression sobered instantly. "No, I'm sure you could have managed. He often this drunk so early in the day?"

"No, not really. He must have had an especially hard night." The lie rose automatically after years of covering up how bad Patrick had gotten. Trent's gaze searched hers and she squelched the idea that he could see the lies, could see all the way into her soul. "I'd have managed."

"I bet," he murmured. "Easier with help though, wasn't it?"

It certainly had been. It would have taken forever to get Patrick roused enough to move, if she couldn't have dragged him. Now all she had was a little clean up. "Like I said, you have my thanks," she said, and meant it this time.

"You know, you're not doing your brother any favors by coddling him."

His words were like a finger poking in a raw wound. Patrick was her own burden to bear and no one else's concern. "Oh Jesus, you had to go and ruin it, didn't you? You know nothing about my brother. You know nothing about our life and what's made him who he is." She stalked to the front door and yanked it open. "Dry up, Trent. Get gone and stay that way. At least for a day or two."

Picking up his bowler hat from the hall table, he stepped out into sunshine that caressed him like a lover, but paused on the stoop. Calmly, he settled his hat over his silken hair and turned. "I may not know about your life, Kate Kirkland. But I'd sure like to."

With an ineffectual, inarticulate groan, she slammed the door and sagged against it. The low male chuckle that wafted through the wood made her fists clench.

But *easier with help* echoed through her mind, again and again.

Chapter Eleven

The party was in full swing. The mansion glowed with electric light, yellow rays spilling all the way across the expansive yard until they hit the sidewalk where Micah stood. Even from there, he could hear loud voices and raucous laughter. A small band tucked somewhere in the sprawling three-story mansion threw out the energetic whine and blow of trumpets. He wouldn't hear the tinkling glass and gurgling spirits until he was right on top of it. Sounded like a hell of a party.

Pity it was illegal.

Even more of a pity he couldn't bust it up.

The grand front door sprang open and a woman dashed out. Short and plump, her hair was bobbed at her chin. In one hand she held her shin-length skirt above her knees, and carried a large green bottle in the other. Rolled-down stockings flashed as she wove her way down the grass, laughter trilling behind her.

"Betsy!" roared a man from the open doorway. "Betsy, come back."

Betsy wasn't intimidated. She giggled as she glanced over her shoulder but kept running. Straight into Micah's arms.

"Hey there, ma'am. Might want to watch where you're going." A comforting smile came easily to his lips.

"I stole this," she giggled, holding up the dark green bottle. Close up, she looked older than when she'd run across the grass barefoot. Fine lines etched her round face.

"Isn't this your house, ma'am?" He'd recognized her as soon as she'd turned her bleary eyes up toward him.

She pivoted to survey the large house. "Why, yes. Yes, it is."

"A bit hard to steal from your own house."

"I sup—suppo—I guess so." She let out a delicate hiccup, covering her mouth with the tips of her fingers. "I'm a bit spifflicated."

"I see that."

The man finally made it to them, huffing as he scurried up. Tall and genteel, he hooked an arm around the woman's shoulders. "Come on back now, Betsy."

Micah hooked his thumbs in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "Evening, Mr. Mayor."

Mayor Walker blinked at him and held out a free hand. "Evening, young man. Always nice to meet one of my constituents."

“Oh, we’ve met before, sir.” He shook the man’s hand briefly. It was a good shake, hard and assured. But then the mayor had done enough glad-handing to develop a good shake. There was no point in mentioning Micah wouldn’t have voted for him, even if he’d been in town at the time, since Walker was a product of Tammany Hall and therefore soft on crime, something that made Micah’s job ten times harder.

“Have we? I’m afraid I can’t quite recall.” He spoke slowly, every word carefully measured and doled out. Drunk, too, and trying to hide it.

He rocked back on his heels and smiled his aw-shucks smile, the one that had gotten him out of trouble starting when he was eight and stole a blueberry pie from the neighbor’s window. “I don’t suppose you would. We met at the Policeman’s Ball a few years ago. I’m Prohibition Agent Micah Trent.”

“Uh-oh,” Betsy said on a hiccup. “He’s come to bust up the party and ship us all up the river to Sing-Sing.”

“Don’t be silly, darling.” Her husband rubbed her arm briskly. “I’m sure Agent Trent here understands the way things work.”

The way things work. Micah sure did understand. A few years into Prohibition, in 1923, New York’s government realized they didn’t particularly like the taste of tonic water without gin. They’d thrown up their hands and repealed the weak state law that supposedly reinforced the Volstead Act, the federal law enforcing Prohibition. Bad enough trying to distinguish the legal homemade wine operations from illegal bars. Now the Prohibition Agents had a hell of a time getting anything done. They were at the mercy of local agents in terms of getting any help or backup.

“In fact,” continued the Mayor, “I’m sure Agent Trent here was about to leave. I’d invite you up to the house for a drink, but I wouldn’t want to cause you a conflict of interests.”

“Sure, sure,” said Micah heartily, but inside he seethed. “I’m afraid I’ve got to come in anyway.”

The Mayor’s mouth gaped and his eyes went wide. “You’re not—That is, you can’t be thinking—”

A wicked gleam of amusement wound through Micah, lifting his small smile into a full on grin. He ought to say yes, just to watch the powerful man twist in astonishment. But he did understand the way things were. All over the country rich men threw alcohol-fueled parties. In New York, alcohol powered the government. “No worries, I’m just looking for someone.” He raised two fingers in a Boy Scout salute. “I won’t cause any trouble.”

“All right, that’s all right then. Come on in.” An arm tucked around Betsy, he led the way up the gently sloping lawn.

Inside, chaos reigned. Partygoers crammed into nearly every spare inch, including three young women who perched on the marble banister of the wide staircase. They sat shoulder to shoulder, seemingly unconcerned that their bare calves dangled over a twenty-foot drop. Their feather and rhinestone headdresses bobbed as they laughed and joked with the cluster of well-dressed men around them.

Micah shook his head and drove on, keeping his eyes peeled for Walton Winthrop as he wound through the crush. He finally found his temporary boss in a knot of people clustered near the band. Of average height, Winthrop still managed to stand out. He was unusually pale all over, from his ash blond hair to his dove grey suit, and he was one of the few people in the entire place without a glass of giggle water in his hand. Micah's mouth twisted. Apparently it was one thing to attend a wild party and another thing to be caught drinking at one.

Catching Winthrop's eye was enough. The man disengaged from his group and came over to the shadowy corner Micah stood in, brows drawn tight and a nasty frown on his face.

"What are you doing here, Trent?"

"Been looking for you all day." He hitched his thumbs in his trouser pockets and took a look around the large ostentatious ballroom. The large, crystal chandelier had been wired for electric light and threw a bright glow over the Sheiks and Shebas who crowded the room. Every sparkle and bauble the garment district could attach to clothing glittered on their garb. "Must say I didn't expect to find you here."

"I've got to play the game if I expect to get my men any support." Winthrop's mouth pinched tight. "But then I don't answer to you, do I? Unless I'm mistaken in my impression, it's the other way around."

"Sure, boss, sure."

Winthrop sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "You're lucky I like you, Trent."

"Eh, you don't like me. You just have a keen appreciation for my fine skills."

"You've got enough arrogance to swamp everyone here." A sharp bark of laughter escaped him. "But you're unfortunately right. It's why they shipped you in for this operation. What have you got for me?"

"The Kirk." This was the difficult part. Winthrop hadn't liked his handling of The Kirk sting for a while now.

"What about it?"

It was Micah's turn to rub the tension from the back of his neck. Telling Winthrop about Johnny meant they were one step closer to wiping out Kate's bar. He'd seen the unswerving loyalty she gave to her staff, and the devotion they returned. And somehow he just couldn't yet picture himself raiding her. Though he'd have to. This world left very little room for flex. Either a person was on the side of law and order or they weren't, and didn't deserve his pity.

"Johnny Vittorelli's made his move."

A muscle jumped in Winthrop's jaw and he took Micah by the shoulder to guide him into a small, dim room. A library, with walls of built-in shelves and dark, comfortable-looking furniture. "Tell me."

"Just like we expected, he's made the offer to become The Kirk's bootlegger. My nominal position."

"Really?" The gleam that lit his ice-pale eyes betrayed the intelligence that had enabled him to move to the top of his field. "What's your plan?"

Protect Kate and make sure the scum wasn't able to take advantage of her, before he was forced to bring her world crashing down with a bust. Not a good idea to mention Kate. He shrugged. "Not exactly sure yet. But Johnny's a hothead. He's sure to fuck something up. When he does, we'll have him. We have him, we'll have an in on his father."

"Good, good." A calculating look slipped over his face—undoubtedly thinking about the newspaper headlines he'd get if his agency took down someone as big as Vittorelli.

Not that Micah minded. He didn't fancy seeing his name in print. He was treading a thin line to begin with. Their covers were meant for fast ins and outs, not lingering around for long periods of time.

And the longer he stayed, the more he saw the unswerving loyalty that pinged between Kate and everyone she cared about.

When Micah was growing up, his father hadn't had either a law-abiding bone in his body, or a speck of loyalty. For a little while, Dad had played at being a family man, until he'd become too enamored with his mistress and run off to start a second family, without bothering to cut Mother free. At the same time, he'd conned, stolen and rolled as a tough guy all for cold, hard cash to support his new family. So Micah'd figured the two characteristics weren't mutually relatable. Kate's loyalty was the puzzle. He couldn't figure out how she had so much and still managed to break every rule she came across.

"Use whatever resources you need," Winthrop said.

"I always do." With a nod, Micah turned to leave, but his boss halted him with a word.

"Don't take any wooden nickels, son."

"I never do," Micah said, and then grinned.

Chapter Twelve

Pausing on the sidewalk, Kate adjusted her armful of bags. Getting them delivered would have been an easier choice but she'd been swept up in the first fun afternoon she'd had shopping in months. At first a few dresses and a pair of beautiful green shoes hadn't felt heavy. Now the twine handles bit into the flesh of her wrists. Kate shifted a bag and proceeded on her way.

Out of nowhere, a waif of a girl popped up in front of her. "Can I carry your package, miss?"

Kate blinked and looked around. A second ago, she hadn't seen the girl. Where had she come from? There was an alley to the left but it was narrow and the entrance was piled with boxes and pallets from a shirtwaist factory. Could she have been in there? She was skinny, the bones of her wrists standing out in stark relief below her too-short dress sleeves. The dress itself was thin and threadbare and went all the way to the ground in the styles from ten years ago. The hem was dusty and grimy but the girl's face was scrubbed clean. Lank blond hair hung in her eyes. Kate figured she was about sixteen.

It was a shame. People of all ages flooded into the city, thinking a brand new life waited to be plucked. Some found what they were looking for. Others had a harder time of it, like this girl seemed to be having.

"Sure," Kate said as she held out the bags. There was a slight risk to it. Theoretically the girl could run off with Kate's packages. If necessary, Kate could run her down. More likely, the girl was after a few cents from a tip.

She flashed a brilliant smile at Kate, showing off surprisingly bright, even teeth. "Thanks miss." She took the burden and fell into step.

Kate would have to give her a good enough tip to get a decent meal. She had the narrow shoulder blades of a bird. "What's your name?"

Pale blue eyes widened. Kate guessed no one had asked in a while. It could be easy to get lost in the big, bad city. "I'm Annie."

"Annie, I'm Kate Kirkland." She stopped and turned, sticking her hand out. "It's nice to meet you."

Annie's grip started out weak but then firmed up and she shook her hand energetically. "Nice to meet you too, Miss Kirkland."

"So Annie, why don't you have a job?" She started back down the street.

"I ain't been able to find one yet. Tried at a couple factories but other girls beat me to it. I've heard there's a cosmetics factory with some open positions. I'll try there tomorrow. And if that doesn't work out I'm sure I'll find some other."

Kate nodded. Industrious and upbeat. Good traits. "Where's home?"

"North Carolina. I already miss it a little. The city's exciting but home was beautiful."

There couldn't have been a more perfect opportunity to nose deeper. "Then why did you leave?"

The skin over Annie's cheeks tightened and she looked down at the concrete as her mouth flattened. Her shoulders hunched almost to her ears. "Got a new step-daddy. My third one."

"I see," said Kate, and she did. It was possible the new daddy wouldn't let her go to a motion picture, but Kate didn't think so. Annie was willing to do menial chores in hopes of a tip and she was looking for factory work. There were other options that would look easier if she'd been a girl bent on a fast life and easy money. They'd arrived at the brick stoop of Kate's brownstone and she made a fast decision. It was possible Annie would turn the offer down, but it was worth a shot. "Annie, how would you like a job?"

"I'd love one Miss Kirkland." She looked up the narrow three-story front of Kate's home. "Do you need a maid?"

Kate chuckled. She'd gotten used to not having a housekeeper. Patrick kept his mess to his room and she learned to make do on her own. Too often she spent all her waking time at work. "Not quite. I own a blind pig."

Annie took a small step back. "I'm a good girl, Miss Kirkland."

"That's what I need. All I want is someone to serve drinks. No hanky-panky."

Annie glanced back at the upper windows. They gleamed in the late afternoon sun. "I don't know. You'd pay enough for me to rent a room somewhere?"

"Of course. Or if you like you could stay here and I'd only dock you enough for meals. You could save a little extra money."

"Really? I've never lived somewhere this nice before. Our home in North Carolina wasn't half as big and we had seven people in it. Is it just you here?"

"Me and my brother Patrick." Kate led the way up the stairs and unlocked the door. Annie handed over the bags and Kate set them on a table. The innocent girl looked around with big eyes. Kate tried to see the entryway through her eyes. Years ago, her mother had decorated it with spindly-legged chairs and pictures of the rolling hills of upstate New York in gilt frames. It might be a bit intimidating to a girl from a small, rural town. "There is one thing you should know before you decide between here and a rooming house. My brother is a drunk."

Sympathy pooled in Annie's big eyes. "Gets mean when he drinks?"

"Nope, not a bit. He gets very quiet and locks himself in his room most of the time." Kate led the way down the narrow hallway to the kitchen. "Occasionally he sings Irish ballads at strange hours."

“And sometimes he’s as near to sober as can be and has coffee in the kitchen.”

Kate froze in her tracks. Behind her, Annie stumbled as she tried not to run into Kate. Patrick sat at the table, a white mug in his hands. Black hair tumbled over his forehead and he was sickly pale. When he put the coffee down it jittered against the tabletop. He pushed away from the table and went to the sugar bowl that sat on the black and white tiled counter. A shaky stream of sugar poured into his coffee as Patrick skipped the bother of a spoon.

“You’re up,” Kate said stupidly.

“Your powers of observation grow more astute every day.”

She swallowed tightly. This was not the brother she’d once loved. “Annie, on the third floor are two bedrooms. Why don’t you head up there and see if you like them. I’ll be up in a moment to discuss your duties. And we’ll go get whatever belongings you have, if you wish to stay here. Otherwise I’ll take you over to the Martha Washington and we’ll get you a room.”

Mute, Annie nodded and scurried out of the room.

“Adopted another stray, have you, sister?”

“She’s not a stray. I needed a waitress and she needed a job. It’s a fair trade.” Willing her heartbeat to calm, Kate walked across to pour herself a cup of coffee from the vacuum pot on the counter.

“If you help enough people do you believe you’ll make up for your failure to save me?” Patrick’s eyes were flashing at her but she couldn’t read the message below the vitriol. Staying calm was vital. If she allowed Patrick to get her upset the situation would only get worse.

“Are you truly sober?”

“Nope. Nearer than I’ve been in a while though.”

“Why?” Kate sat across from him and propped her elbows on the table. Fragrant steam drifted from her mug, twining around her nose.

“Why? Why not? I thought I’d at least take a peek to see what life might be like from up on the wagon.”

“And?” It was difficult to keep her hopes under wraps. She would give anything to have her loving, laughing brother back.

“I don’t think I like the view very much.” The words were flippant but Patrick’s eyes were filled with misery.

Kate’s eyes prickled. “I wish I knew how to help you.”

He looked down and his hands tightened around the mug until his knuckles turned white. “I wish I knew how to help myself.”

Tentative, worried he would reject her, Kate reached out and touched his tense hand. There was no predicting her brother lately. He was just as likely to push her away as he was to latch on and begin sobbing. “You don’t have to throw your life away.”

“What would you have me do? Find a wife, have some children? Wouldn’t that be the berries?”

“Someday you could. If you want. If you got sober.”

“I’m sure I’d make an excellent father. I’ve had such a wonderful example, after all.”

“You don’t have to become our father. I’m not like Mother.”

“No, you’re the exact opposite. Instead you don’t depend on anyone. Modern Kate, you don’t need a soul. You won’t let them in. You’re like an ice maiden.”

Abruptly, she sat back in her seat. He was wrong; she was independent, not cold. He was only trying to wound her and it worked. There was a sharp sliver of pain lodged in her breastbone.

“What happened to your last beau, Kate?” Patrick continued. “Pushed him away, didn’t you? Teddy was a nice man. You’re just afraid to feel anything.”

It wasn’t true. She and Teddy had mutually decided they weren’t right for each other and he’d gone off to find a wife who’d be happy keeping a home for him. Last she’d heard, Teddy and his bride had a son and another baby on the way. Kate’s heart thumped. When she blinked, fat tears rolled down her cheeks. Quickly she flicked them away. She pushed away from the table shakily. If she had realized she was so near to breaking down she would have already left.

Patrick jumped up and lunged across the table, grabbing her arm. His hand was cold and clammy. “Kate, wait. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that.”

“Yes, you did. But you really should have been talking to yourself. No, you’re nothing like Father because you’re too afraid to be anything at all. Afraid to take over his bar, afraid to be a brother, afraid to be a human being. You hide in that bottle.” Clamping a hand over her mouth, Kate stared at him with wide eyes. Even as the words were coming out of her mouth she couldn’t believe it. It was like she’d been standing outside herself, watching her say such horrible things.

He released her arm. With a trembling hand, he pushed his thick black hair out of his eyes. Kate’s breath caught in her throat as she waited for him to speak. This had been a long time coming but she was at the end of her rope. Everything she had tried, from coddling to haranguing had been pointless. Father had been the one taboo subject she’d never dared talk about. She’d feared poisoning Patrick’s mind even further. But she’d not only mentioned Father, she’d blurted out how alike she feared them.

“Maybe. Maybe you’re right.”

She gasped. It was too much to hope for, but she wished desperately this could be the turning point. He’d never admitted anything of the sort before. “Then quit, Patrick. Take the pledge. I’ll be here for you. Whatever you need, consider it done.”

“It’s not that simple anymore, sis. It hasn’t been for a long time.”

“Why not?” She clutched the edge of the table and the metal bit into her fingers.

“I get sick if I don’t have a drink.”

“It will end eventually. Just stay with it.”

He stood and carried his mug of coffee to the sink. He poured it out and Kate stared at the brown liquid sliding over the white enamel, fascinated. They were avoiding each other's eyes, Kate knew. Too much rode on his next words.

"I am afraid Kate. You're right. Too afraid." He slipped out the back door, into their tiny walled-in garden.

Chapter Thirteen

“Trent’s here, asking to see you,” Nick said, poking his head in her office door.

Kate set down her pen and blinked for a minute, trying to focus. She’d been staring at the accounts for hours, until columns of numbers swam before her eyes even when she looked away. Why in the world did getting tablecloths laundered cost so much?

“What?” she managed to croak.

“Trent’s here,” he repeated.

So early. He’d come for the decision she’d agonized over for the past two days. She stood, smoothed her dress down her hips and ignored the fluttery feeling pinging around her chest. It was a thrill at the thought of taking down Johnny, that was all. There could be no other option.

“Let him in.”

Maybe she should sit again. Standing there, before her desk, made it seem like she was eager to see him and that wasn’t true. Not at all.

It was too late to move. Trent swung in her office, one hand on the doorframe.

“Good afternoon, Kate.” He pushed off and stalked toward her. “Made a choice yet? Do we work together or are you going to make this hard on us both?”

He had a predator’s gait, rolling yet smooth so his prey didn’t get too frightened and scurry off. Kate felt hunted all the same. Her pulse accelerated, throbbing in her throat, and she fought the urge to tell him no, to be contrary for the sole purpose of seeing his reaction. Would he pounce?

“We’ll work together.”

“Good.” His smile was slow and liquid, another method of stalking his prey. “I’m so glad you’ve seen the light. What tipped the balance?”

“I have people depending on me. I can’t risk even a chance of failure.”

He was close, too close. Near enough to reach out and touch, but she wouldn’t—even if she was tempted to see if his lips were as smooth as she remembered, if his skin still set off the electric zing she’d thought about for days.

When he took that choice away too, she shouldn’t have been surprised. He traced down her throat, from her ear to her shoulder. A crackle of energy passed down her neck, and lodged right above her collarbones, where it throbbed and tingled.

“I wonder,” he said. “Do you depend on anyone?”

She swallowed and her throat was dry as a desert wind. They weren't talking about the bar anymore. "Why should I? I don't relish the idea of being let down again."

"And yet you're so determined not to fail them. You know, you might be surprised. You might find someone as determined to be reliable as you are."

"I suppose that's you?" She laced her voice with scorn she didn't feel.

"Not at all. Business I'm good for." His fingers danced along her jaw, traced down her neck again. Kate was trapped in his eyes, fascinated by the fire that smoldered there, in contrast to his mischievous grin. "Anything else, I'm a risk. Too high a risk, by far."

He angled forward a fraction and when her tongue flicked out to wet her lips, his gaze latched on. He was going to kiss her and she would let him. His thumb brushed her bottom lip, dragged it open a fraction.

His mouth. Jesus, his mouth was swift and talented as he kissed her. His hands were just as talented but oh, so much slower. He traced over her hip, up to her waist. Her nipples hardened and her sex swelled as he kissed her in a slow meeting of teeth and tongue. Her head grew too heavy and her neck bent back in surrender. With one strong hand palming the base of her spine, he draped her across his arm. He stretched out his caresses, until he reached the side of her breast. Her breath caught in her throat even as her blood rushed into a throbbing crescendo. The gentle stroke over her nipple made her whimper.

She'd never made such a weak sound. Abruptly, she yanked her mouth back from his and planted a hand in the middle of his chest.

"Is this a game to you?" she asked, unable to keep the question in. Her breathing was harsh but at least his was the same, pouring out of him in heaving gusts. His eyes lit with a lustful fire. "Do you think I'm so stubborn I'll get involved with you just because I'm told not to?"

"You are that damn stubborn. Prideful, mostly."

"That's not a bad thing. Sometimes pride's all a person has left."

"Only if someone's tried to break them. Who hurt you? Who tried to strip your spirit down?"

A memory flashed through Kate before she could stop it: Father looming over Patrick, who cowered in front of this very desk. Father's face was purple with rage, his fist raised and trembling with the want to do damage. She hadn't been the one hurt, she hadn't been the one stripped of her soul. Now she was the only one who could hold them together, at least until Patrick managed to rebuild himself. Suddenly chilled, she stepped back.

"My life's not your business."

"No, I suppose not." His mouth set in a grim line and his jaw firmed.

She tilted her head. Unusual hints of grimness were coming through all over him this afternoon, when normally he was full of jokes and smiles, all easy good charm. "What's gotten into you today?"

"I'm guessing you'll understand if I say that's not your business."

"Fair enough. So what's the plan for Johnny?"

“Don’t have one yet.”

A little sigh of disgust escaped her. “For someone who was so insistent we work together, that’s not much help.”

“Have you got anything better?”

She clenched her teeth. “No,” she admitted.

“Ah. Now I see why you gave in. You couldn’t think of anything.”

“I have some feelers out. People who know people. They’re asking around for me.”

“Same here. In the mean time, what will you do?”

“Nothing. Johnny will come by soon to hear my answer. Maybe tonight.”

“Then I’ll be here.”

“I don’t need you to babysit me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” He ranged a step closer. In the tiny office, it meant he towered over her. With any other man, she’d despise it. With Trent there was a girlish flutter in her chest. She wanted to bury her nose in his neck to inhale his spicy cologne. Shameful, that’s what she was. “I’d like to deliver a message of my own to Johnny.”

Micah was close enough to touch. She’d like to feel for herself just how snugly fitted his suit jacket was to his broad shoulders. “And what would that be?”

“That I don’t share well.”

Her throat tightened again. Once again, they’d veered off track. She was saved when Annie stuck her head in the door with a brief knock. Micah jerked back.

“Miss Kate, I’m going upstairs until opening,” she said, and then bit her lip.

She forced a reassuring smile. The poor girl was tentative about everything, even asking permission to use the washroom, as if she feared being put out. She’d have to find a way to instill some confidence in Annie. “It’s just Kate. And yes, that’s fine.”

“I’ll check on Mr. Patrick—er, Patrick for you.”

She’d told Annie a half-dozen times that she didn’t have to care for Patrick, that he wasn’t part of her duties, but it wasn’t worth arguing about now. Not with Micah watching them, his gaze suddenly turned to ice. “That’s fine. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Annie bobbed a half-hearted curtsy—another thing Kate had said not to bother with—and then left. Apparently Annie’s parents instilled an old-style sense of courtesy in her. Kate hoped she never lost it, even if it meant getting called Miss Kate for years. Annie was a fresh breeze through the dirty city streets.

“Found someone else to care for your poor excuse of a brother?”

She hissed in a gasp, her attention instantly returned to Trent. The air in the little office felt heavy on her skin and too thick to breathe. She wasn’t sure what hurt more: the implication she’d foisted Patrick off

on someone else, or that Trent had made the dig at all. He'd seemed so forthright and almost caring when he'd carried Patrick to the spare room. She'd been conned and she was sick with it, her stomach churning.

Sliding behind her desk and into her chair, Kate spread her hands across the scarred wood, anchoring herself to her father's memory. All you have in the end will be Kirklands, he used to say. Right again.

"I think maybe you should leave."

"Damn, Kate, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that, not at all."

"I don't know what kind of flea you got in your ear but I'm not some pushover to take that crap from you."

"You're right, you didn't deserve that. I—"

She held up a hand. "I don't want to hear any excuses. Tell it to one of your other chippies."

"You don't think that," he said with a teasing smile. "I wouldn't chase you this hard if I had a girl on the side and you damn well know it."

Silent, she looked up at him while she fingered the oak leaf design carved into the edge of the desk. It was a tell, betraying her tumult, but she couldn't stop. She didn't believe he had another woman. But she also didn't want to listen to any damn excuses. He'd dug deep and he'd dug hard with one short sentence. That's what was best to remember the next time she started thinking about his mouth—the pain he could whip out with it.

"I think you're right, Trent. You're not good for much at all, other than business. Now leave and don't come back until tonight. When we'll have business." She emphasized the last word intentionally and willed him to hear the rest of it. *And only business.*

"Kate—"

"Out, Trent."

He stood for a minute, mouth pressed flat, gaze burning into her, before he turned and stalked out. She listened until the heavy front door slammed and the air rushed out of her lungs. For once, it was a sigh of relief, not disappointment.

She propped her elbows on the desk and sank her fingers into her hair, cradling her throbbing skull. She'd almost behaved like an innocent-eyed rube, fresh from the country. The glimpses Trent had unintentionally shown today added another layer of intrigue to him. Dark and dangerous, there was something under his shiny surface that fascinated her a little bit more, making her wonder if he'd dole out a different type of kiss when he was like that. If he'd taste different.

Until that foul mood had reached out to smack her.

It was better this way. She'd hold onto that fact, not the way he kissed her, and she'd be better armored to stick to business. And stick to taking care of Patrick, the last of her family.

Chapter Fourteen

That evening, when Micah arrived at The Kirk, it was busy for a Wednesday. Lucas let him in with a perfunctory nod and Micah stood near the bar, watching for Kate among the swirling currents of bodies. Over the clinking of glasses and murmur of voices, Susie sang about yet another man who'd done wrong. He knew it might as well be him. He'd messed up this afternoon and made a royal ass of himself. It would serve him right if Kate wrote him off. He'd half expected to be denied entry.

Even knowing Patrick was her sore spot, he'd gone right ahead and poked a stick in the open wound. Knowing why he did it, to piss her off and force her to keep her distance emotionally since he couldn't seem to manage it, didn't make it feel any better. The pain that had flashed in her blue eyes lanced through his chest. More than anything he wanted to make up for it. He just couldn't figure out how to fix it without making everything worse.

Jake was one hundred and ten percent right. Micah would only end up betraying her and that would destroy her worse than some nasty crack about her brother. There was no way their two worlds could coexist together, and no way he could hold off Winthrop forever. If he even wanted to, that was. He'd been working toward taking down a mob family his entire law enforcement career. Kate would probably be happy to see the backside of him anyhow, once she discovered all the lies he'd told.

Hell, he was probably fooling himself, inflating this crazy lust that arced between them into something more important. If he could just fuck her, he'd find out it was about hot, sweaty flesh and physiological reactions, nothing more.

The crowds parted and he had a view straight to her. She stood near the stage. Her black dress delineated the lean curves of her body against the silver and turquoise wall. The sleek black cap of her hair gleamed in the low light, as well as the jet beads that arrowed down her dress, emphasizing her tiny waist and slender hips. Yet despite her sparkle, she looked lonely, observing everyone around her with a detached gaze. Alone in a crowd, much the way he felt as he dragged his way through his two-faced life.

Her gaze lit on him and suddenly she didn't look so lonely anymore. Anger sparked her blue eyes into a glittery prism. Well, hell again, at least he could bring her some emotion, even if it was unfavorable. He moved toward her, unable to stay away despite his numerous resolutions. Jake was damned right. He was in over his head with this woman. The problem was he couldn't seem to mind.

When he stood before her, she said nothing and took his measure with a look that flicked up and down. The impassive expression was supposed to dismiss him, but the anger and hurt that burned behind her eyes gave her away.

"I am sorry," he said. Their insane connection meant no need to explain. They both knew what he meant.

"I don't doubt that. I also don't doubt you meant what you said, either."

"I didn't, though," he lied. It should have come easily, since he lied to her, to everyone else, to God Himself all the time. But those were lies by omission and these words stuck in his throat like a cat's claws. Prickly and nearly unshakable.

One of her straight brows arched. "Do you have family, Trent?"

He nodded. "My mother and a brother. Timmy's younger than me by eleven years."

"What would you do for them if they needed help? What have you done?"

He'd taken any job, selling newspapers, polishing shoes, running errands no matter how degrading, and turned every penny over to his mother. Bad enough Micah had been one of the hundreds of scrambling wretches who covered the city, hawking papers, or sleeping in doorways to get the morning edition before some other little punk beat him to it, all to keep food on the table when another one of Pop's schemes had fallen through. After his father left, he'd scrambled to keep them afloat, ensured his brother didn't have to sell newspapers. Or worse. It had been a hard scrabble to get into first the police force, and then the Prohibition Bureau, where at last he'd felt he could do something worthwhile. At least for a short time.

"Anything and everything," he said.

"Think of that. And then tell me I've done the wrong thing to support Patrick."

"He's a grown man."

"Demon rum has him hostage," she said, her voice laced with scorn as she quoted the slogans that had helped pass the Eighteenth Amendment. "Well, whiskey, if I'm to be precise. But he's tried to give it up on his own, and it only makes him sicker. I pray you never see Timmy go through this, but only if he does can you talk to me about my choices."

For a second, Micah pictured Timmy drunk, lying in a puddle of glass and whiskey. It wouldn't be so easy to judge then. "I'm sorry," he repeated, feeling hamstrung by guilt. The words were wholly inadequate.

"Now I really think you are." Kate's eyes were huge with emotion, as blue and deep as mountain pools.

He almost reached to cup her face before he realized they had company. A whole bar full of it. She made him forget where he was.

"I do hate to interrupt a touching scene."

Micah dropped his hand and bit back a curse. Some protection he was when he let Vittorelli walk up unnoticed. The entire speakeasy had drifted away, he'd been so concentrated on Kate.

"Just business," Kate said, holding his gaze a second longer. She hadn't jumped or seemed surprised at all. So the feeling like the world stopped when they were together wasn't mutual. Plus she'd let him almost make an ass of himself with Johnny sneaking up behind him. Wonderful.

"I wish that all my business dealings were as intimate as what I just walked in on," Johnny said as he took Kate's hand and sketched a pompous bow over it.

"Quite the manners you've got, Vittorelli." Micah propped shoulder against the wall and folded his arms over his chest. "And here I thought all gentlemanly behavior died out as women's skirts rose."

As Micah had expected, Vittorelli's gaze dropped to Kate's bare calves and lit up with avarice. Micah hoped she noticed. Not that he saw the junior crime lord as any sort of competition, but the old world gentleman act rankled.

Dammit, not that he should have any worry about competition at all, if he knew what was good for him.

Vittorelli managed to drag his attention away from Kate's graceful legs, and sneered down his pudgy nose at Micah. "Do I know you?"

"Nope, can't say you do." Micah let anticipation gleam in his eyes, thinking of taking down Vittorelli and making him pay. "But you will."

With a flick of his hand, the mobster dismissed Micah. Or tried to. A couple nervous flicks of his eyes betrayed the fact that he didn't know what to make of Micah, even as he turned back to Kate. "I've come for your official decision, my dear. I'm looking forward to our business dealings." The Lothario put a smarmy emphasis on his words.

"Yeah, Kate, tell him your decision."

She shot him a look that told him to keep his mouth shut, but Micah simply smiled. This was going to be fun. Maybe there would be a hell of a lot to deal with later, and he still had to figure out a way to keep Kate safe, but this moment of Johnny's embarrassment was going to be a warm memory to carry.

"I'm afraid I won't be taking your generous offer, Johnny."

The man's face went slack with surprise. Micah would have bet his entire kitty of spare cash not a soul had said no to his face. Micah managed not to laugh. Barely.

"There's no way this piker can match my price."

"No, I can't. There are certain other benefits I'm able to offer our dear Kate."

"I see," Johnny sneered.

"I'm not sure that you do," Kate interjected. "But it serves the same purpose in the end." Breaking out a slick, surface-only smile, Kate took Johnny's hand and shook it. "In the mean time, I hope you don't

deprive us of your company. Why don't you stay and have a drink on the house? We're not too busy. I'm sure Billy can find you a table almost near the stage."

She'd never turned that certain smile on Micah and he counted his lucky stars for it. The few smiles he'd earned had been completely genuine.

"Almost near," Johnny echoed.

Kate nodded and waved a hand around in what looked like a negligent gesture. Micah was sure it was carefully manipulated. "As you can see, the ones right up front are all filled. But can I have Hank get you a drink? Maybe a sidecar or a sloe gin fizz?"

Johnny shook his head slowly. "Not tonight, thanks." Slowly, he turned and stepped away, only to stop a few paces away. He turned back, the dumb shock on his face replaced with mottled rage. "I don't have to actually say this isn't finished, do I?"

Micah slid a lazy grin across his mouth and he let his shoulders roll flat against the wall so he and Kate presented a united front. "We wouldn't have it any other way."

Chapter Fifteen

Outside the door to a sixth floor apartment, Johnny held his hands over Earline's eyes. "You ready, doll face?" Reaching around her, he unlocked the door and pushed it open.

Earline wiggled against him and squealed. He liked the wiggling part, since it pressed all her lush curves up against him, particularly her round ass, but the squealing he could do without.

"Oh you bet, daddy. I'm so excited I could spit."

He'd have to do something about her speech, if he kept her around. Though it might be worth ignoring for the look on his father's face if she broke out with an expression like that at Sunday dinner in the Vittorelli house. The long table with platters of spaghetti and tortellini, crystal glasses and silver flat ware. And Earline giggling and chattering about spitting. Pop would go purple with rage. Definitely worth considering.

He walked her forward, into the marble tiled entryway and moved his hand away from her face.

She squealed yet again and this time added a clap of her hands. "Johnny," she breathed. "It's beautiful!" Rushing into the living room, she dashed to the window, which flaunted an expansive view of the Hudson River. Nasty body of water, but it sure did look nice from six stories up. Once in a while, Johnny fancied he could see a couple of the floaters he'd dumped in the river spin lazily down it.

With more restraint, he followed her and flopped onto the couch. "Like it, then?"

"Oh Johnny, it's the cat's meow." She turned around from the window and took in the rest of the furnishings. The place had been decorated by Phyllis, who'd been two girlfriends ago. Maybe three, he wasn't sure, but she'd left behind a lot of highly polished wood with purple and gold curtains and upholstery.

"It's the nicest place I've ever been in," she said, running her hands over the damask drapes. "Much less lived in."

"Why don't you check out the rest then." He took a cigarette from the enameled caddy on the side table and lit it. Smoke curled around his head as he watched her dart here and there, investigating the kitchen and then running down the hall.

She reappeared in the mouth of the hallway. "There are two bathrooms, Johnny. Two!" As if he didn't know that, the dumb bitch. She was so excited she clasped her hands before her and hopped on her toes. It did interesting things to her chest, making it bounce and shimmy.

Naw, he wouldn't keep her too long. What was lush now would likely turn to fat with an easy life. Really, he'd be doing her a favor when he eventually turned her out and she had to fend for herself again. Kate Kirkland, now there was a woman who'd never be fat. All long and lean, she might even look better with a few more pounds on her. Johnny would never want her though, even if she offered herself on a silver platter along with The Kirk. There was too much mouth on her. Plus she apparently didn't recognize a good opportunity when it was handed to her.

He couldn't fucking believe she'd turned him down. Under his management, The Kirk could become the hub of family business. Maybe he shouldn't have tried the subtle approach, offering to provide the alcohol for The Kirk. Now that he thought about it, Kate probably appreciated a man who was upfront about his intentions. Too late for that method now.

If only he hadn't told his father that he had The Kirk sown up right and tight. Plus Kate and that fucker Micah Trent had embarrassed him in front of his men. For that alone, now they'd have to die.

"Johnny? Did you hear me?"

"What?"

"I asked if I could redecorate? Just a few pieces? To make the place more like me?" Her voice slid up at the end of every sentence, like she still wasn't sure of her place in his life. Good. Kept her from getting too comfortable.

"Anything you want, doll face. I'll give you a list of stores you can go to." Ones where he had understandings with the owners. Couldn't have this getting too expensive on him.

"This is amazing, Johnny," she sighed, as she petted the cherry wood sideboard. "No one's ever been this good to me."

"Yeah?" he leaned back and rested his arms against the back of the couch. "Why don't you come over here and show me how much you appreciate it."

With a knowing smile, Earline sank to her knees before him. As nimble fingers danced over the fly of his pants, Johnny let his eyes slowly close. How he wished it were Kate on her knees, quaking with fright, preparing to suck him off. She wouldn't be such a stubborn bitch then, with her mouth full of him.

But everything would be all right real soon. All it would take was one smart move and The Kirk would be his. And the entire city could know that when Big Johnny wanted something, he took it. They'd all fear him.

Even his father.

Annie seemed to think Kate and Patrick needed to eat something more than scrounged leftovers and she'd spent nearly all morning bemoaning the lack of supplies. Kate wasn't sure there was anything that would tempt Patrick but Annie needed to eat, since she was a growing girl. Besides, it would be nice to get

away from the brownstone for a while. Tired of hearing about it and feeling slightly guilty, she had just picked up her small purse in anticipation of running out for some groceries when the doorbell cranked. It was likely Micah, making a pest of himself again. She ignored the flutter low in her belly.

“Am I ever going to get away from here?” she muttered as she yanked open the front door.

It wasn’t Micah.

Earline stood on the stoop. She looked well in a new two-piece suit, and her makeup had been lightened some from the trowel-applied version Kate had last seen. Her mouth was still a wet looking slash of crimson, however. “Hello, Kate,” she said quietly.

“Look what the cat dragged in.” She braced a hand on the doorframe, blocking any thought of entrance for Earline. “Left me a little high and dry, didn’t you?”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“You knew we were low on staff to begin with.”

“I did.” She folded her hands over her purse at her waist, absolutely impenitent.

“It didn’t occur to you that I might need more than a half hour to replace you?”

“I knew Coral would fill in. And she did, didn’t she? They always hop to help you.”

“Any reason you cut out that fast?”

“Johnny offered me an apartment. He said I had to decide immediately, or he’d move on.”

Kate sighed. “Poor way to start off. Jump for a man once and he’ll expect you to do it forever. What are you doing here now? I don’t expect you’ve come to beg my forgiveness.”

Earline shook her head and her permed hair didn’t move even a quarter inch. “I need my spare dress.”

“Of course.” Kate stepped out and locked the door behind herself before she went down to the cellar level. Silently, she opened it and let Earline in ahead of her, then led the way to the small changing room at the back of the bar. Clothes and glass makeup jars were piled on every flat surface. This was mostly Susie’s domain, since she made a couple changes a night, but sometimes the waitresses preferred to change into the black and white sheaths they wore at the bar, rather than walk unaccompanied through the dark streets in evening wear.

Earline tossed through a few piles of rayon and lace while Kate stood with her arms crossed. Finally Earline fisted her hands on her hips. “I can’t find it,” she whined.

“I think they put your stuff off to the side.” She pointed to a bedraggled scrap of black cloth and sequins on the floor in the corner.

“Real big of them.” Earline lifted the dress and dusted it off. “I’m not sure why I came back for this old rag, anyways. Johnny’s been buying me plenty of clothes.”

“I can see that.” If Kate’s guess were any good, the suit Earline wore would have cost a month’s pay at the Kirk. “I suppose the fineries are worth being with a sugar daddy like Johnny Vittorelli?”

“He’s put me up in a real ritzy apartment. Six rooms all to myself. I’ve never had a bathroom I didn’t have to share.” Her eyes went dreamy and a smile softened her angular features. “And he’s sweet to me, at least. Ya gotta look out for number one, toots.”

“Earline, he’s a criminal.”

“And Micah Trent’s not?”

“Says you.” Kate jerked back and her arms fell limply to her sides. “There’s nothing going on.”

“Johnny told me about the two of you. But it’s all around too. Everyone’s talking about how you two are spooning in the corner or your office every chance you get.” Glee sparked in her piggish eyes. She liked being the bearer of bad news—always had, whether they’d run out of napkins, or the time Meredith, another waitress, had unexpectedly found herself in the family way. Being able to rub gossip in Kate’s nose was likely manna from heaven.

“It’s business.”

“No skin off my nose what you wanna call it. But he’s a criminal too. So maybe you shouldn’t get quite so high and mighty.”

“Same type of criminal as me. He sells booze, that’s it. He doesn’t hurt people like Johnny does.”

“Doesn’t he?” Earline pushed past Kate and stalked into the bar. She paused dramatically in between two tables, a hand on a chair back. “You might want to ask yourself what happens to the bar owners who don’t deal the way he wants them to.”

“Really now, you’re stretching it,” she drawled. “At least he doesn’t take ’em for a drive and dump them in the river.”

“Might as well. They get raided and get sent up the damn river to Sing-Sing.”

“That’s ridiculous.” But she always did a second round of investigation on the people she worked with, and the latest notes were coming back with a certain slant to them. Nothing was said directly, but she’d gotten the idea her sources were nearly as worried about crossing Micah as they were Johnny. A few weeks ago, only word she’d gotten was that Micah was fresh on the scene but seemed to have slick connections and more pull than expected keeping the bulls off her fellow juice joint owners’ backs.

“Is it? You might want to ask around. Find out for yourself. You’ll see I’m right.” She lifted her nose in the air and stormed out, leaving Kate behind stunned.

It couldn’t be true. There was no way Trent would do that. Still, she heard her father’s voice echoing around the empty chairs. *All you have is family.*

And Trent sure wasn’t family.

Chapter Sixteen

Kate meant to ask Micah about Earline's accusation when he showed up that afternoon to take her latest order. Instead, she edged around him as they inspected her supplies, watching him out the corner of her eye, wondering how to bring it up. He joked and teased her, seemingly unaware of her tumult. She leaned against the brick wall and nibbled on a thumbnail. The fourteen-year-old deep inside her wanted to stomp her feet and scream that it wasn't fair. She couldn't have the first man she'd wanted in a long while.

"Anybody home over there?" He tucked the scrap of paper he'd been using for notes in his pocket and flashed her a disarming grin.

"What?" She shook herself. "What do you mean?"

"I just asked for fifty dollars a barrel on beer and you didn't say a word."

"That's a ridiculous price!"

"Of course it is." He stalked her, until he was in touching distance, an increasingly familiar light in his deep eyes. The fan of his breath wafted over her cheek with the sweet mint of chewing gum. "Kiss me."

"You think I'm going to kiss you to get your price lowered? You're cracked."

"No, I don't think you'll kiss me for booze. You'll do it because you want to."

She did want to, desperately. It was reckless and dangerous but he was a living, breathing temptation. His finely formed mouth hovered just out of reach. It would only take a fraction of an inch to close the distance. Playing by the rules wasn't her strong point and she got reckless when pushed. And Micah certainly pushed all her buttons.

She did it. She leaned forward and danced her mouth over his, feeling smooth lips, and the tension he kept tightly leashed. He was daring her. Daring her, the bastard, and the fourteen-year-old deep inside her rose to the challenge. She pressed deeper, flicked her tongue across his lips, then deeper, across his teeth. Winding her arms around his neck pressed tender breasts against his chest, and she hissed at the rush of heat that wove through her. She sank her nails carefully into his thick neck, as she finally breached the barrier of his teeth and stroked her tongue along his.

That was all it took.

A groan broke from him, and he clasped her ass in his strong hands until she was pinned against the wall. He kissed her furiously, hitched her knee around his hip and roughly palmed her breast. She was frantic, pushing against his enticingly hard hips. He drew a gasp from her by thumbing her pebbled nipple, and seemed to find that amusing because his mouth smiled against hers.

She twined her fingers through his hair and pulled back. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” he rasped. “Not a damn thing.” His eyes were dark and the skin over his cheekbones had drawn taut, but a small smile played around the edges of his mouth.

“You sure?”

“You tell me.” He drew his hand down from her breast, spanned her belly, then edged further like a thief. Slowly, so slowly she thought her breath might flee her forever, he cupped her aching center. “Anything funny?”

“God, no.” Her head fell back against the bricks with a *thunk*, but she watched him from under her lashes. She half expected him to look down at his prize, but he didn’t, not even when he began to lift her dress. He stared right into her eyes, that smile flirting across his face, even after her skirt pooled around his wrist and he traced patterns across the tops of her thighs. Triumph. That’s what the smile was—triumph, and greed. And a healthy dose of lust.

“Should I stop?”

Yes, yes, stop. “God, no,” she groaned again.

He stroked her curls and she thought she might expire on the spot. It had been so damned long, and even then she’d never felt like this before. Like she could puddle at his feet if she lost his support. He traced her slit and her hips jerked involuntarily, drawing his finger in deeper. The tip of it danced up and down her, circling, circling, until she thought she might go mad. She ground her head against the wall, trying to anchor herself, but it was hopeless. She was lost in his touch.

He added a second finger, and pushed firmly against her clit.

She came, shuddering in his arms, clutching at him as the pleasure broke through her.

He dropped his forehead to hers. She let her eyes flutter shut to avoid his burning gaze, and they breathed harshly, in tandem. He muttered something that sounded like, “Shouldn’t have done that.” But that made no sense with the way he’d been after her.

Once their breathing calmed, he smoothed down her clothes and she found herself suddenly shy. She looked down to ensure her bodice was straight, but he tipped her chin up. His smile was back in place, the bright one he threw around as cheaply as counterfeit money.

“Regrets already?” he asked.

“Of course not,” she replied, but it was a lie. She hadn’t even asked about Earline’s accusations. She’d been stumbling around, worried about how to broach the subject and he’d been thinking about this, about seducing her. She must have looked like an easy mark, distracted as she was. And the rotter had taken full advantage. “I’ve been hearing some things,” she blurted.

“About Johnny?”

“No. About you.”

He dropped his arms from around her and stepped back. His expression emptied. Sure, he still smiled, but he'd somehow turned his eyes flat. "What would that be?"

"That the juice joint owners who deal with you have had a rotten percentage on getting raided recently."

"Is that right?" He tucked down his collar and straightened his tie, as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

Micah propped an arm on a stack of wine. "Nothing."

"It's true?" Her heartbeat was thumping erratically, like a badly played jazz tune. Until now, she hadn't realized how sure she'd been that he'd deny it.

"I didn't say that either. I'm surprised you of all people would believe the Mrs. Grundy's when they gossip." He turned to another stack of wooden crates. "You're running low on champagne. Want me to bring some more? Four cases?"

"Yes, as well as a couple other things. I've got a list in my office," she answered automatically but then she clenched her fists in frustration. At the moment she couldn't give a good Goddamn about her champagne supplies. "What do you mean, me of all people? There's talk about me? I suppose I'm considered fast because I run The Kirk."

"Not exactly," he said airily.

Trent, back to his light and breezy routine, would drive her mad after what they'd just shared. She could still feel his confident hands on her body, like a phantom haunting her. Her legs trembled, and she was still damp and swollen between her legs. The smell of sex still wove around them. While he grinned at her. "What does not exactly mean?" she snapped.

His gaze dropped and he shifted his feet. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"Probably not. But it's too late to turn chicken now and I swear, if you don't man up and tell me, I'll—I'll—"

"You'll what?" He grinned at her and his chocolate brown eyes twinkled.

Twinkled, by God, when she was so frustrated she could scream. She folded her arms and narrowed her eyes. "I'll start wearing dresses that go all the way down to my ankles."

"That is a terrifying, frightening thought." That blinding smile of his faltered and he held up a hand to stop her sputtering. "I'm not sure I feel right teasing you about this. They don't talk about you. They gossip about your brother."

Her chest constricted. She should have expected it. Blindly, she turned around and began to check a stack of table linens. "I see. I'd bet a hundred simoleans I know what they say."

"I'm sorry." A wry chuckle that had nothing to do with humor spilled out of him. "I seem to say that to you a lot."

“This time I’d say it’s not your fault.” Kate’s eyes prickled and her throat was tight. She wouldn’t care if the talk were about her. She’d expected it when she took such an active role in The Kirk and she’d never done anything to feel ashamed of. Her brother was another matter. She’d fight the world for him. It would just be easier if he fought with her. “Horse feathers,” she said. “All these tablecloths are dirty.”

“Kate.” His voice was filled with sympathy. It made the ache in her chest hurt worse.

“I’m not sure what it is. It’s gray. Maybe dust.” Keeping her back to him, she pulled the stack into her arms. “I’ll just have Annie take them to the washer woman.” She hustled through to the bar, yanking the brick door closed behind her. She couldn’t stand his pity another second.

Chapter Seventeen

She found Annie polishing highball glasses at a table next to the bar and thrust the stack at her. "Can you run these upstairs? Normally we keep them down here, but Mrs. Kelley was supposed to come by earlier. I wonder why she didn't come by."

"Are you okay, miss?" Annie peered at her, a worried crease drawing her pale brows together.

"Sure, sure, I'm fine." She was rambling, no doubt about it. "Just run these up."

"Right away, Miss Kate."

"Just Kate," she threw over her shoulder as she made for the quiet sanctuary of her office. Once there, she drew a deep, shaky breath and leaned on her fists against the desk. The kisses and caresses she and Micah had traded warred with guilt over Patrick, sending her into a tailspin.

Of course people gossiped about Patrick. Of course. He hardly came out of the house, and when he did it was at strange hours, looking as disreputable and raggedy as could be. So much for the vaulted Kirklands and her father's pride. A drunk and a woman who focused only on running a speakeasy, at the cost of having a life. This was what remained of the family her father had worked so hard to create. True, Father had been a hard man, probably too hard, but he'd only been doing the best he knew how.

Trent hadn't even answered the question. She still didn't know if he'd sold out other bar owners to the bulls. He'd sidestepped the question so neatly, deflected it to the matter of Patrick, which Kate hadn't even noticed. She should demand a straight answer.

"Where is she? Where's that little bitch?"

Kate jerked her head up at the shout. She knew that voice. It was Johnny's big six, the man who guarded him. There was an indeterminate shout and then the sick crack of something hard meeting human flesh. Their trouble had come to a head.

She kept a Remington shotgun in a special holster between the desk and the wall. Kate pulled it out and checked the load. An unexpected smile bloomed on her face at the singular slide-crack sound of the pump action. Nothing in the world made quite that same noise. She slid off her heels to move quietly.

Out in the bar, she found constrained chaos. Hank was on the floor unconscious. Blood trickled from his nose, a vibrant crimson against his pale skin. Her heart constricted but she didn't have time to worry about him. Johnny's pet goons had Lucas and Nick lined up against the wall. Annie must have made it upstairs. They had pistols pointed at her men, who stood with their hands up. Lucas fairly vibrated with

anger, while Nick looked like he was about to piss himself in fear. No one had noticed her yet and she used the advantage to edge closer.

“Where is she?” asked Pietro, the smarter goon.

“Go to hell.”

“You’ll get there first,” said the second, shorter thug. He looked at his cohort and Kate could just see his pug-like profile. “Can I shoot him?”

“Go check the back rooms. Boss wants her bad.”

“I’m right here, toots.” Kate was close enough to put a hurt on both of them with one blast.

Pietro whirled and only smiled to find himself looking down the shiny barrel of her shotgun. He kept his pistol in line with Lucas’s head, enough to take the bouncer out without looking. “Miss Kirkland. I’d think twice about shooting. You might hurt us, but you’d get these two also. How well do you like your employees?”

She kept her expression relaxed and forced herself to shrug even though she thought she could upchuck with nerves. “You said it yourself. They’re employees, that’s it. Would Johnny go out of his way to save you?”

“I respect his ruthlessness.”

“No, you don’t. You’re hoping he’ll get you in with his father. I’ve got bad news for you, Pietro. Poppa Paulo doesn’t think boo of Johnny, or the men who work for him. You’re even stupider than I thought you were if you believe different.”

Pietro jacked the hammer back on his pistol. The slow crank of the cylinder echoed loudly in the quiet room. Lucas and Nick watched the drama with wide eyes.

“Maybe I just like to kill now and then.”

“That I’d believe.” She swallowed once, twice. “Where is your boss for that matter? He send you to do his dirty work all on your own?”

“I’m right here, my dear Kate.”

She turned her head to his voice, but kept the shotgun unwavering. He stood in the open doorway, Annie banded to his chest with one arm. A gleaming silver gun rested against her temple.

Annie’s brown eyes were liquid with tears and her small hands clutched at his thick forearms where it wrapped around her, just below her throat. “I’m sorry, miss!” she choked through her tears. “I had my hands full. I didn’t close the door fast enough.”

“Let her go,” Kate gritted.

Johnny shook his head and a lock of lank brown hair fell across his high forehead. Apparently he’d been so eager to crush her world today, he’d forgotten to use his hair cream. “I don’t think so.”

“She’s a child. She’s got no part in this.”

"I think I disagree with both those statements." Johnny squeezed the girl's bare arm. "She sure doesn't feel like a child to me. In fact, I'd say she's got a real fine chassis. And you made her a part of this when you hired her."

This was high stakes, suddenly more than control of a speakeasy. She couldn't let herself think of the three souls that lay in her hands. "Why is this place so damn important to you Johnny? This is ridiculously overblown to get your hands on one semi-popular club."

"I like it. I want it. So I'll take it." Johnny smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. "I have plans for it. The Kirk will work quite nicely as a base of operations for me."

Out the corner of her eyes, she saw a shift of brown as one of the goons tried his luck. "Ah, ah, ah. Be good while the grownups chat." She looked back at them and wagged the barrel the tiniest fraction, like shaking her finger at a child's nose. Pietro sneered but took a step back.

"But why The Kirk? There's blind pigs all through this city who'd let you in and thank you for it."

Johnny narrowed his gaze and pouted sullenly. "Let's say I like the atmosphere." He flicked a glance at Hank, who moaned quietly. "Or at least, I did."

Kate spun through the possibilities before lighting on the only one that made sense. "Poppa Paulo," she blurted.

"What?" The pistol twitched, and Annie flinched.

"You told him it was a done deal, didn't ya?"

Johnny bared his teeth and Annie whimpered as his fingers dug into her arm. "That's none of your fucking business," he growled.

A familiar shadow flicked across the vestibule behind him. Keep him going a minute more. It'd be easier if he were inclined to spill all his plans like the mustachioed villain from a moving picture.

"I bet he even gave you a deadline, didn't he? That's the reason you moved so fast to strong-arm tactics. How's it feel to have a father who treats you like a child? You know, he'll never let you take over his operations. Never. Some other gangster will have him killed and you too, probably just so's they don't have to listen to you whine. Maybe it'll be Masseria. I hear he's been carving out big chunks of territory for himself."

"You don't know shit, you dumb bitch. Let's get this show on the road, shall we?" He set the pistol firmly against Annie's temple. "I have the documents with me. Sign over The Kirk."

"Are you out of your ever loving mind? Why would I do that?"

"You'll get to live. And I won't hunt down your shit of a brother."

Behind Johnny, shadows solidified into muscle and bone. Micah set his own pistol to the back of Johnny's head, right at the top of his neck. She had never been so happy to see a man in her life. Giddy relief flooded her.

“Well now,” Micah’s voice was bright and cheery, which only added to the insane level of tension flowing around the room. “I don’t believe I can let that happen. Let the girl go.”

“No.”

“Did you know that with my gun right here and a large enough caliber I could pretty nearly decapitate you?” His bright smile made the threat nearly psychotic.

Johnny’s olive complexion blanched white. Sensing movement, Kate turned her full attention to Pietro and the other lackey. “Don’t make a peep,” she warned. “I’m feeling kind of jumpy.”

“I’m going to say this one more time and that’s it. Let go of the girl. I don’t think Kate will mind cleaning your blood off the floor.”

“Nope, not a bit,” she chirruped. This could turn out okay after all. The men cringed from her smile. “Lucas, Nick, move away.” They started to edge to the side, still eying the guns Johnny’s underlings had trained on them.

Johnny let go of Annie, who darted behind Kate. He held his hands in the air and slowly turned. The two men danced together, Micah keeping his gun in place, until Johnny faced the door.

“Go home and tell Daddy you failed,” Micah said.

Features snarled in anger, Johnny looked at them over his shoulder. “Let’s go,” he spit at his men. Slowly they followed him out, and Micah edged to the side so he didn’t end up with a gun at his back. He watched them go, then shut and bolted the outside door.

“Everyone okay?” he asked when he reemerged from the vestibule.

Annie burst into noisy tears and Lucas knelt to check on Hank. “I think he’ll be all right. There’s a nasty knock on his head from where he hit the bar on his way down.”

Kate nodded shakily and set the shotgun down. “Nick, run and get Doc Abraham. He probably shouldn’t be moved yet.”

She wanted nothing more than to collapse on the floor and kick and scream like an overtired child. During the danger, she’d seen and heard with perfect clarity, almost as if the world was moving slower than normal. Now her vision blurred and she shook violently. It could have ended so badly.

But she couldn’t collapse. She never could. She was always the strong one. Her gaze lifted to Micah, who tucked his gun under his suit jacket and stood before her, studying her quietly. Right when she’d needed him, he’d been there, tipping the scales in their favor.

A smile crept across his mouth.

“What?” As far as she saw, there wasn’t much to smile about. She felt as tight as a bowstring, every muscle popping and twitching.

“I like the way you’re looking at me.”

A quick sigh of frustration huffed out of her. “How’d you come in the front, anyhow? I left you in the storage room.”

“Oh, hell,” he said as he ran a hand through his dark hair. “You’re gonna make me ruin my good image.”

“Spit it out, Trent.”

“I couldn’t figure out how to open the door.”

A semi-hysterical laugh choked in her chest. “Excuse me?”

“Your fancy hidden door. You’ve never opened it in front of me before and I couldn’t figure out how to open it.”

“You and the Prohibition Agents both, let’s hope.” Laughter kept welling out of her. Half dizzy with it and relief, she plopped boneless into the nearest chair. “It’s the meat hook,” she gasped.

“What is?” He hitched up a hip and leaned on the table in front of her.

“The key is the meat hook that’s hanging about three feet to the left. I’ll show you how it works later.”

“Trust me that much, do you?” Eyes solemn and intense, he looked down at her.

Her laughter faded away.

“Yes. I think I do.” She felt trapped in his gaze, like they were having a silent conversation. Like he both thanked her and warned she’d regret it. Or maybe that was her, projecting her own exhilaration and fear onto him. “Oh God, I forgot about Annie!” Kate sat bolt upright and looked around.

“She’s all right. Lucas took care of her, sat her down and got her a drink.”

A couple tables over, Annie listed to the side, her head propped on a hand. There was a dazed look to her sleepy eyes.

“I’m a horrible person,” Kate grumbled. “I get a young girl dragged into a mess and then I don’t even take care of her afterwards. Awful. Completely irresponsible.” She buried her head in her hands. “Hell, I should go to her now but my legs feel so rubbery I don’t think I could walk.”

A hand swept over her hair, soothing her. “You have a right to be shaky. Though I could throttle you too. What were you thinking, taking on two mobsters?”

“I couldn’t hide forever. They would have found me eventually.”

“You mean to tell me there’s no secret exit? I don’t buy it.”

Ok, so maybe there was, up to the house through a panel in her office ceiling. When she’d been forced to move The Kirk into her cellar, that had been one of the first things she’d had remodeled. Getting caught flat footed in a raid wasn’t her idea of a good time.

She shrugged, hoping to avoid the question. Logically she knew he had no right to get mad at her, but the train of thought still reminded her of the times Father would get onto her for trying to protect Patrick. She did what she had to do, safe-guarded the people who depended on her, but that didn’t mean she had to talk about it. Since she didn’t want praise for it, there was no reason to boast. “I couldn’t leave them to fend for themselves.”

“There you go again, protecting everyone around you. Who protects you?” His hand stroked rhythmically over her, tracing the curve of her skull, sliding down over her shoulder. Tracing her collarbone until he reached the vulnerable, fluttering skin at the base of her throat. His touch sent a ripple of sensation through her that was much more welcome than the fear-shakes she’d been wrapped up in. She clung to the feeling, letting it warm her. Heavy lust swelled between her thighs. Now she knew how those touches could twist her up, up, until she broke and clung to him.

“You did a pretty good job of it. Today, at least. What’s with that anyway? Why aren’t you upset? You act like it’s an everyday occurrence to go head on with the bad guys.”

The petting paused, and then the comforting weight of his hand withdrew. She peered up from between her fingers. He’d shut down, every trace of emotion leached from his strong features. There wasn’t even a ghost of his usual armor, that bright grin.

“Not quite every day, but I’ve had a few run-ins.”

“Oh?”

“It happens in my line of work. When Prohibition was enacted, before we had the big sit down to carve up the territories, not everyone played nice.”

She wondered about that. There was nothing she could put her finger on, and he looked her straight in the eyes during his little speech, but something didn’t ring true.

Still, if there was one thing she knew at this point, it was that Micah would back her up if he were at all able.

No matter what secrets he hid.

Chapter Eighteen

“Patrick. Patrick, wake up.” Kate sat on the edge of his bed and brushed the hair from where it tangled in the thick sweep of his lashes. She traced the brackets around his mouth, which lingered even when he should have been relaxed in sleep. Irish twins, they were only eleven months apart in age. A long time ago, they’d even been mistaken for true twins, with the same black hair and blue eyes. Now Patrick looked years older.

Groaning, Patrick stretched his arms over his head and blinked. “Morning,” he mumbled.

“Afternoon, you mean.”

“Is it?” Fisting his eyes like a child, he struggled to a sitting position and blinked at the clock on his bureau. “So it is. Lord, my head hurts.”

“Of course it does.”

“Come on sis, don’t take that tone with me.”

“What tone?”

“The high and mighty one. You used to be fun.”

Before she’d carried the entire weight of their family and the responsibility for making sure their employees thrived. “You used to be worth having fun with,” she snapped.

Her entire insides felt leaden. Where had that come from? It didn’t matter that she felt beat down and weary of her duties. There was no point chastising him. There hadn’t been for a long time.

“Oh, don’t start.”

“You’re in trouble, Patrick, and I don’t know how to help you.”

“And what about you?”

She pulled her hand back. “What do you mean?”

“You’re in trouble up to your pretty little eyeballs, running with mobsters.” There was something dark in his eyes, and a nasty scowl contorted his mouth.

“I’m not running with them. I’m trying to save The Kirk from one. Our livelihood, remember? How did you hear about that, anyway?”

“I still get out.” He ducked his head, avoiding her gaze, and guilt sagged his face for a minute, until it was replaced with a sneer. “Johnny Vittorelli’s been bragging about how he good as owns us. It’s gonna make him a big man.”

Kate gasped from the twin impact of the grenades Patrick had lobbed in her lap. He'd always talked easily about a couple small places that put up with him, mostly so Kate could sweep through regularly to pay up on damages and his tabs. If he didn't want to say where he went, it meant he was going out to drink in seedy, back-alley blind pigs where the booze came from bathtubs and was filled with formaldehyde. Killing himself faster than he was already drinking himself into the grave. This wasn't good news about Johnny, either. It meant he flat out couldn't give up on The Kirk, not without losing face, something that was like death to his family.

Patrick continued like he had no idea of the impact of his words. "And you go to some fucking rumrunner for help. Some son of a bitch no one you don't even know from Adam, and you don't even tell me what's going on in my own bar?" Twisted with bitterness, his pallid skin slowly went red.

"Your bar? What the hell would you do? Challenge Johnny to a drink off? Last man standing keeps control of The Kirk?" She leaped off the bed, trying to pace through the mess of a room. She kicked a bottle out of her way and sent it spinning across the wood floor. When he'd started tripping over anything, even a dust mote, Kate had taken all the rugs out of his way. Not that it mattered much when he filled the space with empty bottles and trash. "I can't believe you consider the bar even partly yours anymore. I'm the one who works my ass off for it, who's poured everything I have into it."

"Last time I checked, Father gave The Kirk to me. It's my name on the damned deed."

"Fine. I'll just walk away and leave you to deal with this whole balled up mess all on your own!"

"At least I'm not some self-righteous prig who judges everyone," he growled.

The words were like a fist to her gut. She crossed her arms over her chest in a too little, too late gesture. "Jesus," she whispered. "How did we come to this? How did you turn into such an asshole?"

He dropped his gaze and fisted the blankets pooled around his waist. "I've had a hard life, Kate. Father...Father was a hard man and Momma's hiding in her room didn't help."

"Bullshit," she said flatly. "I had the same life. I still hear Father in my head. Every damn day. And I don't let it lock me up in fear."

"Don't you? Your prison's just a little larger than mine. The house, the bar. You're tied to them, same as me. Hell you even moved The Kirk into the ground level so's you'd be even closer."

"You know why I did that. What else was I supposed to do?"

"I don't know." He sighed. "Get married, like a normal woman?"

And the hits kept on coming. She averted her gaze and looked out the window. What little she could see of the sky was bright blue with fluffy white clouds drifting by. It didn't seem right. There ought to be a tidy thundercloud, right over their house, dropping lightning and oblivion. She clutched her elbows so hard her nails sank into skin, but it didn't hurt. Nothing compared to the emotional pain ricocheting through her, pinging from heart to stomach and back again. She'd given Patrick everything and he didn't want it.

"So what would you have me do now? Burn it all down and walk away?"

“Maybe.” He leaned back against his headboard. “At least then I’d be rid of Father’s ghost.”

“Is that what you’re after, drinking yourself to death just so you don’t have to think about Father anymore? Hasn’t it occurred to you what that’ll do to me?”

“What’s that?” He sounded as weary of life as he looked.

“Tie me to your ghost.”

“Honestly, Kate, I’m not sure that I care.”

She had to get away, away from him and the hateful things he spewed. In a daze, she wandered out of his room, down through the house. She found herself unlocking the door to The Kirk. She stood in the center of the room and stared blindly around herself. Empty, with the lights on, it seemed almost seedy. Sad, like the room waited for the frantic energy of visitors to come alive again.

The front door echoed with a heavy thump-thumping knock. She startled and made for the door. Whoever it was gave in to impatience and knocked again before she could slide open the narrow peephole.

Micah stood with one hand braced against the frame, his head bowed. When he raised his head, his brown hair had tumbled across his brow and a pensive frown pinched his features.

Kate opened the door.

“Something just occurred to me,” he said in lieu of a greeting.

“What’s that?” For some bizarre reason, his deep voice made her want to give into the tears that had been threatening since she ran from Patrick’s room.

“How’d Johnny and his idiots get in here yesterday?”

“Hmm? I guess you missed that before you came in. Annie. She hasn’t been around our world long enough, didn’t close the door behind her.” And right now, it didn’t bother her, not even enough to make her worry about the training Annie would need.

If she leaned into Micah, she was pretty sure her head would fit perfectly in the center of his wide chest, against the crisp white shirt on display between his lapels. A hysterical giggle built in her chest as she thought about doing just that, with no warning. What would he do? Wrap his arms around her and offer comfort, or see it as an invitation to more sensual pleasures? At the moment, either sounded good. At least then she’d be sure she wasn’t thinking about her fractured family.

“Are you okay?” He cupped her shoulder and ducked to catch her gaze. Concern and compassion flickered over his face.

“Yes. No.” A frustrated sigh replaced the near giggle of a moment before. “I had a terrible fight with my brother.”

“I know how family can be.” No *I told you so*. A hard little knot inside her chest unfurled.

“You fight with your brother?”

He shook his head. “My father.”

“You only claimed your mom and brother as your family.”

"I did. They are. He's my father, but he's not my family. I don't see him often, and when I do it usually results in a huge fight. Last time I saw him was three years ago. I figure I'm well quit of the rotten bastard."

"My father died seven years ago and I'm still not quit of him."

"How'd he die?"

"Tried to break up a bar fight and caught a knife in the ribs."

"And you still took over The Kirk, even after it killed him."

The shrug she gave had no chance of expressing the myriad feelings that tumbled and twisted through her. "It was all he had. All I had. Patrick was an active partner for a while, so it didn't seem so hard before..."

"Yeah, before." He tucked a hank of hair behind her ear, and she shivered as his fingers traced over the curve. He seemed to be fascinated with her hair and she was rapidly growing to expect the tender touches. "I have an idea," he said.

"What?"

"Let's get out of here for the day."

"Lucas and Nick will get here soon." She realized with perfect clarity that she wasn't saying no. It was a tempting idea, the thought of running away for the day and leaving her troubles behind.

"Do they have keys?"

"Lucas does."

"Then leave a note. I'll go use the telephone in your office to ask Jacob to come over and keep an eye on things."

"He'd do that for you, last minute?"

"He's a good friend."

She still felt dazed, like she was walking through bubbles, but she couldn't think of a reason why she shouldn't leave. In fact, she could think of quite a few reasons she didn't want to be in the same building with Patrick. She had to escape. "Okay."

Minutes later, she locked the door to The Kirk and walked down the street with Micah at her side. That dazed, unfocused feeling clung to her. At the corner, she stopped, ignoring the people forced to swarm around them, and halted him with a hand on his arm.

"Second thoughts? This'll be great, I promise."

"No second thoughts," she said. "Kiss me." If anything could ground her to the here and now, it was his delicious mouth.

"Yeah?" A slow, delighted grin spread across his face.

"Yeah."

Stretching up toward him, she settled her hands on his broad chest, across his narrow lapels. He cupped her skull in his large hands and sweetly settled his mouth over hers. They sipped at each other before the heat took over and he angled her head, slanting over her lips. He dipped his tongue into her mouth. The entire world fell away until it was just the two of them in the center, spinning out of control. With her hands spread across his chest, she was aware of every thump of his heat, every inflation of his lungs.

She was aware.

And her body was taking advantage of the fact to make a few things known. Flushed and tingling, she could drag them back to her brownstone and lock them in her room. And be happy for it.

Slowly, she pulled her mouth from his. "Where are we going?"

"And ruin the surprise? Never."

"Modern, they call it," sniffed a watery voice behind her.

"In our day that never would have happened."

Kate risked a glance over her shoulder. Two well-dressed women stood in the open doorway of a linen shop. One tall and skinny, one short and plump, they watched Kate and Micah with disdain. "It's the automobile. It's ruining society as we know it."

"But Milly, they're not in an auto," said the short one in a bewildered tone.

Kate stifled a giggle by burrowing her face against Micah's jacket. "Let's go," she choked.

"Happily." He sounded just as amused as she was. Taking her by the hand, he tugged her away, and led her across the intersection.

Chapter Nineteen

“Here we are.”

“Yep. Home again.”

They stood on the sidewalk, three buildings up from The Kirk, in front of a tiny Italian restaurant. Their hands were intertwined, fingers laced together. Dusk had fallen and shadows crept along the street. A few people lingered here and there, but most hustled past them, eager to get to their loved ones, cook dinner and have a quiet night.

They’d gone to a baseball game and even though the Yankees had lost, Micah hadn’t cared a bit. They’d had a great time laughing, joking and pretending they were carefree and now Kate didn’t seem eager to end it. She seemed content to stand with him. Truth be told, he’d be damn happy to stand still with her. Or even better, if they walked away from it all. Her millstone of a brother, his own shifting loyalties.

Winthrop had sent a message round to the warehouse today, asking for an update on the investigation into Vittorelli’s activities and The Kirk. Micah had read it, then found himself shredding it before he’d stalked out, headed for Kate. He didn’t know how to answer his boss. Didn’t know what to give up. If he handed over Johnny for yesterday’s attempted assault he’d get a slap on the wrist and be back again in a matter of months, while The Kirk was shut down for good. At the same time, it was as close to his goal of taking down mobsters as he’d ever gotten. He couldn’t give up even that small choice when he knew Kate would eventually find out the truth about his double life too. Every chance he got, he spun the options, trying to find an outcome whereby he could fulfill his goals and keep The Kirk in one piece. He’d come up dry.

“Ready to get to work?” he finally asked.

“Nope. You?”

“Nowhere I have to be.”

Slowly, so slowly he thought he’d forget to breathe as he waited on her, she turned away from her building and looked up at him. Awareness and desperation and trust but most of all fragile, blooming trust lived in her delicate features. “I don’t suppose you have any more surprises for me,” she breathed.

“Maybe one. Are you sure you’d like it?”

Ducking her head, she looked up at him through the thick black fringe of her lashes. It made him feel about as tall as the Brooklyn Bridge.

“Why don’t we find out?”

He had no idea how he kept his hands off her for four blocks. Lost in a haze of possibilities, he felt like a caveman as he practically hauled her down the streets. She raced along with him, her gleeful laugh ringing out as they darted around a fruit seller's cart, nearly knocking over a pyramid of oranges. One tumbled off the top but Micah caught it and lobbed it to the fruit man, who snatched it out of the air even as he cursed them in Italian.

They darted through the etched glass doors of Micah's apartment building and ducked into the elevator just before an elderly gentleman closed the gate. The man stood up front, and Micah filed to the back. Kate stood in front of him. As the lift lurched upwards, they stood in silence. He was almost afraid to touch her and ruin the heightened excitement of the moment. From behind, the nape of her neck looked fragile, exposed by her bob. With one hesitant fingertip, he traced the delicate curve. Kate shivered, and the smoldering look she shot over her shoulder blew away any thoughts of delicacy or fragility or fear—far away on a summer storm's strong wind.

She slid a hand between them and grabbed his belt. With one strong yank, his body came up flush behind hers. He instantly hardened, his cock coming to sudden and violent attention to the curves he was snugged against. He wanted to kiss her, wanted to nibble the thin skin behind the shell of her ear. He assessed the gentleman at the front of the car. Well-to-do, nice suit, pleasant expression when they passed him. A bit of intuition told Micah the man wouldn't give two twigs about a couple kissing in an elevator. Still, he had to consider Kate's sensibilities. Even though she'd kissed him earlier on a crowded street, and she seemed to pride herself on being a modern woman, that could have been a special case.

"I want to kiss you," he whispered in her ear. "I want to have my mouth all over you. Taste you from the inside out."

"Behave," she whispered back. But she tucked her sweet backside a little closer against his groin and her mouth tilted up on one side.

He allowed himself a second of pride on accurately guessing her response. He was starting to get inside her head, at least as much as a man could understand the woman who tied him into knots.

With a jerk and a shudder, the small box ground to a halt and the man left, with a nod of his head and two fingers tipped to his brow. One more floor went by in a single thick breath of lust and her heady scent.

At Micah's floor, they ran down the hall to his apartment. When he fumbled in his pocket for the keys, Kate took it as an invitation to torture him. She wrapped her arms around him from the side. One hand went under his suit jacket to the small of his back and the other traced patterns across his thigh.

"Are the keys in this pocket?" she asked, a throaty chuckle in her voice.

"Nope." He flipped them out of a jacket pocket and opened the door as fast as he could. They tumbled in and he pushed her up against the plain white wall of his entryway. He bracketed her between his arms, hands flat on the wall beside her shoulders.

"Why?" Why now, he wanted to know.

“I don’t want today to end.”

They stared at each other a moment, unspoken words floating between them. She was certain that it would end eventually, it seemed. Everyone abandoned her in the end, by one means or another. Death, drink. Walking away. He’d do anything to stick like glue to her side. If he were honest, it wasn’t possible. He’d leave too, and if he were damned lucky she’d never realize exactly how badly he’d sold her out for the chance to take down some bad guys.

His luck had always been for shit.

She’d do the walking this time. Somehow he didn’t think he’d adapt the way he did when Father had disappeared, creating a new family just four blocks away. He’d cursed his dad, but moved on, becoming the new head of their small household. He’d mostly been relieved they wouldn’t have to pretend they didn’t notice his long absences. When Kate left, it would bring him to his knees.

Slowly he spanned her hips, stroking his thumbs into her yielding flesh, giving her a chance to break and run. He wasn’t sure what he’d do if she tried. Let her go, he hoped. Probably not. He kissed her, slanted his mouth over hers.

Heat and sweetness and a deep note of spicy excitement assailed him. Not a speck of doubt transferred from her mouth to his. She opened, letting him delve into her hidden wells, and danced her tongue to play with his. Her hand moved up over his shoulders, kneading like a cat, and her body pressed away from the wall to him. Exploration fired into lust, and with the first surge of her small breasts against his chest, he couldn’t take any more. Just that fast, he was lost.

Abruptly, he gripped her hips and palmed her ass, hitching her to him. Her arms tightened around his neck but there was still no doubt, and Micah was fiercely glad for it. Blindly he carried her into his living room, to his couch, kissing her the whole way. As gently as he could, he placed her on the cushions and knelt before her. He cupped her calves and felt the play of silk stockings over skin. Patient but not passive, she waited, her blue eyes sparking.

“Not getting second thoughts, are you? This will be great, I promise you.” She echoed him from earlier, wearing a mischievous grin.

He chuckled. “I’m not your first, am I?”

“No. Is that a problem?” Her eyebrows arched in challenge.

“Not a bit.” A relief, actually. He kissed her and set to work peeling off her clothes. The little jacket first, followed by her linen shirt and a white chemise. Finally he tugged off her skirt. She helped, lifting her hips and wiggling, even as she held his head to hers and kissed him voraciously.

He sat back on his haunches and surveyed the gift he’d somehow, inexplicably won. Lean curves were gilded in tiny white lace panties and flesh-colored stockings rolled down to just above her knees.

“Do I meet with your approval?” she teased.

Micah glanced up at her face. Eyes heavy lidded, her lips were wet from his mouth.

“Abso-fucking-lutely.” No bra or binding across her chest. She didn’t need any. Her firm breasts sat high and perky on her ribcage, the size of oranges. Micah adored oranges. He traced the lace panels set over her jutting hipbones. “Ritzy. You always wear things like this?”

“Pretty much.”

He wasn’t going to handle it well, knowing what was under her clothes during routine business transactions. He’d have to fight the urge to bend her over a stack of booze crates and fuck her. Or maybe he wouldn’t have to fight it. Maybe she’d close that strange door and give him a look like the one she had now.

He slid his hands up from her hips, traced the inward bell of her waist and covered her breasts at the same time he swept upward for another, drugging kiss. She gave a soft, breathy moan as his palms grazed her nipples and he swallowed it. His cock was so hard it throbbed, but when she lifted her legs and wrapped them around his ass, he thought he might explode. With the willpower of a saint, he managed to pull back a scant inch.

“Fast okay?” he gritted out. He prayed she said yes, since his control was quickly going the way of the birds.

“Fast is fabulous.” She ground against him with a wiggle of her torso and he groaned.

His jacket slid off his shoulders with her help, and then she went to work on his buttons. It was just as well, since he couldn’t stop palming her breasts. He tweaked her pert nipple and she moaned. The skin at the base of her throat flickered with her pulse, especially when he licked right there. His shirt bound up, over his arms and he was forced to let go of luscious flesh. He satisfied himself—and her, too, if the gasp was any indication—by moving his lips down. His teeth grazed over the plump under swell, and then he took her nipple in his mouth.

After a shuddering pause, she attacked his pants and yanked and tucked and twitched him free. He helped her the best he could, but it was hard work to abandon her skin, even the bare inches necessary to get his trousers past his hips. His hand moved down her ribs, over her hip, and encountered damp silk. Down, down, everything was going down, including his mind, down into a swirling morass of lust and want and desire. One arm wrapped around her, the other hand busy petting the moisture between her sleek thighs, and he pulled her off the couch with him. It seemed appropriate. Everything was right in a way he’d never felt before.

Settling back on his knees, he draped her so she straddled his hips.

“How much do you like these?” he asked, tugging at the gusset of her panties, letting the backs of his fingers graze the tender flesh where her thighs met her crisp curls.

“Do it,” she answered, deep and throaty. A wicked glow lit her eyes. It was almost scary, the way they moved together.

He answered her smile with one of his own and curled his hand around the front of the scrap of silk. They rent at the seam. He tossed them aside before cupping her center. He found hot cream even silkier than the garment he'd just ruined. It spread along her folds like butter as he delved into her core, then wandered up to dance his fingers around the swollen knot of nerves at top. Again and again he made the journey, kissing her senseless at the same time, until she grabbed fistfuls of his hair and pulled him back.

Flushed and sweat damped, her face glowed. Her pink tongue darted out to wet her lips. "You promised me fast."

"If I've changed my mind?"

"Not allowed."

She released his hair and traced her nails down the center of his chest, leaving shivery goose flesh in her wake. Taking his cock in her soft hand, she rose up on her knees and poised him at her core. Their gazes were locked together. He didn't think he could look away, not even if a hundred mobsters suddenly invaded the apartment.

Kate sank down on his cock, enveloping him in the fire of her silken walls.

When she'd sheathed him completely, she threw back her head and laughed, a full body chuckle that reverberated through him from every inch of flushed skin that was pressed together.

"Yes," she breathed. "Oh yes, I need you."

Deep under his breastbone, something went plunk and wrapped tight around his chest. He was forever, unbelievably wrapped up in the wonder that was this woman. He'd work it all out later. Right now she was his, and he was hers.

He placed his hands across her shoulder blades, nearly spanning the entire width of her narrow back, and banded his arms along her sides. Once, he undulated his hips and her eyes slid shut on a gasp.

"Like that?"

"Oh yes," she moaned.

"Then hold on."

She did, anchoring her arms around his neck.

"Open your eyes," he commanded. He wanted to make sure she felt the same desperate connection. He found it there in the liquid depths of her gaze, along with a tiny bit of fear. He could understand. He was just a little bit terrified of where this could all end up as well. Touching her jaw, he dragged his thumb across her plump lips. "I'm right here with you," he murmured.

"Good. That's..." She sighed, a long, shuddery exhalation. "That's good." She laid her mouth over his, kissed him softly.

Slowly, he moved and rotated his hips so his cock drew almost all the way out of her clinging sheath. They moved together, over and over, and everything spun rapidly out of control. He had only the most tenuous grip on himself as he palmed Kate's hips, drawing her down. Once again she was right there with

him. Her head dropped back as she went boneless in his arms. Giving into the orgasm that wound its way up from the base of his spine, he clutched her and thrust one last time before he shuddered and dropped his head to her shoulder.

Chapter Twenty

“When you’re done, we’ll go shopping?”

Earline slid her hand along the fine leather of her seat, trying to keep the motion subtle so Johnny wouldn’t notice. He didn’t like it when she acted like some wet behind the ears country girl, but holey moley was this a fine automobile. All leather and chrome inside, the Chrysler rumbled along like an angry lion. Just wait until she wrote Patricia back home and told her about it. Her sister would just die with envy. Then she’d run and tell Mother all about it, and all about the beautiful clothes Johnny was about to buy her. Let Momma say she wasn’t worth nothing after that.

“Johnny? We’ll go shopping?”

“Of course, doll,” he answered, but a scowl twisted his face.

“Is this an important meeting?” She didn’t much like it when he got worried about business.

He gave a sharp bark of laughter and slung his arm across her seat back. “Something like that.”

She figured it must be. Three of Johnny’s men rode in a Hudson Straight Six behind them.

They pulled to the curb and Earline blinked in surprise when Johnny threw the Chrysler into park. It was a regular neighborhood block, and didn’t seem like the type of place wheeling and dealing would be done. They were parked directly in front of a tailor shop and next to it, on the corner, a small market. A little boy stood outside, short and grubby. He ran the back of his hand across his nose even as he stared at the big, fancy car. She figured he must be about eight.

“How long do you think you’re going to be, Johnny?”

“Not too long.” He wasn’t even looking at her, and instead fiddled around under his jacket. “But don’t worry your little head about it too much. Longer I am, the more pretties I have to buy to make it up, right?”

Something warm unfurled under her breastbone. Maybe she could get a mink coat. It wasn’t cold now, but that didn’t hardly matter. Patricia had always wanted a black one. “Sure, daddy. Take your time.”

“I thought you’d say that,” he said, but he had on his nice smile, not the one that made her want to cringe. He really could be a good man. And when he wasn’t, it wasn’t really his fault. He had too much pressure on him, especially with Kate Kirkland refusing to hand over control of The Kirk.

Catching her by the back of the neck, he kissed her, thrusting his tongue in and out of her mouth in rapid beats. “There, baby. One to remember me by.”

She smiled and turned to watch him meet his men on the sidewalk. Pietro was there, along with another man she didn’t know. And Tony Scalletti. Tony scared her. There was something in his eyes as he

looked at her. Something...lustful, she supposed. Maybe lust and hate wrapped up together, but she didn't know what she'd ever done to him.

They entered the tailor shop and a bell tinkled over their heads. Earline scrambled in her purse for a mirror and her lipstick. She quickly wiped saliva off the edges of her mouth, then reapplied some red. It wouldn't do to have Johnny think she didn't like his kisses. It wasn't that so much as the fact that they were messy. He latched his whole mouth around hers and sucked. It kinda reminded her of the time Uncle Billy Joe and been really drunk on moonshine and...

She shoved the thought away and checked her appearance in her enameled mirror. She could do with a little more mascara actually, but she didn't carry any. Instead, she slicked her mouth with lipstick one more time, then made a pouting moue in the glass. Perfect. She looked like Clara Bow.

"Is this your car?"

She jumped and snapped the mirror shut on her finger. Damn, that smarted like hell. The boy who'd been outside the market now stood right next to her open window. "Kinda," she said, and stuck her finger in her mouth. Suction eased the sting, a little at least.

"It sure is ritzy. I've never been in an automobile before." He slanted a look at her from under his lashes as he petted the chrome along the window frame. His hands were so dirty they were actually brown.

"Ain't gonna happen." She whacked his fingers with her pocketbook. "And I'll thank you to take your paws off."

"Ain't you hotsy-totsy?" He flicked his wrist as if to shake off the pain. "And that ain't your damned car, neither," he sneered as he walked away. It was the same sneer she'd seen in the faces of half of Gibson, Oklahoma after they'd found out about Momma and Pastor Wilks. The other half had wanted dates, as if she'd be just the same as Momma.

"I'd bet two bits you ain't nothing but his whore," the lousy little brat threw over his shoulder.

Just wait until Johnny heard about this. He'd fix that kid's clock but good. She slammed out of the car in a huff and stalked across the concrete sidewalk. Maybe he could find out who the hellion's parents were, she thought as she pushed open the shop door.

She came to a dead stop.

The bell tinkled over her head as the door floated closed.

Johnny had his back to her. Before him, Pietro and another of Johnny's men held a third man by the arms. He was gibbering and crying, his blond head matted with sweat and blood. Tony Scalletti leaned against the counter, as casual as could be with his legs crossed at the ankles. He raised his eyebrows at her, not even looking as he caught the skinny knife he'd flipped in the air.

A wet, snapping sound caught her attention. Johnny had pistol-whipped the man and his head still arced to the side, a fine mist of blood spraying from his mouth. It doused both Johnny and Pietro with a delicate spray of color.

“Son of a bitch.” Johnny took his handkerchief out of his breast pocket and mopped his face off. “I come all the way down here to give you a friendly warning about running numbers in my territory, and you go and make a mess all over me.”

“You don’t want to do this,” the man sputtered. “My brother—”

“Like I give a flying fuck who your brother is.” He pointed the muzzle of the pistol at the man.

“He’ll get you.” It was hard to understand what he was saying. His swollen mouth made mush of the words. “He’s a big man. You ain’t shit compared to him and—”

“Oh, shut the fuck up,” Johnny said, almost casually, but his face had gone purple. He pulled the trigger.

The blast was impossibly loud in the small room. Earline screamed before she could stifle it, shoving the meat of her palm into her teeth. Blood and matter sprayed out behind the man, in the same crimson as her lipstick. He dropped to the floor. She tasted copper, and smelled it too, and oh god, her stomach flipped once, twice. She was gonna be sick.

“Oh, hey baby.” Johnny neatly wrapped his pistol in the bloodstained handkerchief. “I didn’t realize you’d come in. Do you think you can hold onto this for me? I’m afraid it’s a bit of a mess.”

She couldn’t answer. She couldn’t take her hand away from her mouth or she’d upchuck all over Johnny’s shiny shoes. Oh god, they weren’t so shiny anymore. Thick, round drops of blood dotted the toes. A high, buzzing whine set up in her ears.

Johnny followed her gaze down to his toes. “Huh, even more of a mess than I thought.” He took her pocketbook and dropped the gun inside. “No point in getting even dirtier than I am, though. I probably ought to go get cleaned up before we go shopping, eh?”

She still couldn’t talk but she nodded. She couldn’t take her eyes off the bundle of skin and bones that used to be a man.

“Boys, you know what to do,” Johnny tossed over his shoulder as he hooked an arm around her neck. The men went to work destroying the shop, pulling down bolts of cloth. Tony sliced a length of particularly beautiful shantung silk.

“Come on, doll. I was thinking you could use a mink.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Kate woke in near blackness. A single beam of moonlight peeked through heavy curtains, and crept across Micah's bureau. A small clock gleamed with a white face but she couldn't quite make out the hands. She wasn't sure she wanted to. Micah had carried her to bed after they'd made love on his floor, and then spooned up behind her, tucking the covers up over their shoulders. Now the sheets were tangled around their intertwined ankles, with more than enough heat pouring off the man behind her. One of his firm arms pillowed her head and the other was wrapped possessively around her hips. She'd been gone too long from The Kirk. She should creep out of bed and leave him to rest.

She didn't want to move.

Instead she gave a small sigh of contentment and wiggled her backside more tightly into him. This entire day had felt like a moment outside time. Almost like her life had taken a normal track and she was free to spend all the time she wanted with her man.

Patrick would still be there when she got back, however. Eventually she'd have to figure what to do. If she ever managed to find a way to dig through the anger and the frustration, that was. And the guilt. Especially the guilt.

Cocooned in the bleak darkness, a memory rose unbidden. It had been a matter of months before Father died, and Kate had visited him at The Kirk's old location. The office there had been much larger but she'd perched on the same scarred desk. Father had been instructing her on the importance of ensuring vendor accounts were paid promptly, but Kate mostly basked in his happy, relaxed presence. Patrick burst in, waving a newspaper. One of his fiction pieces had been printed and more than that, he'd been paid for the privilege. Riding high on his success, he'd tried to share his joy with them.

And Father had shot him down, treating him with less respect than a dying dog in the street. He ranted at Patrick about getting his fool head out of the goddamn clouds. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, how I wish Kate had been born first and male," he finished. "At least then I'd know I was leaving the legacy I've built to someone who'd deserve the damn thing."

Kate watched with humiliation burning in her cheeks. Desperately she wanted to speak up but if she dared a word that rage would turn on her. Worst of all there was a churning, sick kernel of pride deep in her belly. Pride that Father picked her and thought her worthy.

It was that pride she did penance for now. She couldn't shake the feeling that every time she'd felt it, she injured Patrick a little bit more. At the same time, he exhausted her. There was never enough that she did or gave. He took and took and she wondered when he'd be filled up.

Kate sighed and turned her face into Micah's arm. The skin there was smooth and almost thin, such a contrast to the rest of him. He'd been different than anyone she'd ever known. In the world she lived in, most people were too busy trying to keep their own head above water to give even a moment's concern to the troubles of others. Not Micah. He was like a person out of their grandparents' generation, concerned with the well being of those around him. Part of her was sure such a good thing couldn't last forever. The rest of her worried that walking away would be giving up one more scrap of her soul to her father's ghost and Patrick's selfish demands.

In his sleep, Micah groaned and splayed his large hand over her belly. His pinkie grazed her pubic bone. As tendrils of lust curled in her chest, she turned in his arms. Wet, nipping kisses along his jaw and strong neck woke him.

"Hello, there." His voice was gravelly with sleep.

"Hello to you too." She explored his hard muscles. The flat planes of his chest, then the curves that swooped down to his ribs, the delineated ridges of his abdomen. "I should get back to The Kirk," she whispered, but her hand had a mind of its own and curled around his jutting cock. Give and take, he was silk over steel.

He nudged her flat onto her back and found her breast. "Not just yet."

She gasped when he scraped his nails lightly over the tender crease between breast and ribs. "No, not just yet," she agreed.

This time was slow and tender and almost fragile.

He spent what felt like hours on her breasts, tasting them and molding them, before he moved between her thighs. When Micah came into her, he seemed even harder and fuller than last time. Still, her body welcomed him joyously, and she wrapped her arms and legs around him, clinging to what he offered.

There, safe in the dark and in his arms, she allowed herself to feel what she was afraid to take. The forever she couldn't have. In the enveloping, pure black, she didn't have to turn her face to hide what must be written there.

Pleasure stole her body and she released on a gasping sigh. He was right behind her, and they collapsed together.

Safe a little longer.

Susie tapped the note Lucas had just given her against her palm, then slid it between her fingers. It worried her. Short and to the point, like Kate herself, it only said she'd taken the day off and to continue

with business as normal. That sanctimonious Jacob would be along before opening to help keep an eye on things and make sure Johnny and his men caused no problems.

Kate was with Micah. The part about Jake being on his way tied a ribbon on the idea, though Susie had already expected it.

A little harmless fun, it had seemed a good idea to encourage Kate's flirtation with the handsome bootlegger, at least at first. Susie figured her friend could use a little of that, and especially some time away from the drain that was Patrick. All her energy went into him and what little was left got poured into The Kirk. Susie couldn't remember the last time Kate had taken an entire day for herself. In fact, she couldn't swear it had ever happened before.

Now she wasn't so sure. It seemed hypocritical to worry about the same thing Susie had hoped for previously.

She couldn't help it.

For one thing, Kate wasn't responding the way Susie had expected. The more time she spent with Micah, the more Kate seemed worried and wound ever more tightly. Not too long ago, she'd seemed so tense Susie thought she might snap, but somehow she'd ratcheted even tighter. If Kate were a pistol, Susie would say the hammer was already cocked. The only question was where she'd shoot.

Susie jumped when the chair across from her pulled away from the table with a screech along the floor. The hand on the back led to an arm in a dove gray suit, which led up to stocky shoulders. Not so far up, because he wasn't a tall man. Not nearly as tall and elegant as her Ricky, at least.

"Oh, it's you," she snipped.

"Sure as the sun comes every morning." Jake spun the chair around and straddled it.

"Thank God you don't come every day."

"Admit it, you'd miss my pretty face."

He wasn't a pretty man by any stretch of imagination. With a nose that had been broken at least once and eyes darker than she'd ever seen on a human, he looked fierce. Intense. Disturbing, the way he looked into her. She took a sip of her sloe gin fizz, and crinkled her nose. "Look at you, sitting like a dock worker. Haven't you got any manners at all?"

"Sure I have. Just don't see why I should waste 'em on the likes of you."

A hot coal burned beneath her ribs. Embarrassment and humiliation. Dammit, she hadn't felt either of those in so long, she'd thought they'd gone the way of the dodo bird. Extinct forever. It wasn't a pleasant realization.

The first few weeks after she'd left Alabama, when she'd still struggled to keep the South out of her voice, she'd constantly pictured her momma's pale face and known she'd be absolutely horrified on her daughter's behalf. Eventually Susie learned that if she didn't think about Momma she never got embarrassed. And it was the right choice. She never would have survived in that small town; she hadn't fit

in. She'd be married a good five years by now with a baby on her hip, and two trailing in the dust behind her, instead of doing a job she loved and having a chance to look for Mr. Right. It was the right decision, no matter how others saw her.

"Whoa now, I didn't mean it like that."

"I don't know what you mean."

"However you took it that had you looking like I broke your favorite dolly."

"I don't look like that!" She set her glass down with a snap, sending the pink liquid sloshing over the rim.

"No? Well my apologies twice then. For thinking I offended you too."

"How did you mean it?"

"Just that you didn't strike me as all caught up in social niceties, like some society dame."

"I'm not."

"See there? We're in agreement about something." His smile was wide and surprisingly bright. "I almost feel like we should mark the occasion."

"Doubly. This is the first time Kate hasn't been here when we opened in as long as I've worked here." She waved the note and watched curiously as Jake's smile faded and his eyes went even darker. Was it even possible for a man to have black eyes?

"It isn't like Micah to duck out in the middle of trouble, either."

Interesting. He didn't seem to like this turn of events much either. She wasn't sure what to make of this sudden accord in their thinking. They'd been circling around each other like a pair of wary cats since the first time they met. She didn't like his prideful arrogance, which she figured was ridiculous for a low life smuggler. And he didn't like...everything about her, it seemed. When her beaux were around, he got even cruder. Probably thought she was a two-bit trollop. Most people thought blues singers were just as awful as the dark things they sang about.

"Not much we can do about it, I suppose," she finally said.

"Nope. I tried to talk to Micah but he's not willing to listen. Your Kate has him trussed up like a Christmas goose."

"Oh, it's Kate's fault, is it?" She sat bolt upright. "Like she doesn't have enough on her plate without Micah storming in and turning her life upside down."

"Seems to me he's been saving her ass and her precious speakeasy, not causing her more trouble."

"Listen here, you sanctimonious ass, Kate is the most noble and loyal person I've ever met. If your flash in a pan pal hurts my friend, you're the one I'll come after. So maybe you ought to get him a damn leash."

"You've got a mouth like a sailor, not that I'm surprised. Don't you worry about us. Micah will sort this all out and we'll all go back to the way we were. Like I'd fear a threat from you, anyhow. What could a

no-account club singer do to me? From what I hear you've got no one but Kate and those men you string along."

Susie stood and carefully replaced her chair. Her belly churned as something low and hot twisted through it. Anger. Righteous anger at him. It couldn't be anything else. More fool she was for thinking she and Jake might agree about the color of the sky, much less their mutual friends. "Don't you worry your ugly little head on my account. I can take care of myself. And you, if I have to."

Chapter Twenty-Two

As Micah arrived at the warehouse the next morning, Jake was waiting for him, sitting on the empty bed of the truck with his arms folded. Micah dropped his jacket on a plain oak table in the corner that served as their office and started to fold his sleeves back. Jake's brows were drawn down in a nasty glower.

"Let me have it," Micah said. He'd been expecting another go-round for a while.

"Why should I bother?" Jake slid forward and hopped off the truck. For a man of his bulk, he landed gracefully on the balls of his feet.

"Don't know. Because you can't help yourself?" He tried tossing a grin at his friend but Jake didn't respond. Micah grabbed the nearest crate and hefted it onto the truck. This load was headed for a bar on East Forty-Second Street, not far from Kate's place. Tomorrow the owner would find himself in a nasty spot of trouble.

Did the owner pour as much of himself into his livelihood as Kate did?

Jake only grunted as he loaded a case of whiskey. Micah glanced at him out the corner of his eye. His oldest friend seemed more distracted than Micah could remember seeing him. Growing up in their old neighborhood, Jake had never been one to worry much. Following the straight and narrow had been second nature to him.

"Come on, lemme have it. I'm making a fool of myself. I'm dividing my loyalties. I'm going to be in a world of hurt if she ever figures out what's going on."

Jake still said nothing, just shot him a nasty look over a crate of champagne.

"How about it's not too late, and if I manage to get my head out of my ass we can still destroy the Vittorellis? Or how I've got shit for brains and I'm going to land us in the clinker if Winthrop ever hears about this? He probably will. I swear that old man knows everything. He probably even knows how much sleep I get at night."

Still only angry silence from Jake, coming off him in dark, heavy waves.

"All right, you asshole. Let me have it already. Giving me the silent treatment's a female sort of thing. I've never known you to hold back at telling me how you see the world."

Jake slammed down the crate in the truck and turned on Micah. His fists clenched at his side, and his chest heaved in a fast and heavy rhythm. "Maybe I don't know how to see it any fucking more. Maybe I suddenly understand how that woman has you twisted into bits."

“Is that right,” Micah said slowly. He leaned against the round rear fender of the truck and tucked his thumbs in his pockets. “Bet that wasn’t such a great move for the merchandise. Champagne doesn’t really like being knocked around.”

“I don’t give a great Goddamn about the champagne. It’s just going to be poured in the fucking gutters tomorrow.”

“This stuff?” Micah pulled a bottle from its private compartment and held the dark green glass to the sunlight. Dust motes floated through the air around it. “It’s too good a year. It’ll go out the back door and show up at some big muckety-muck’s party. Maybe even the Police Commissioner’s.”

Jake rubbed his temple. “Do you ever wonder why we’re doing this? There doesn’t seem to be any damn point to it. We’re fighting a losing battle and there’s not a soul thanking us for it. Americans don’t want to be saved from their vices. They want to wallow in them.”

“What’s caused this about-face? I feel like I’ve stepped into a mirror and everything’s backwards.”

“Susie called Kate noble. And what’s more than that, she believed it—enough that she half swayed me. The owner of a juice joint. Noble.”

“I can’t say as I’d disagree with that. Almost frighteningly loyal too.” And somehow, despite the night they’d shared, he would have to betray her loyalty when he threw her to the wolves for the chance to take down the Vittorellis. If only he could see clear to keeping The Kirk safe at the same time he destroyed Johnny. But it seemed impossible.

“Jesus, that’s what Susie said too. Almost exactly. The whole world’s been flipped over on its head.”

“You were still comfortable in it a week ago. So it’s Susie that has you twisted up?” Micah managed to keep the smirk off his face. He never thought he’d see the day a woman would tie steady, reliable Jake into knots.

“Oh, shut up. Stop laughing at me.”

“I’m not laughing.” He held his hands out, palms up.

“I can hear it in your voice. You want to. How the hell did this happen, Micah? She’s a loose woman.”

“You know this from experience, do you?”

Jake’s hands fisted and his shoulders hunched. On some level, he was thinking about decking his oldest friend over a woman he himself just called easy.

“Ah, you meant in the old fashioned kind of way.” He clapped Jake’s tense shoulder. “Let me tell you, my friend, there’s something to be said for a woman who knows what she’s doing.”

“I ain’t going anywhere near her. We get this mess sorted out, you figure out what you’re going to do about The Kirk, and we’ll be swanning off to our next assignment. I like my life the way it is, thank you very much.”

“Actually, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. You might need to start looking for a new partner.”

“Oh, hell.” Jake ran a hand over his short hair. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am. I haven’t been sure about what we’re doing for a long time.”

“And just what the hell do you think you’ll do instead? Don’t see you as a farmer.”

“Haven’t thought much about it.” He grinned. “Maybe I’ll convince Kate to run away to Cuba with me. Or some other little island. A hot sun and warm sand sounds pretty damn good to me.”

Jake grunted. “So that’s the way of it, is it?”

“Maybe. Don’t know. She might not have me, won’t for sure if she ever finds out the truth. And in reality, I don’t see her leaving The Kirk. She’s got damn strong ties to it. I wouldn’t want to break that part of her, either. That’s not even the point.” He waved a hand through the dusty air. He thought he might just be through proving he wasn’t his father. Jake knew all about good old Pop, and would understand if Micah talked about it, but that felt a bit too cozy-cozy for comfort. “Of course I’d like to have a beautiful woman with me, but the real reason is that I’m sick and tired of what we do. Just like you said.”

“I’m not going anywhere near Susie. Even if you and Kate ride off into the sunset.”

“Never said you had to. In fact, you should probably stay about as far away as possible. She runs through men like I run through neckties.” Not very sporting of him, but he was having a good time giving Jake exactly what he deserved after the crap he’d tossed around about Kate.

Jake bared his teeth in a grimace. “I don’t know what she can be thinking, carrying on like that. Makes a body form an opinion of her.”

“Maybe she’s thinking there’s no harm in a few dates with men she enjoys?”

A rough growl spilled out of Jake’s chest. “Do what you will. I don’t care. I will say, though, that I don’t want another partner.”

“Aw, you’re gonna make me all soft and weepy,” Micah replied dryly.

“Nothing to do with you, you jackass. I just don’t feel like breaking in some wet-behind-the-ears idiot. Of course that’s assuming you don’t get my ass killed in some showdown with Big Poppa.”

Leave it to Jake to take the fun out of a conversation. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m hoping no one ends up dead.”

“Oh, yeah. That makes me feel loads better.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kate sat at her desk, staring blindly at paperwork that no longer made sense. Instead, she was back in Micah's room, in his bed, in his arms. Her body throbbed, low and dull, remembering his drugging touches. A physical release. In weak, dark moments, Micah felt like a temptation worth risking her heart over, but that was an illusion. She was an idiot if she thought otherwise. She crossed her legs against the tender burn between her thighs. They'd been thrown together, working against Johnny, and as soon as that was over, things would go back to normal—if she could forget the heavy thickness that stilled her blood as he'd entered her.

She groaned and rubbed a hand over her eyes.

"Kate," called Lucas from the alley door. "You got someone here to see you."

She set down the inventory list she had been pretending to consult and sighed. "It's not trouble, is it?"

"Not quite."

"Not quite? What does that mean?" She made her way across the room.

It meant Earline. Her shoulders bent, the girl stood waiting. A handkerchief twisted in her hands and her makeup was smudged around her eyes.

"Johnny kick you out already?" Kate was being mean but she couldn't help it. She'd never admit it but after she had gone out of her way to help Earline time and time again, the woman's uncaring willingness to abandon Kate at short notice had hurt. Just goes to show how little the average person could be depended on. "I'm afraid you can't have your job back. I've filled the position already."

Frantically, Earline shook her head. The processed locks weren't even plastered down, flying wildly around her face. Something must have really upset her for Earline to forgo her salon visit. "I don't want the job. I'm going back to Oklahoma."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Can I come in?"

Kate raised an eyebrow. They didn't open for another three hours so only Lucas and Susie were in the building.

"I suppose so."

She led the way to the back and sat at her desk. Lacing her fingers together over her stomach, Kate leaned back in her chair. "What's going on?"

Earline plopped down in the chair opposite and started rummaging in her purse, probably looking for another handkerchief since she had destroyed the other one. Kate wondered what could have gone wrong so quickly. No bruises on her face and her bare arms were also unblemished. Maybe Johnny hadn't wanted to buy her a diamond bracelet. From everything Kate heard, Johnny was moving up but still not making the big bucks yet. He couldn't keep his territory under control and seemed to be losing ground to people who actually lived in the neighborhoods. Unfortunately, it only seemed to make him more vicious.

Earline was still rooting, saying nothing. Kate felt like snapping at her to hurry up. There was a business to be run here, after all, and Johnny had pulled quite enough of her time and resources. In one swift movement, Earline pulled a pistol from her bag, the grip wrapped in a stained cloth, and dropped it on the desk with an ominous clunk.

"There," Earline sobbed. "That's what's going on."

It was a beautiful piece of death, with mother-of-pearl grips and a barrel that gleamed blue under the lights. Kate picked up a fountain pen from her blotter and used it to spin the butt toward her, with the added benefit of spinning the muzzle away. On the back of the butt was exactly what she'd expected to see—an intertwined JV, picked out in gilt. Johnny's gun.

He kept four of these, all Colt .45s, an affectation of his. He seemed to think they made him look like a big man, but everyone else thought they were a joke. For one thing, the barrels were too damn long. The design made them impossible to easily conceal under a jacket or in a pocket, which was undoubtedly how Earline had come by it. The man hadn't wanted to ruin the line of his suit jacket.

"What happened, Earline?"

The sobs came harder and faster, turning into keening wails. Earline buried her face in her twisted bit of linen. With disgust, Kate noticed the same intertwining initials embroidered in the cotton. She yanked open a drawer and pulled out a glass and a bottle of whiskey. It was her good stuff and needed no mixer. Two fingers gurgled into the glass, then Kate slid it across the desk. "Drink that."

Earline groped for the drink and downed it in one go. A low hiss escaped her. She dropped her head back. "He's awful, Kate. A monster."

Kate resisted the urge to say *I told you so*. "Did he hurt you?"

Earline shook her head. "I've seen pigs die before. Daddy used to slaughter them. I kinda expected a man's blood to be different. But it wasn't. It was the same color."

Kate suppressed a sigh, as this was as bad as she'd imagined. Earline had seen a man killed. "Who was he?"

"Just a Mick. A shopkeeper. A tailor shop. In the Bowery. Johnny and his goons ruined some beautiful fabric."

Kate gritted her teeth. It was just like Earline to be more concerned with the cloth than the dead man who had owned it. Franklin McCauley, most likely. Egged on by McCauley's furious brother, the entire

city buzzed since he'd been found in his shop the night before. Daniel McCauley worked with Tammany Hall, the dirty side of City Hall, and had enough muscle to keep the talk going until the murderer was hanged. Johnny'd finally balled up big time.

"Why did Johnny have him killed? Or did he do it himself?" A glance at the gun lying on her desk showed the likely answer. Earline could only delude herself for so long.

The other woman chewed on her bottom lip. The crimson lipstick that had been slicked over her mouth was almost all gone. Only a pink ring remained. "It was Johnny. Something about a numbers racket. He said he'd warned the man before and then he—he—Johnny shot him. In the head." She dissolved into another fit of tears.

Kate rapped her nails on the arm of her chair as she waited for Earline to calm down. On some level, she felt like she should offer comfort. Perhaps a hug or at least a pat on the back. On the other hand, if Earline had come to Kate looking for comfort, she was in the wrong place. And while Earline could be conniving, self-centered and self-serving, she certainly wasn't stupid. There was a reason she was here, taking up Kate's time.

Earline's tears slowed and she wiped her eyes off. "You know the cops, Kate. You know which are dirty and who would go right to Johnny."

"You're taking this to the police?" Kate was surprised.

"No, I'm going to California. Well, I might have to go home to Oklahoma first, but then I'm going to Hollywood. I want you to take the gun in after I'm long gone. If I just leave, Johnny won't care much, but if I rat on him before I do, he'll come after me. You're already on his bad side. Everyone knows you'd be the type to turn it in. If it doesn't involve the Volstead Act, you're disgustingly honest like that."

Kate lowered her gaze to the gun in question. This was more in line with what she would expect from Earline, but also a frustratingly honest appraisal of the situation. Plenty of women had run home after being Johnny's mistress. But he would kill Earline if she gave him up to the cops, and Kate was already on his hit list.

There might be another way out. It didn't involve the police and it didn't involve doing the right thing. The plan forming in Kate's mind was also quite dangerous. Micah's role would be critical, and she didn't know if she could do it. There was no goodly reason on earth to ask the bootlegger for even more help. He'd done enough, and it was acid eating her bones that she might not be able to repay him. Besides, Micah had volunteered to help her out with Johnny. His ruthless, vicious father was another matter. But dammit, she didn't have the necessary firepower at her disposal. Micah would have it, since the booze racket could be dangerous in this town.

She eyed Earline. "How soon can you get out of town?"

"I'm not sure. I don't have much cash. Johnny never gave me any, just bought me dresses and jewelry." She shot Kate a malevolent look from under her sparse lashes. "And you never paid me much."

Kate fought the urge to roll her eyes. She'd always paid a living wage, even paid more than most other club owners. "Bring the jewelry tomorrow. I'll buy it off you." Lord only knew what she would do with it all. Earline's taste was as far from hers as possible. Probably she'd have to sell it when there was more time to spare.

"I don't want to give you my jewels! What'll I have when I go back home? Everyone'll say I've come home with my tail between my legs."

"You'll have your life."

Under what remained of her powder, the color leached from Earline's skin. "Maybe I'll go straight to California. Oklahoma feels too close."

"That might be a good idea." Leaving the gun out in the open wouldn't do. Kate opened the middle drawer of her desk and shoved some papers to the side to make room. Using her pen because touching it directly would be repugnant, she dropped the gun in. The drawer made a decisive thud as it closed. Dusting her hands off was pointless, but she did it anyway as she stood. Anything to shake the mental filth from such associations.

"Come on, you need to get home."

Earline dabbed at her eyes as she stood. "Yeah, I need to pack."

Kate escorted her out, ignoring Susie's raised eyebrows. After Earline left, she turned toward her friend, and gestured with her head toward the office. Susie jumped up from the piano and hustled after her. Silently, Kate opened the drawer with the gun in it.

"Lordy," exclaimed Susie. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yep. Johnny used it to kill a man yesterday." Briefly, she told Susie the story.

"What are you going to do with it? You can't keep that nasty thing."

"I have an idea. I'm going to have to talk to Micah about it."

Susie leaned on the edge of her desk. "I don't much like that look in your eye."

Kate sighed. "I don't much like what I may have to do."

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Hacks. You’re all a bunch of fucking hacks.” Johnny knocked back his glass of scotch and slammed the glass down on the grimy table. “It’s because of youse that I’m stuck in a stink hole like this!”

The Round Robin was a dank, tiny room. Put fifty men in it and you wouldn’t even have room to sneeze without accidentally getting a cock in your ass. Thick with the stench of unwashed workers and cabbage from the tenement apartments packed above and beside, it was no place for a man like Johnny Vittorelli. He was a big man. He deserved a big place. Like The Kirk.

“Fucking morons,” he growled. “I can’t believe you let that bitch get the drop on you.”

He’d have The Kirk if it weren’t for these idiots. Pietro and Antonio stood before him like penitent schoolchildren. Behind them, the rest of his motley gang sprawled over benches and chairs. What the hell was he supposed to do with such a no good assortment? Not a damn thing, most likely. Pop had intentionally hamstrung him. He didn’t want Johnny to show what he could do, so he’d never have to give up control of the family.

“But Johnny,” sputtered Pietro. “Micah Trent got the drop on you too.”

Johnny turned what he privately thought of as his death stare on the other man. The stare had taken years of practice, but was completely worth it when Pietro squirmed, yanking on his necktie. “Which wouldn’t have fucking happened if it weren’t for you idiots.”

He signaled the bartender, who hustled over carrying a fresh bottle. Fine, aged scotch. At least the booze in this damn hole in the wall was good. It ought to be. He’d provided it himself. Soon, he’d have both good booze and a good location. Then people would start paying attention to him.

“You should have just shot the bitch,” he muttered.

“Johnny, you told us not to. Specifically. You said you wanted her alive to sign papers.”

Johnny whipped one of his babies out of a side holster. At the last second, he adjusted his aim down. He fired. Blood bloomed in a wet flower across the man’s thigh. Pietro groaned and fell, clutching his leg. No one else moved. Beer overflowed the mug the bartender had been filling, spilling out in a quiet glug-glug.

“Anyone else feel like contradicting me?” Not a word was spoken. “Jesus, get him out of here before he bleeds all over the floor.” Of course, the floor was so filthy it could only be an improvement. Two of his men stepped in and scooped Pietro up. They swung his arms around their shoulders and hustled him out the back door.

“I need a solution for this bitch,” Johnny growled. He took a swig of whiskey and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. “Don’t any of youse have a brain in those thick skulls?”

“I got an idea,” said a voice from the corner. The men shifted, parting to allow Johnny a view of his next victim. Tony Scalletti had worked for Johnny for only a month, since he’d helped out on a truck hijacking in New Jersey. That fucking mess of a hijacking, as a matter of fact, but that hadn’t been Tony’s fault. Tony had finally shot the driver, actually. Wiry and short, Tony was always in motion. Even as he leaned against the wall, his hands twitched, flipping and twirling a pocketknife.

“Well? Spit it out.”

“I done some work for some guys in Chicago. They taught me how to build something.”

As Tony went on, Johnny felt his shoulders unknot. Yeah. Yeah, now they were on the trolley.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Micah jogged up Kate's front steps and cranked the doorbell. As the chimes echoed through the house, he turned and surveyed the street. Something was wrong. The back of his neck was twisted with tension—had been that way since he'd turned the corner. He couldn't put a finger on what gave him the willies. A few people milled here and there, mostly around the corner market, typical for the middle of the afternoon. A black sedan slowly cruised down the far side of the street. Micah tried to get a look in the windows, but the sun smeared the glass with glare. As he watched, the Ford came to the end of the block and turned off. He wanted to breathe a sigh of relief but it wouldn't come.

The door opened and Micah spun to smile at Kate. It had been two days since he'd tasted the soft lushness of her mouth, felt her silky skin. He'd come by yesterday, when she'd shown him the little present Earline had dropped off. Susie and the rest of the gang had hovered over their revered boss, making a moment alone virtually impossible. Low voices were enough to discuss what to do with the gun, and to promise what he'd do to Kate's delectable body at the next opportunity, but it wasn't the same as a real touch. Hence the reason he was on her doorstep hours earlier than strictly necessary.

Kate hadn't answered the door.

Patrick leaned against the open door frame. He looked like hell, as usual. His once-white shirt was a dingy yellow and his suspenders slung around his hips. The only color in his sallow face was dark purple smudges under his eyes. It was strange to see Kate's vibrantly blue eyes in such an ill-looking face.

"I've heard about you. Mr. Mouth ain't got nothing to say to me?" Patrick drawled.

Micah shrugged. There were a few choice words he'd like to say to Patrick, all right. He'd start with what a shit bag he was. Then he'd move on to how Patrick let Kate carry the weight of the world on her shoulders, all the while clinging to her ankles like dead weight. And then he might finish off with a right hook to the jaw.

Instead he asked, "Is Kate here?"

"Sure. She's getting ready for work."

Damn. Kate would throw a fit if she came down to find him whaling on her brother. He studied Patrick's wiseass smirk. Might be worth it anyway. "Can I come in?" It made his skin crawl to ask this man for permission for anything.

"Nope. Don't think so. I like making you wait on my stoop in front of God and sundry."

“You pissant asshole.” Rage curled Micah’s hands into fists. She would have to get over it. Someone needed to teach this sorry excuse for a man a lesson. “You think I’m gonna turn my head and not notice when you talk to me like that?”

“I don’t know. You think I’m not going to notice the way you’re carrying on with my sister?”

“Oh, that’s rich. You, of all people, want to have a talk with me about my intentions?”

“I’m the man of this family. The head of it.”

“Shit, boy. Only because you’re the only one left. And besides that, I’d guess that Kate has more balls than you had even before you fell into that damned bottle.”

A direct hit. Patrick still propped up the doorframe but the line of his narrow shoulders tensed. His eyes flashed an incredibly dark blue and Micah realized he was getting a glimpse of what Kate would look like if he ever saw her furious. More intimidating coming from her, it’d be a damn sight sexier, too.

“The drink’s in me blood, what can I say,” Patrick said with an affected Irish lilt. “We Kirklands have been tipplers from way back in the Old Country.”

“Bullshit.”

Patrick dropped the fake insouciance and stood up straight. “Listen, you cock sucking son of a whore. You don’t know what I’ve been through. Don’t judge me until you know me, and I can guaran-fucking-tee you don’t know me. Has Kate told you what a bastard our father was? How he beat me and made her watch?”

Micah froze down to his soul. He felt chilled through, like he stood there on the stoop in December rather than a clear, sunny September. She hadn’t said a word about her childhood, at least not about those sorts of horror stories that made him almost grateful his father had only abandoned them. Here he’d been feeling like he was on top of the world because he’d gotten Kate to trust him, only to be slapped in the face with the truth by her wastrel brother. She still hadn’t opened up to him, not about what really mattered.

He deserved it anyway, for keeping his own truth from her. It was better this way. True, he wasn’t flying high, wasn’t wrapped up in Kate’s intoxicating burn anymore, but that was all right. He didn’t have to agonize over telling her about his deception. She wouldn’t care.

Like any good manipulator, Patrick must have latched onto something in Micah’s expression. “I’m right,” he crowed. “She’s told you nothing, or at least so little it means nothing. Guess I don’t have to worry much about you hurting her after all. You’re a temporary distraction, at most.”

Patrick knew just how to twist the knife. Micah’s guts churned with pain but he didn’t show it, keeping his expression and his body language stoic. “Hadn’t been able to tell that you worried much at all,” he said with a shrug. He shoved his hands deep in his pockets so Patrick wouldn’t see the knotted fists they’d turned into. He didn’t want to even mention this on Kate’s front stoop, in front of half the local parish, but someone needed to give Patrick a wakeup call, and the bastard wouldn’t let him in the house.

“Your sister’s practically caught up in a gang war and you haven’t lifted a damn finger to help her. Excuse me, that’s the wrong expression. You haven’t put down the damn bottle to help her.”

“Kate didn’t breathe a word of any of it until after your meddling ass was already neck deep in the middle,” Patrick hissed.

“Doesn’t seem like she tells you anything important, either. I guess that makes us even.”

Disgust flashed over Patrick. Apparently he’d realized he’d let his mouth run away with him. Micah held the other man’s gaze, daring him to take a swing. Try it, just try it. With Patrick weak and probably half drunk from the night before, it wouldn’t be much of a fight, but Micah wouldn’t care. He could almost taste the rush he’d get from slamming Patrick’s face into the brick front of the building.

“Patrick? Who was at the door?” Kate’s voice wafted out from the dim recesses of the house. She appeared behind her brother and a smile wreathed her gamine face. “Hi there. Patrick, why didn’t you invite him in?”

“You were busy,” her brother gritted from behind clenched teeth, without breaking from their stare.

“I was just a minute.” She looked from Micah to Patrick and back again.

By no chance was she a stupid woman. She saw at least part of what was going on. Instead of commenting, she stretched up to plant a kiss on Patrick’s cheek. Micah felt his jaw clench. But then she slipped around the other man and twined her arm around Micah’s. It was petty and childish, he saw that clearly. But the realization couldn’t tamp down the sudden rush of pleasure that went through him. He smiled at Patrick, whose brows snapped together as he glared.

“I’ve got to head down to the bar, Patrick. Maybe tomorrow we can go over the plans for the expansion?”

Patrick only shrugged in response. “Later, sis,” he said dismissively as he shut the door.

The dashed hope etched over her nearly killed Micah. He and her brother were getting in a pissing contest when all she wanted was a brother who carried his own weight. A better man would bow out and let her focus her efforts where they needed to be.

Lucky for Micah, he’d already established he wasn’t a good man when it came to Kate. He’d do anything to get what he needed from her. And now he needed her to open up a little bit more. He figured if he kept chipping away, eventually he would break down those walls of hers.

Plans for the future would be a good start. With that goal in mind, he adopted his most charming smile and looked down at her. “Expansion? Is this happening any time soon?”

“Not really.” Her ink black hair slid across her cheek as she shook her head. “It’s one of those someday things we’ve always had in mind. An expansion, that is. Patrick mentioned a second bar not too long ago, and got the most excited about that idea. He talked about making it a literary haven, a place where Hemingway and Fitzgerald could come drink when they weren’t in Europe. He’s followed them in

the papers for the longest time. I never did understand why he was so fascinated by those two drunks.” She stared at the closed door and bit her lip for a moment. “I guess I do now. He wanted to be like them.”

“Now Kate, you know it’s not about that. There’s men who head that way from their first drink, with no way out.” He’d be damned if he knew why he defended Patrick. The last thing that man needed was another person coddling him. Well, next to last. The dead last thing he needed was a never-ending supply of whiskey. “That’s what Prohibition was supposed to fix.”

“Done a bang up job of it too, hasn’t it? Damn Prohibition Agents. Haven’t done a thing for my brother and they’ve practically served me up on a platter to the mob.”

“It’s not their fault.” He sounded overly defensive and took a breath to tamp it down. “They’re doing their job, defending a legal law.”

“Hmm.” Kate started down the steps and he followed. “Tell me the truth. I do have eyes in my head, you know, and they work rather well. What’s going on?”

His chest constricted. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he stalled.

“You and Patrick, what else? What was going on when I came out?” Her question seemingly guileless, his secret was safe for another day.

Why didn’t that make him feel better? Instead of sucking in cool relief, his lungs drew even tighter. “It was nothing.”

“Don’t give me that.” They’d come to street level and of an accord turned down the sunken steps that led to The Kirk’s heavy door. “It was some arcane man thing, wasn’t it? Marking out territory?”

“Something like that.”

Kate harrumphed as she withdrew her key and inserted it in the lock. “I’ll have you know I’m not a bone to be fought over. Particularly not by you and my brother.”

The sound of a rumbling, slow-moving engine caught Micah’s attention. He looked up at the street. From this angle, he couldn’t see much, only the black top and glass windows. It could be the same auto he’d seen cruising down the street, but there were thousands more exactly the same in the city.

“Of course you’re not,” he murmured to Kate. His protective urges went into overdrive, and he angled his body across hers, half-expecting a rifle barrel to appear, wielded by one of Johnny’s goons. The car wasn’t even stopping.

“Don’t patronize me, Micah Trent. I’m serious.”

“Of course you are.”

The back passenger window rolled down. A tanned hand appeared and gently chucked out something metal. It clinked and clanged on the concrete stairs.

Micah reached around Kate and slammed the door open, then shoved her inside. He flattened her to the ground. One kick slammed the door shut. Covering Kate with his body, he braced for impact.

Nothing.

Sprawled across the tiles beneath him, Kate started to struggle. “What the hell was that?” she gasped.

“A bomb.” Or at least he’d thought it was. Maybe the fuse had gone bad. Bombings were notoriously unreliable, good for inspiring terror rather than actual damage. There were a few mobsters in Chicago who’d been lobbing them back and forth for two years with no real success on either side.

Kate wiggled beneath him. Slowly he levered his torso off hers. He felt like an idiot, making a big deal out of—

Boom!

A wave of pressure rolled over them. The door rattled in its frame and dust whooshed in from the crack at the bottom. His ears rang. Plaster rained from the ceiling.

Micah lay there, stunned for a moment. The compression had smashed him flat over Kate. He slowly lifted off as he shook his head to clear it. He swept his hands over her slender limbs, checking for injury. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Mostly. I think I just got my bell rung.”

“Did something hit you?”

“You bet.” She struggled up and put a hand to her temple.

He checked her head again for any bumps or knots. Her skull was smooth and her hair slipped like cool silk through his fingers, with none of the wet stickiness of blood. “What was it? Plaster?”

“It was you.”

“What?”

“Nearly two hundred pounds of male hit me. That would be you.” She groaned.

“I’m sorry, I was trying to keep you safe.” The first rush of danger had faded and Micah found himself perilously close to laughter. She most certainly wouldn’t appreciate that one bit.

She gazed around and let loose a blistering curse. He didn’t blame her. The foyer was murky with dust and they were covered in a light layer of white plaster. The bar she poured her life’s blood into looked like it might fall down around their ears. He followed her gaze up to the ceiling. Two long, wandering cracks ran through it. Hopefully just surface damage.

“Is that safe?”

“I’m not sure. Could be the plaster, could be structural.”

Anger gradually replaced the near-laughter of a moment before. Kate looked like a dejected street urchin. Filthy and shaken, she stared at her ceiling as her lower lip trembled.

Someone pounded on the door, causing another shower of dust to fall. She ducked her head and raised her hands to protect herself as Micah jumped to his feet.

“Kate?” came the muffled call. Patrick.

He was surprised the man had managed to rouse himself enough to run to his sister’s aid.

Patrick pounded on the door again. “Kate, are you in there?”

“Yes, she is. Now stop banging on the damn door before you get us killed.”

“What did you do to her, you bastard?” Patrick was still yelling, but at least he’d stopped the thumping.

“I’m right here.” She had come to her feet and stood behind him. “It was Johnny Vittorelli, I’m sure. He bombed us.”

“We need to get out of here,” Micah said, eying the door and wall. “What’s the damage out there, Patrick?”

“Some bricks are down. There’s a chunk missing out of the steps. Doesn’t look too bad, actually. All things considered, you know.”

“Doesn’t look too bad in here, either.” The door was solid and straight in the frame, and the walls surrounding didn’t show much structural damage. “I wouldn’t want to open this until you can get someone out here to check it all though. We’ll go out the storeroom and come ’round the block. Gonna have to watch out for more of Johnny’s men.”

Kate shook her head. “There’s a safer way. We’ll never have to leave the building.” Her eyes were huge in her pale face and she clutched her elbows across her stomach.

He pulled her into his arms and tucked her head under his chin. Seeing her defenseless ripped him up inside. He wasn’t doing well at helping her solve her problems. In fact, all he’d done was complicate her personal life and demand she give him time out of her already hectic schedule.

For a moment she stayed rigid in his embrace, just long enough for him to wonder if this would be another moment when she held back an important sliver of herself. Then she melted and twined her arms around his back, and he knew everything would be all right. He stroked her slim shoulders, offering what comfort he could, but then another chunk of the wall released its tenuous hold and crashed to the ground.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said.

She nodded, sniffed once and led the way through the darkened bar to her office. She toed off her shoes and clambered onto her desk, then pushed on what appeared to be a plain panel of the ceiling.

Soundlessly, it swung down and Kate pulled a ladder free.

“Just as I thought.” He stepped forward to brace the bottom rungs.

“What’s that?” With one foot on the bottom rung, she looked down at him. Her eyes glittered like sapphires in the half dark.

“When Johnny and his goons showed up. They’d have found you eventually, would they?”

She shot him a look that told him to lay down and die, reminding him of Jake a whole hell of a lot. Figured he’d get tied up with a woman who’d keep him in line. And better she stay pissed off than feel sorry for herself.

“I did what I had to do.” She sneezed, but it didn’t detract one bit from her imperial attitude.

"I've no doubt of that." He patted her leg and wasn't above copping a fast feel of her thigh. "Upsie-daisy we go."

She rewarded him with a double-die look, but she got moving. They emerged in a tiny linen room off the kitchen. The ladder slid up the back of a cupboard filled with sheets, stored out of sight from even the most prying eyes. Micah snagged a couple lengths of toweling on their way out and Patrick met up with them in the kitchen.

"What the hell was that about?" her brother squawked.

"I guess Johnny got tired of waiting," Kate answered. She leaned against the counter. She scrubbed her hands down her face, and a fine tremor shook her.

Micah wet one of the towels and began to rinse the dust and debris off her delicate features. He cradled her jaw carefully and wiped as softly as he could. He didn't want to hurt her, not even on accident. How cruelly ironic he was guaranteed to, sooner or later. She flashed him a tremulous smile and another hard chip of his frozen heart melted. It was damn near impossible to not admire such a brave woman.

"That's ridiculous," Patrick blurted. "He can't run around trying to bomb everyone who pisses him off." Either he was too shaken to have noticed the small tender moment that passed between Micah and Kate, or he'd decided danger trumped his dislike of Micah.

"Tell that to our front wall," Kate retorted. She pinned Micah with her clear gaze. "What are we going to do?"

This was it. The decision he'd put off time and again. He'd failed to think of any solution that could give him both the dream of arresting the Vittorellis and saving Kate. If Poppa Paulo went up the river before they took care of Johnny, her livelihood would be stripped away. Worse than that, her life had been threatened. Hot rage poured through him. He couldn't allow her to even be scratched again, much less killed.

Even if it meant giving up on his career for good.

"We go to Poppa Paulo."

Her eyes widened. He wouldn't have thought it possible; they'd been so wide already. "Are you sure?"

"Game's over. Johnny's not playing anymore. Poppa Paulo's old fashioned. His type believes in keeping violence within his own circle. Less likely to attract unwanted police attention that way. Johnny's gone too far. Combined with that other thing?" He didn't know what, if anything, she'd told Patrick, so Micah referred to McCauley's murder obliquely. "We might have enough of a bargaining chip now."

The wheels seemed to click and churn in her head as she considered the options. "All right," she finally said, quietly. "We go to Poppa Paulo."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kate lay on the couch in Micah's apartment, her feet tucked in his lap, a handmade quilt draped over her. His talented fingers kneaded her toes, digging out the tension as the radio played quietly. A fire crackled and popped behind the grate. Kate stared at the dancing flames, mesmerized.

A perfect little gem of an evening enveloped her, one Micah had insisted on creating. He'd bundled her to his place, declaring that it was better to be safe than sorry regarding the structural soundness of her home. He'd ensconced her in the living room and anticipated her every wish. She ought to be feeling relaxed, or at least comforted.

She was anything but relaxed. Inside, she felt like someone was using an electric wire to play with her bits and pieces. One second her stomach was knotted and churning, the next her lungs were about to explode. Looking at her wrist, she could actually see her pulse flutter below the meat of her palm. Thoughts zoomed through her head like barnburners at an airplane exhibition, visible for a moment and then gone over the horizon, too fast to examine. And over and over again she heard this afternoon.

She didn't see images, so it wasn't actually remembering. But she heard it. The half-muffled boom, the walls and ceiling cracking. The heavy thump her head made against the floor as Micah pushed her down, then the dry splatter of plaster raining over them.

Johnny had almost won. If the men in the car had driven up a minute faster, if Micah had been a hair slower pushing them out of the way, if the fuse on the bomb had exploded on time—any one of a thousand things could have changed, shifting the outcome along with them.

And she'd be dead. Or The Kirk could have crumbled. Or Micah could have died.

Soon they'd have to face Poppa Paulo. Trying to manipulate a man like that was like trying to pet a lion. Foolish, but it's what they had to do. Johnny had gone too far. Paulo was the sure fire way to get him in check.

The wire touched her muscles and she tensed. Maybe it was better when she couldn't follow through with a thought. Now she'd lit on Poppa Paulo and couldn't get away. What if he decided the best choice he had to dig Johnny out of the grave he'd made was to kill them all? He'd be a lot more efficient than his bumbling son, surely. Hell, maybe they'd be dead before they even had time to worry.

"Kate? Are you all right?" Micah's warm voice broke through her mental haze but couldn't break the connection between that damned wire and her body. She jumped. Twitchy, that's what she was. She felt like hopping up and storming around the room. Breaking things. Screaming at the top of her lungs.

But it wouldn't do any good. Even if she marched into Micah's kitchen and systematically cracked every one of his dishes against the floor, she'd still hear this afternoon and they'd still have to face Poppa Paulo.

Boom. The bomb went off in her ears again.

"Hey. Hey, are you okay?" Micah stroked the fragile skin behind her knee, sending a familiar shiver up her legs. His expression filled with compassion and his brown eyes turned warm.

"Yes. No." She let out a frustration-laden sigh and fisted her hands under the blanket. "I don't know what I am."

"Do you want to talk about it? Violence like that can be hard to deal with. And the bombing, coupled with Johnny's shakedown? I wouldn't be surprised if you're having a hard time, and I would never think badly of you if you are."

"Are you used to it?"

He shrugged, a negligible gesture that still betrayed discomfort. "I suppose so. More than most, I guess. I don't think you ever get completely comfortable with violence, at least if you have a conscience."

"Tell me about your first run-in with it."

Just like that, the curtains were pulled on his expression. His face went blank. No one home here, go away. "You don't want to hear about that."

"I do." The noise in her head was quieting.

"You don't know what you're asking for." He looked away from her and stared at the fireplace instead.

"I want to know." The more she pushed at him, the quieter her head got, until there was sweet, blissful silence. A lost fragment of her screamed this wasn't the answer, that he shouldn't have to pay for her quiet. Most of her didn't care. "I'm not a child. It's up to me what I want to hear about. This isn't our parents' generation, where the little lady has to be protected for her own benefit."

"Well it's up to me what I want to talk about. And that's not on my list."

"You wanted me to trust you, to put my business and my livelihood in your hands. And I have. But you don't return the favor. What do I really know about you, Micah?"

"It's not that I don't trust you. It's not something I like to talk about."

She caught his gaze with hers. Pain flickered in those chocolate brown depths. "Physician, heal thyself," she quoted softly. This wasn't about silencing her mind anymore. Her focus had shifted entirely to him. She wanted to draw him out, to sooth whatever tumult churned inside him. "Let me in, Micah. I'm a big girl. I can handle it."

He looked away, at the fire again, and she felt everything in her stutter to a nervous halt. Finally, after she'd decided he wouldn't open up, he spoke. "I was ten. Some idiot started a bar fight."

Kate swallowed and her throat didn't want to open up again. Maybe he was right, she didn't want to hear this—not with the pain she could see behind his eyes, a living, breathing, biting monster. She was too fragile. She felt like she was made of Tiffany glass and this hit way too close to home. But it was too late to back out now, so she forced herself to nod in encouragement. He caught on to her distress and stroked her calf.

"It's not what you think. The fight caused a riot when the brawlers' crews got involved. It raged for two days, unchecked. Mother kept us in our rented flat, away from most of it. But on the third day the police swept in, cracking heads and carting off the worst. I went out to go collect Pop from...from where he'd holed up." Micah trailed off, staring into the fire as he absentmindedly traced the vulnerable skin behind her knee.

"A block from home, I heard crying. Soft, pitiful. I still don't know how I heard her over the screaming and shouting. A little girl had gotten trapped under a fallen barricade. I tried to dig her out, but I was only ten and no one would help me. They were too busy fighting and looting. A policeman saw me and peeled off from his formation to help. We dug her out, but by then the rest of the police had disappeared and he was on his own. A few Bowery Boys came around the corner and found us."

"Oh, Micah," she breathed. She could imagine his terror as a young boy, with nothing he could have done.

"They were lowdown dirty criminals. Animals. He was just trying to help." Micah's voice was low and so hoarse she could barely understand him. Suddenly he shook his head as if banishing the images. "They beat him, practically ripped him to shreds. I found out later his name was Michael Jensen. Officer Jensen."

"I'm sorry, Micah." She sat up so she could touch him, gave him comfort by petting his near shoulder.

"For what? It wasn't your fault."

"No one that young should have to go through something that horrible."

"It's the way life was around there. I'm lucky I even made it to ten before seeing the dark side." He pulled her hand off his shoulder and pressed a gentle kiss to her palm before folding her hand in his. "Might have even been for the best. Before that day, I'd toyed with the idea of joining up with one of the gangs. They'd been after me for a couple years. But I realized they were scum and I didn't want to be a criminal like them."

"Huh." The questioning exhalation escaped her before she could think better of it.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing."

A wry smile slanted his lips and he stroked her tender palm with his thumb. "Don't give me that. I can see those gears churning in that mind of yours."

“Really, it’s nothing.” She bit her lip when he raised an eyebrow at her. “Yet you ended up on the other side of the law after all.”

Micah stilled as his guts went stone cold, like he was standing naked on top of the Brooklyn Bridge in January. Of course, he thought numbly, of course she would be so perceptive. He should have known better before letting his tongue run away with him.

The idea of confessing hung in the air before him. He could put all his cards on the table, reveal the busted flush he was trying desperately to bluff into a winning hand. No, he was not on the other side of the law. No, he was not one of them. Yes, he had lied to her from the beginning. The lies grated on him, never more painful than in this instant. For now, he could play along and pretend that he’d earned her ferocious loyalty. Never in his life had he earned that kind of devotion—he could at least pretend it was his for a while.

And everything would come crashing down. She’d be furious, probably run away in a white-hot rage. Worse than not having her anymore would be the knowledge that she was not safe, that she was still in danger. Who knew what she’d do? Try to confront Vittorelli by herself, most likely. Maybe she could manage it. Maybe.

She could just as easily end up on the floor of The Kirk in a sticky pool of blood. A short three inches of type, ten pages into *The New York Times* about the tragic death of a local club owner. The implication would be that she should have known better than to get involved with men like that. No one would care that such a vibrant life had been snuffed out—no kind of payout for her fire and loyalty.

Besides, she didn’t know about the ace he held up his sleeve. If he had to pull it out in a last minute scramble, it would be as good as a confession to Kate, but at least she would be safe. Sacrificing The Kirk could pay for both keeping her alive and dismantling the wretched mob family.

“Micah?” she inquired quietly. “Are you okay?”

He’d gotten lost in his thoughts. Normally he had more smiles than a gambler had marked cards, but this time it was difficult to pull one out. He forced it. “I’m fine.”

Her fingers, long and slender, twined with his. Her dancer’s body was outshined by her strong mind and personality, and he often forgot how delicate she really was. But seeing her hand nearly engulfed in his violently reminded him. He’d take any risk to ensure she was protected, even if it meant losing her forever. Of course he’d fight for her, try to convince her they were good together, but he held few illusions. She’d be done with him.

Suddenly he was desperate to be inside her, to feel her wet heat cling to him as she made those soft sighs of surrender. He kissed her harshly, claimed her mouth in a fast meeting of lips and teeth and tongue. He bore her back, into the cushions and knew he’d never be able to sit on this couch again without remembering her. That was only right. For breaking her fragile trust, he’d deserve to be haunted.

If she wondered at the desperation in him, she said nothing. She opened to him, enfolding him in her arms. Her legs slid apart, so he fell into her welcoming embrace. She kissed him back, darting her tongue into his mouth, and kneaded his shoulders.

Tossing the quilt aside was easy, but he fumbled when he pulled down her panties and opened his pants, but when he delved into her curls, she was wet for him. He sank into her and a soft moan broke from each of them.

“Jesus, Kate,” he groaned, and buried his face in the gentle curve of her shoulder. He stilled, lost in her clinging body.

“I know,” she murmured, and softly grazed her nails down his neck.

He shivered. She couldn’t really know how lost he felt, until he came home in her. But he’d take what he could get, at least until she’d have him no more. Palming her breast, he thumbed her nipple through the cotton of her shirt. He was an idiot, an ass, but he thrust anyway.

They writhed together, constrained by the narrow couch. Wrapped up in her giving body, he was going over too fast. She was so hot and so wet. He wedged a hand between them and pressed his thumb over her clit, bringing her up with him. With a twitch and a hungry moan, she came apart beneath him. He gentled his touch but kept his thumb on her, drawing out her orgasm as he followed her over the crest. When he came, he shuddered.

Eventually, Micah rested his forehead on the couch as their cheeks pressed together. Everything would be all right. Even after she moved on, he would have right now, this memory. He’d be able to remember when he was at home in her soft body, and it would be enough.

It would have to be enough.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Ready to get a wiggle on?” Micah tipped his bowler hat to a rakish angle.

He looked sharp in a black suit, with a bright yellow tie and a matching handkerchief poking out of his breast pocket. In a planned move, Kate wore a paler shade of yellow, almost a gold. The dress was patterned with swirling crystals in a vaguely flowery design that swept low over her hips. A matching headband circled low over her forehead and shone against her dark hair. They looked like walking luxury and power, but more than that they looked like a unit since it was imperative they convince Poppa Paulo they were worth taking seriously.

It had taken a little more than a week to pin down exactly when Poppa Paulo would be here. A week of looking over their shoulders, worrying if Johnny would beat them to the punch and make another move before they could get to his father. Luckily the damage to The Kirk had been all cosmetic and easily cleaned up in a day, so she’d been able to re-open and stay busy. But that only went so far to keep her mind from fretting.

“Are you sure this is the best choice for where to catch up with him?” She glanced around, fidgeting with a cluster of crystals on her hip.

They stood at the mouth of a dark alleyway. Halfway down was an innocuous looking white door. A pot of geraniums framed each side of it, glowing a sickly orange under a single bare bulb stuck right over the doorframe. “Poppa Paulo doesn’t hide his comings or goings. We could talk to him at his barber’s or his supper club. Either of those would be fine with me.”

“He might be seen in those places but it’s hard to get to him,” Micah said. “Besides, both of those are his territory. This is neutral.”

“Neutral?” she squeaked. “Joe Masseria’s place is what you call neutral?”

“Poppa Paulo can’t risk looking weak in front of Masseria, but he can’t risk offending him either. And Joe loves a beautiful lady.” With a teasing smile, he rubbed her shoulders briefly. “That would be you. You look gorgeous. Unbelievably sexy.”

She appreciated the effort he made in trying to calm her down. But it was like her insides had all come loose and fluttered around in her body. “Thanks, though I’m not sure how I feel about you dangling me in front of other men’s noses,” she said, forcing a smile. She drew her shoulders back and took a deep breath.

She twined her arm around his and tucked herself in along his side. He felt solid, steady. It would all be fine in the end. “Okay, let’s go.”

They knocked on the door and a big ox of a man opened it. With a bald head and ears that had bloomed into cauliflowers from too many fists, he was probably an ex-boxer. Micah smiled and stuck a hand out.

“Hey, Tiny,” Micah said. “Long time since I’ve seen you last. How have you been?”

Kate shivered. It made her a hypocrite, since she was a criminal also, but she was sometimes able to forget the ties Micah had to the underworld of crime. But it felt different. Kate had been forced into her choices. Micah seemed to live in this world because he liked it, flashing vibrant charm at everyone he met, even the lowest scum. On the other hand, he was still the steadiest person she’d met in her life.

“Hi, Micah,” said the guard. Kate blinked and tried not to show her surprise. Tiny had the high, reedy voice of a man a good foot shorter than he actually was. “Been a while. I’m doing good.”

“Verity and the kids?”

“Great.” He opened the door wide and Kate and Micah stepped past into a small foyer. A girl stood at the coat check window, popping gum. “Junior’s doing really well in school.”

“So he’s staying out of trouble?”

“Eh,” Tiny prevaricated and ran his hand over his bald pate. “He started running numbers for a guy down in Little Italy but I got him sorted out. Told him he’d be breakin’ his momma’s heart if he ended up like me.”

“Good job.” Micah clapped Tiny on the shoulder and sidled up close, bringing her near enough to smell Tiny. She found herself surprised again. He smelled pure and clean, like Ivory soap. “Who’s here tonight?”

“The usuals, pretty much. Poppa Paulo. Joe the Boss.” Tiny eyed Kate. “You better keep that one close by your side tonight.”

“Just what are you implying, bub?” Kate’s chin went up in affront. Did he think she was some tramp to run off at the first sight of a powerful man?

“You’re pretty. Just Mr. Masseria’s type. He might pester you more than you want if he don’t know you’re with Micah here.”

“Oh.” She couldn’t be offended by hearing exactly what they’d hoped for. “Well. Thanks.”

“You go on.” Tiny smiled, turning his beat up face into a thing of beauty. “Have a good time, you two.”

“Will do,” Micah replied, but the grim set to his jaw betrayed his nerves.

They entered the inner rooms and, dumbfounded, Kate stood staring at a bordello from fifty years ago. Everything that would stand still long enough to be gilded, and even some things that wouldn’t, like the drink girls, gleamed with gold. The walls were covered in crimson swags of velvet. Shadowed booths ringed the room, but Micah led them to a tiny table in the center.

“Gold?” she hissed at him. “I need to wear gold? I look like I work here.”

“Not even close,” he reassured her. “You’re on a level twenty times above them.”

As she lowered herself into the chair he held out, she glared daggers at him. “You don’t expect me to buy that line, do you? If it’s true, I’d have still looked better than them if I were wearing blue. Or silver. I happen to like silver.”

As he pushed the chair in, he leaned in low over her shoulders. “I’ve got everything under control.” His breath wafted over her bare neck as he spoke and sent tendrils of heat down her spine. “Don’t you think you can trust me by now? I wanted you to look like you fit in, but as their queen. It’s worked. Now look happy to be here. We’ve caught attention already.”

He nudged her jaw in a move that would look like affection to everyone else, but really directed her gaze to a large, half circle booth in the corner. Ringing it were four goons in ill-fitting suits with bulges at the waist that betrayed they were packing iron. But behind them, in the padded velvet booth, sat the real source of her anxiety. Poppa Paulo and Masseria.

They were both looking at her.

Poppa Paulo was a large man, with a friendly round face and a gentle smile that reminded Kate of the grandfather she’d always dreamed of having. He sat alone on one side of the table. When he nodded to her, Kate’s mouth went dry.

Quickly she looked away to the other man at the table. A mistake. Joe Masseria was a hefty man, with the dark gaze of a cobra she’d once seen at a Coney Island display. The carnie had called the snake the most dangerous in the world and she had stared, fascinated with its dangerous elegance. In the same way, she couldn’t look away from Joe the Boss. One of the gold-dressed girls was tucked under his arm. Without ever releasing Kate from his gaze, he leaned over and said something that made the girl get up from the table. This man was more than dangerous; he was walking, talking death. She and Micah were fools for thinking they could use him in any way, even to maneuver a meeting with Poppa Paulo.

Micah crossed to his seat, moving between Kate and Masseria, and broke the spell. Her throat clicked as she swallowed and looked down at her hands. Without realizing, she’d splayed her fingers and dug into the tablecloth. “Jesus,” she whispered. “We can’t do this.”

Micah gathered her hand in his larger, warm one. There was a smile on his face but his eyes were darkly serious. “How much do you want The Kirk?”

“I’ve thought about walking away,” she blurted. “Let it all go, let Patrick sink or swim on his own.” A half-hidden thought she’d only barely acknowledged, now the words came out, temptingly right. Seductive. Obviously something wasn’t working with what she’d been doing for the past five years. Maybe it was time for a change.

Emotions flashed across Micah’s face, almost too fast to catalog. Surprise, pleasure and finally what might have been regret. Why regret?

He rubbed her palm slowly with a thumb. “You can’t make a decision like that now, out of fear.”

“Why not? Seems like a brilliant time to me.”

His gaze dropped to their joined hands for a moment before he looked back up at her. “And me? Am I a factor in that choice?”

“If I said you were?” For the second time in only a few minutes, she found herself trapped in a man’s gaze. This time there was nothing of fear to it, only pulse-pounding excitement and the feeling that just maybe she was about to embark on a whole new adventure. His response hardly even mattered, the point was that she’d handed her trust over to another living being. In giving her faith, she almost felt like she regained a part of herself the world had tried to kill.

He was just about to answer, mouth opening on the words, when a waitress walked up bearing a magnum of champagne in an ice bucket and two glasses. Naturally, the ice bucket was gilded.

Kate was surprised to find herself not annoyed by the girl’s entrance. She smiled up at her. “We hadn’t ordered anything yet.”

“Oh no, ma’am.” She was pretty in a vapid way, with apple-round cheeks and blue eyes as empty as a sheet of glass. “This is a compliment of the house.”

Kate felt sorry for her for an instant. The little thing probably had no idea the danger she played with, working here and cuddling up to Masseria and the like. The chance to buy flashy clothes and have rich men paying attention to her was likely all she thought about. Before she knew it, she’d find herself in over her head, just like Earline. Just like Kate.

“To what do we owe this honor?” Micah asked.

The girl transferred her attention to him and those empty looks instantly filled up with sex appeal. Her hip jutted provocatively to the side and she fluffed her hair. She’d found a new toy. All sympathy rapidly fled Kate’s bones.

“I’m sure I don’t know, sir,” purred the little floozy.

“Please send our compliments.” He dismissed her with a nod.

“Anything you like. Please, if I can be of any assistance, any at all, let me know. Just ask for Clara.” With that, she sauntered away, bottom twitching beneath her tissue-thin skirt.

Kate harrumphed. “If her name’s really Clara, I’m a Vanderbilt. Couldn’t she come up with a name that wasn’t stolen from a motion picture?”

Micah chuckled and it rolled through Kate, loosening all the bits that had wound tight. “Your claws are showing. Give her a break. Reading material harder than Photoplay is probably too much for the little thing’s brain.”

An unwelcome laugh burst from her throat. “Maybe. She ought to know better than to poach on another woman’s territory.”

“Is that what I am? Your territory?”

“Of course,” she threw out, keeping her voice light intentionally. “At least for now. I don’t share well.”

He opened the bottle with deft maneuvers. No showy waste for him. He filled their glasses with the same economical moves. “That’s good to know. I’ll be sure not to give you reason to claw some poor girl’s eyes out.”

“That’s the right choice. Much better on the female population that way.”

She raised her glass in a subtle toast and he matched it, then looked over his shoulder. “It’s show time already, isn’t it?”

“Afraid so.” He took a healthy swig of the drink. “Better to get this over with, right?”

“You bet, bub.” She drank too. Bubbles tickled the back of her nose.

They moved to the booth in the back corner, only to be blocked by the middle big six. Joe and Poppa Paulo watched impassively. One raised his thick arm and shook his head. “Mr. Masseria’s busy,” he growled.

Micah flashed one of his most winning smiles, the one that had nearly blinded her the first time they met. “Then we won’t take up too much of his time.”

“It’s all right.”

Kate repressed a shudder. Joe’s voice was liquid and low and filled with smug assurance of his own power. He feared nothing, certainly not them. Kate liked it that way. Masseria wasn’t a man who would deal well with fear. He’d have them hustled out the back way, never to be seen again.

She stepped forward with Micah, keeping touch with his solid presence. “We just wanted to say thank you for the fine bottle,” Micah said.

“It was quite a nice vintage,” she added. “I’d like to keep it in my place more often, but I haven’t been able to find much.”

“A shame. You’re welcome to…visit whenever you’d like some.” His hesitation made it plain there’d be a steep price that wouldn’t involve cash. “Or I could give you the name of my man. He’s got sources from all over.”

“Oh, Miss Kirkland’s well set up with me.” Micah’s tone and expression were easy, but Kate could feel tension in the hard arm he wrapped around her waist.

“In fact, I’ve been having a bit of bother shaking off someone who’s been rather persistent. He’s been trying to cause some trouble for me.”

Masseria remained unaffected by the news but Poppa Paulo sat up slightly. He knew what his son had been up to, then. If only they knew just how much he’d specifically condoned.

“Now that’s a real shame,” Joe said in his river-slick voice. “I’ve heard great things about The Kirk lately. Been meaning to stop by.”

Revulsion slithered through her at the idea of having this man in her place. She smiled brightly anyway.

“We’d love to show you what The Kirk has to offer. Susie, our resident singer, has a voice like a fallen angel. If the place is still mine, I’d arrange a king’s welcome for you.”

“That sounds wonderful,” said Joe. “You’ll definitely have to sort all this out.”

“Actually,” Micah interjected with a look at Poppa Paulo. “Miss Kirkland would like a meeting with you sir. I’m afraid it’s Johnny she’s been dealing with.”

Poppa Paulo waved a hand. “My son’s business is his own. I do not interfere.”

“That’s a pity. I’d hate for you to end up taken by surprise.”

Joe smiled—nothing but teeth and a sick enjoyment at seeing Poppa, his occasional rival, take a hit. “Come now, Paulo. You can’t tell me you don’t have that son of yours on a leash. We can’t have this beautiful lady lose her establishment. Although,” he said as he turned that empty grin on Kate. “I’d be pleased to offer you any sort of employment you like.”

Knowing just what kind of job he implied, she wouldn’t deal with him if he were the last man in the city. “Gee, that’d be kind,” she purred. “But I’m rather attached to my place. I’m sure you understand family ties.”

Not hardly, considering how many deaths he’d ordered. But he made a lot of noise about his organization being a family. Until they made him angry. Then they were dead family.

“Any time you’d like to change your mind, doll face, let me know.” He turned back to Poppa Paulo. “Meet with the lady. You’ve got nothing to lose, right?”

Poppa Paulo obviously didn’t like getting backed into a corner. He bristled. “Spit it out now,” he challenged. “I’ve got nothing to hide.”

“I’m afraid that’s no good,” Micah said. “Why don’t you come by the Kirk tomorrow. Let’s say around two?”

Poppa Paulo raised an eyebrow. “Why should I do that?”

“We’ve got something you want. Something very important to Johnny’s...freedom, shall we say?”

“Is that right?” There was a charged moment of silence while the gears churned in his head. Poppa Paulo missed nothing. He’d realize that whatever they had it would be something that could hang Johnny or they wouldn’t wave a red flag before an angry bull. “Fine. Two.”

With that, they were effectively dismissed. Kate and Micah nodded to both men and he led her back to the table.

“We can’t leave yet?” she asked.

“Not just yet.” He pulled out her chair and refilled her glass before seating himself. “They know we came to see Poppa Paulo specifically, but if we run off it will look like we’re scared.”

“I am. Scared, that is.”

“Should I admit I am, too?”

“God, no,” Kate laughed. “I’m scared enough for both of us.”

They stayed long enough to finish off the bottle of champagne. In the end, Kate drank most of it because Micah never let her glass get more than half empty as he cracked one liners about the patrons. By the time they left, giddiness warred with the fear in her breast.

In the alley, her heels clattered on the cement and the noise echoed through the quiet. On a sudden flash of elation, she danced out of Micah’s reach and did a half spin.

“We did it!” She stretched her arms wide to encompass the entire, beautiful city. “We’ve survived step one.” Micah caught up with her and she threw her arms around his neck. “All thanks to you.”

He shook his head somberly. “No, that’s not true.”

“Sure it is. I never would have dared use Masseria to maneuver Poppa Paulo if it weren’t for you. You’re my hero.” She kissed his jaw, his lips, but it was like kissing a skyscraper. Hard as steel. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m no one’s hero. Or at least I shouldn’t be. I don’t have any shining armor.”

“No.” She drew the word out as she tried to gather her muddled thoughts. She’d expected he’d be at least a little pleased. “That’s true enough. You don’t even carry a sword.”

Micah sighed. “Come on. Let’s get you home.”

Home. She’d convince him to stay with her for the night, take full advantage. And in the morning they could sort out what his damned problem was.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Micah stood on Kate's stairs and watched her unlock the door. In the moonlight, she glimmered like a muted star. As the lock nicked open, she threw a mischievous look over her shoulder.

"Coming in?"

He shouldn't, but he nodded and followed her into the dim entryway. Music from The Kirk drifted up through the floor, a quiet, mournful trumpet, an appropriate accompaniment for his subdued mood. When she'd thrown her arms around him and called him a hero, she'd ripped a hole in his soul.

He was no one's damned hero and didn't deserve her admiration, not when he'd deceived her from the minute they'd met. Hell, he'd probably have done her a favor by letting The Kirk go down in flames—or busting it when he'd first walked through the door. Instead, he'd tied that millstone more tightly around her neck and she'd thanked him for it.

She deserved the truth. Greedy, he'd taken from her. The least he could do would be to tell her whom she was really dealing with.

"Kate, we should talk." He hadn't expected it to be this hard to choke out. The strange double life he led had been his safeguard for so long, he wouldn't know who he was without it. So how did he reveal himself to Kate when he didn't know what was back there, in the recesses of his soul?

"Yes, Micah?" Kate prompted and he realized he'd trailed off, staring at her delicate features. She'd set down her small purse and stood with one hand trailing over the thick mirror frame. She had the grace of a dancer, every movement almost magical. "What's wrong?"

He couldn't do it. If he tore down the deception and found the same callous indifference he got from his father, he didn't know what he'd do.

Besides, it was for the best, really. If he confessed to being a Prohibition Agent, Kate would rightfully throw a fit and have nothing to do with him. Which would leave her to complete the second half of the plan all on her own. Maybe she could play the game, maybe she couldn't. His belly constricted at the thought of what could happen if it went downhill and he wasn't there to protect her. Johnny would seem like a child at an ice cream social compared to the threat his father could present. And Micah and the rest of the Prohibition Bureau didn't have a fraction of the evidence they'd need to arrest Poppa Paulo.

She moved closer and put a hand to his chest, slipping the tips of her fingers under his lapel. "What is it?"

“Nothing. Nothing new,” he said and pulled his hands out of his pockets to hold her slim shoulders. His thumbs toyed with the ties that held her dress. “I just wanted to make sure you realize what a tight rope we’ll have to walk tomorrow.”

“Convincing Paulo we’re serious without bruising his nasty ego. I know,” she said solemnly. “But that’s tomorrow and dawn always comes before you’re ready. Tonight...tonight I have you.” With a gentle tug on his yellow tie, she turned and headed for the stairs. “And I have plans for you.”

He followed her blindly. This was a mistake but it would take a stronger man than he to walk away from the husky promise in her voice. At the top of the stairs, he let her push him into her room. She patted his chest and said, “I’ll be right back.”

Going to check on her brother, most likely. That was fine. She was more of a protector, more of a damned hero than he’d ever be. Fiercely loyal Kate. He wondered what it would feel like to have that loyalty at his back.

He stood at the threshold to her room and shoved his hands back in his pockets as he looked around. The room was almost exactly as he’d remembered. Neat and precisely organized. The furniture was very modern, all swooping lines polished to a high shine. A vanity sat to the side, the female jars and dishes lined up like little soldiers. The color splashed everywhere, in the deep red throw rug and cubist prints, betrayed her passion and zest for life.

The bed was large and neatly made, with only a couple carefully placed pillows. He stared at it, half entranced. The things he could do with her on that wide-open space flickered through his head. All with her brother down the hall and the sword of Damascus hanging over their heads.

No, he wasn’t a good man at all.

Kate shut the door to the spare bedroom and bit her lip. Patrick wasn’t in the house. She’d already checked his room and the bathroom. Normally she’d worry, but she couldn’t make herself care. If she wanted, she could hunt him down. She had before. There were only a couple places that still tolerated his drunken excess on a regular basis. She had to visit them regularly and clean up his running tabs. He was a big boy. It was time she let him find his own way.

Instead, she crossed the landing to her own room and quietly shut the door behind herself. Micah stood in the center of the room, his jacket hitched open as his hand rested on his hips. His hair was mussed, tumbling down over his forehead, and his tie was loose. Still, he had an abstracted air, like he was deep in thought. He hadn’t even noticed her entrance.

“Hey,” she said softly.

He turned and the dark, erotic look in his eyes released a knot of self-doubt she hadn’t even realized lodged in her belly. Slow licks of need spiraled out from her center to replace it.

“Hey yourself,” he replied. His voice was deep and rumbling and sent her pulse into triple time. But he made no move toward her.

Languidly, she pulled the ties on first one shoulder, then the other. The silk dragged over the puckered tips of her breasts in a teasing caress, baring her to his hungry gaze. She stood in only sheer stockings, pale yellow panties and heels.

Micah stripped off his jacket, then took a step toward her.

“Uh-uh,” she tisked, halting him in mid-stride. “You’ve gotta get rid of more than that.”

“Do I?” He gave a half grin and took another testing step.

“Yep. I won’t be the only one naked.”

“You’re only half-naked. Beautifully so, but still.”

A flush spread over her cheeks at his compliment. A pale complexion didn’t work with playing seductress. Resolute, she ignored it. “Then you can get half naked if you want. But that’s the rules, bub.”

“What if I were to change the rules?” He sounded suddenly, spookily serious, as if they were talking about more than their little game.

“Then I’d run away.” She tried to keep it light and playful but she was afraid she’d failed. Opening up had always been hard, ever since she’d learned at her father’s knee the response was unpredictable. If the rules of engagement shifted under her feet, she probably would run out of pure fear.

“Dressed like that? Or not dressed, as it is.”

“If I had to.”

The tension faded from his tightly held shoulders, and she felt an answering weight lift off her. “We can’t have that,” he said. “You’d shock the neighbors.” He pulled his tie free of the knot and dropped it onto the pile of his jacket.

Fascinated, she watched as he unbuttoned his shirt. Underneath, he wore a sleeveless undershirt that gleamed white against his honeyed skin. He yanked it over his head with one smooth pull. Her breath stuttered as she saw the hard curves and planes of his body. She didn’t think she’d ever get over the quick flush that rolled through her at seeing him. He unbuttoned the front placket of his pants and revealed a sharp arrow of muscle that angled into his hips.

She bit her lip and clenched her thighs against the sudden rush of moisture, as visceral as if a phantom hand had caressed her. She heard nothing but the harsh roll of her own breaths.

But he stopped with a wicked grin and left his pants where they were, draped over his jutting hipbones. Reaching down, he toed off his shoes, one after the other, and they clumped against the floor with a thump. His socks came off and his feet were bare.

“Good enough?” he asked.

“Um-hum.” She hardly knew where to start. Stepping close enough to touch, Kate circled him. She stopped directly behind him and looked at the broad sweep of his shoulders, the way they narrowed down

to his slim waist and how his pants hung loosely over his buttocks. At the base of his spine were two divots of muscle that her thumbs would perfectly fit. So she did it, nestled her thumbs there and splayed her fingers out to the side. Micah shuddered in response.

This thing they had went both ways. He might be able to turn her inside out but it definitely went both ways. A heady power rushed through her.

She ran her hands up the smooth skin spread before her and bit her lip against a sigh. He was on fire and the heat poured into her. Her hands resting on his shoulders, she pressed up against his back. Her breasts flattened, and the curve of his ass fit into the softness of her belly.

“What should I do with you?” she purred.

“Anything you like.”

“Anything? That’s such an open word. So many possibilities.” She slid her hands back down the way they came, then under his waistband. His pants fell under their own weight and she was left cupping his round globes. Blindly, she reached around his front and speared her nails gently through the curls she found. One hand curled around his shaft and the other hefted his swollen sac. The contrast was delicious, sleek stiffness versus tissue paper delicacy. She squeezed.

With a rough grunt, he thrust into her hands.

“You like that?” She did it again, and this time added a massaging pull.

“Yes,” he hissed.

“Would you like me to continue?”

“No,” he said, but he thrust again in contradiction.

She wasn’t sure she’d ever been so aroused. Sensitive parts had swollen and she felt almost fevered. With her face pressed into his back, she felt both hidden from the force of her own lust and exposed by the trust he placed in her hands. Literally.

“I’m having fun.” She set her teeth to his flank and bit lightly. He shuddered, and she filed away the response for future use.

“I’ve got better ideas.”

“Plural?” And extra rush of moisture flooded her. “More than one idea?”

“You bet, sweetheart.” With a groan that spoke to how much he liked her ministrations, he disengaged and turned.

She was caught out, sure the feral pleasure she’d known, twisting him into a frenzy, would show on her face. Ducking her head to avoid his gaze, she found the proud, erect part of him. Last time, she hadn’t gotten a very good look, since everything had moved so quickly. A dusky pink, with thick veins that twisted under the skin, he was long and thick. Of their own accord, her hands reached out to retake their same positions. A single drop of fluid anointed his slit.

Slowly, she sank to her knees. He reached for her shoulders, as if to stop her, but she twisted to avoid his grasp. That liquid begged to be licked. Her tongue darted out and she dragged the flat of it across his broad head.

His air gusted out in a groaning sigh. "That wasn't what I had in mind."

"No?" She tested the delicate web where his head met his shaft. "I am allowed my own ideas, you know."

"Dear God, yes you are." He tunneled into her hair and cupped her skull, like adoration and protection wrapped up in one. Her scalp tingled under his questing fingertips.

Flicking a glance up, she saw that Micah had dropped his head back onto his shoulders. He was a tall, imposing sculpture of a man at the height of power. But she didn't feel weak. She felt powerful also, one of the myriad facets of woman. In this one, she held full control of his sensate experience.

As an experiment, she licked his entire length, from the root all the way to the tip. He flinched, like it was too much, but then came right back, desperate for more. Taking him fully into her mouth, she relished the unique texture of him, soft and hard blended together. On some dim, far off plane, she realized her knees ground against hardwood, but she didn't care as she used every trick she had, and some she'd only heard of, to drive him mad.

Finally, he broke free of the light suction and lifted her by the arms. He walked her backwards until her legs met the edge of her bed, his gaze filled with lust.

"My idea involved tasting you as you came," she said. She'd never felt this freedom to tease a lover before, leaving her giddy and nearly lightheaded.

"We will most definitely come back to that one at another time," he said with a wry grin. "But I didn't think you'd want this to end too quickly. And with the way your mouth felt on my cock, I wouldn't have lasted much longer."

"I think I could get you to rise to the occasion again."

A half chuckle, half groan escaped him. Playfully, he pushed at her collarbones. She let herself tip back until she landed flat on the bed with her arms outstretched and her legs dangling off the side. She was laid out on display for him and in that moment, with the way his gaze ate up every bare inch of her skin, she'd never felt more proud of her body. A serviceable accumulation of bones and skin, it had always just been there, but the way Micah ran his hands over her, like he needed to feel every bit, made her feel like some sort of pagan goddess. Or sacrifice.

His hands slid over the inward curve of her waist. She shivered and grasped handfuls of the cool bedspread. So over-sensitized, every touch set off avalanches inside her. He came to her panties and traced along them, dipping in a fraction.

"I like these," he murmured. "They make your skin look like warm cream."

Another chunk of her defenses crumbled. She might be in over her head with all these swirling feelings, but the water sure felt great. “Take them off,” she whispered.

He obeyed and Kate wriggled her hips to help him along. She toed off her heels, which fell to the floor with a thump. She moved to slip off her silk stockings but he stopped her.

“No, leave them.”

She acquiesced, transfixed by his dark-honey hand on her pale thigh. He traveled up to her curls, her breath thick as molasses in her chest. When her curls parted under his sure touch, her breathing restarted with a jerk and a low moan. Her head fell back to the bed. He dipped in, around, and stroked her clitoris firmly. Pleasure wound out through her limbs, weighing her down in bliss.

“You’re so wet.” He slid a finger in her channel.

“Is that a complaint?” she managed to quip.

“Hell no.” He removed his hand and the broad head of his cock quested for entrance.

“Oh, good. So long as we’re clear.”

“You tell me.” He sank into her in one long, slow stroke. “Are you clear on how much I want you? Are you clear on how hard I am for you?”

She’d melted. Her backbone of steel had turned molten and flowed through her. “Oh, yes,” she moaned, and she meant more than her understanding of him. She meant *oh, yes, that’s good*, and *oh, yes, give me more*, and *oh, yes, I love that*.

He still understood her perfectly and gave her what she needed, hard strokes that churned pleasure through her. She writhed, her back arched and her hips meeting him stroke for stroke, driving back toward him. His thick length dragged over her clitoris on every down stroke and she began to sigh with every one, soft, breathy gasps that sang her thrill.

Her orgasm began in her breastbone, a morass of sparking pleasure bursting through her body. She reached for him, sank her nails into the taut arms that bracketed and shielded her. He was right behind her in two strokes, his cock twitching as he flooded her. He dropped onto her, a delicious weight, and buried his face in the crook of her neck.

Though her arms felt as limp as laundered neckties, she managed to lift them and pet the damp hair at the base of his skull.

Wide open. Exposed. She felt like she’d had the bottommost layer of her soul peeled back. And it was okay.

More than okay, it was magical.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Kate sat at a table near the stage and tried very hard not to look at the large table set in the center of the room. Of course, she failed.

They'd taken three of the regular tables and set them together, then covered them with a snowy linen cloth. Bottles of '07 Cabernet sat open to breathe, and her mother's best crystal glasses graced the table like stolen jewels. Not a drop would be drunk, but setting the scene had taken careful planning. Civilized power, that was the angle. The heavy mahogany chairs from the dining room had been brought down. A centerpiece of lilies and orchids graced the table, like they were ready for a Christmas feast, instead of a visit from a mob boss. Dressing the scene, Micah called it. Respect for Vittorelli must be shown, not fear.

Kate had a sniggling suspicion she'd fail at that too.

She looked across the room to where Micah sat with his partner. Whatever Jake was hearing, he didn't like. There was a deep furrow between his brows and his shoulders were hunched. Kate couldn't hear a word, not over Susie's singing. Her friend had insisted on being here, claiming she had to practice. But she wasn't singing any of the bluesy numbers she trotted out every night. Instead it was something about a bluebird, and Orinthal tinkled out the accompanying beat on the piano.

When Susie caught Kate's gaze, she winked. If Susie had a modicum of sense, she'd be as far away from the impending debacle as possible. New Jersey maybe. Hell, California. Kate would be there if she could. A white, sandy beach and the glittering world of movie stars sounded pretty good to her right about now. Mostly it sounded far away, best of all. Yet Susie was at The Kirk, lending moral support. When had Kate acquired such good friends?

"Where you at, sweetheart?"

She blinked and looked up. Micah had leaned one hip on her table and smiled at her. He twisted his mouth into a wry grin, as if he knew how silly the question was.

"California," she answered truthfully.

"Ever been there?"

"Nope."

"Me neither. Why's it on your mind?"

It was her turn to smile wryly. "It's not here."

His gaze became intense and she had to look away, down at her hands fisted in her lap. "You still thinking about it?"

“About what?” But she knew what he meant. She was just buying time.

“Running away from it all.”

“Yes,” she said quietly, then looked back to his sympathetic gaze. He knew what she was about to say, and Kate believed he understood. “But I can’t. And I don’t actually want to. It’s just one of those idle dreams.”

He drew her fisted hand out of her lap and slowly coaxed her fingers open. His touch was slow, drugging opium that loosened all her muscles, from just a simple stroke across her palm. “Nervous?”

“Of course. I’d have to be dead not to be.”

The set of his shoulders looked so confident, sure of himself in a way she didn’t think she’d ever felt. “It’ll be okay.”

The door opened and saved her from having to reply. Everyone looked to see who entered, afraid Vittorelli would arrive early. Power plays were his normal method of operation to ensure everyone knew he answered to no one. Meetings happened on his time schedule. But it was only Annie, who ducked her head shyly when confronted with half a dozen sets of eyes on her. She made her way over to Kate but then just stood there, toying with the belt on the dropped waist of her skirt.

A way to get the girl out of her shell had to exist but Kate hadn’t found it yet.

“I thought you were going out this afternoon,” she said as gently as she could. She wanted Annie as far away as possible. The girl didn’t deserve to be dragged into this dirty life. Kate should probably ask around, see if anyone needed a housekeeper. Annie had sure taken care of her and Patrick. Maybe it was selfish but she liked having the girl around.

“I am, Miss Kate. But I wanted to tell you something before I went,” Annie said.

Sure she would go on, Kate waited one beat. Then two. She managed to bite back her sigh. The girl was so shy it was like pulling teeth to get a few words. “Yes?” she finally prompted. “What is it?”

“Mr. Patrick. I heard some crashing, and then breaking glass, and he wouldn’t come to the door. Told me to go away.”

Not a surprise. Also not something she needed to deal with now. Patrick had a penchant for holing up for days on benders, and Kate didn’t have the energy to deal with it now. But more than that... Kate sat back, feeling almost lightheaded. No heavy knot of guilt lay in her stomach. Patrick was a grown man, and she was done working herself into a tizzy over him. He’d come out or he wouldn’t. He’d get better or he wouldn’t. If he couldn’t bother himself to get involved in the Vittorelli situation, nothing Kate would ever do or say could change the outcome.

“That’s fine,” she heard herself say. “You run along now and have your day.”

“Where you headed, Miss Annie?” Micah asked with one of his wide, bright grins.

Annie’s pale skin flushed pink. “Shopping. I think... I’d like some new clothes.” Her chin went up. Maybe she was growing a backbone after all. “I want something more stylish.”

“And here I thought you might be stepping out dancing with a beau.”

That pink flush deepened to crimson. “I don’t have a beau and don’t know how to dance, neither.”

“What? How can that be?”

“Ma didn’t cotton much with dancing.”

“We’ve gotta fix that.”

With a huge grin, Micah took Annie’s hand and tugged her out to the dance floor.

She shook her head frantically and darted a look at Kate, but at the same time she giggled and allowed herself to be towed along. In no time Micah showed her the steps. Back, back, side, side, and he had her dancing a foxtrot. Her feet moved awkwardly, her steps a little tentative, but her eyes sparkled. Micah spun her and a girlish laugh scattered across the room.

Kate wanted to laugh along with her. Micah was a miracle worker. In two minutes, he’d brought a shy young girl out of her shell, the same way he brought light and joy into Kate’s life. Over Annie’s shoulder, Micah winked at Kate. She loved his gift of enjoying life.

She loved him.

Her heart stuttered and stumbled in her chest. She’d always thought if she fell in love, it would be in some moment of dramatic importance. Instead she found herself caught up in bubbling freedom. She smiled back at him and allowed her love to shine through. Maybe he’d see it, maybe he wouldn’t.

She could always tell him later tonight.

“May I have this dance?”

Jake stood over her shoulder, one hand out in invitation.

“Certainly.”

Jake led her around the parquet dance floor, but she felt like she was dancing with Micah. Their gazes caught at every opportunity and every smile felt like a whispered caress. She was giddy with joy, like she could float twelve inches above the floor.

The angry boom of a fist against the club’s front door reverberated through the room. Kate came back to herself in an instant, as everyone in the room jerked to a halt.

The devil had come for his due.

Lucas stuck his head in through the door to the foyer. “Boss?”

“Just a second.” She jerked out of Jake’s arms. “Annie, Susie, Orinthal. Out the back door, through the storeroom.” She should have made sure they were already gone but she hadn’t truly expected Vittorelli to be quite this early. Or she’d hoped he wouldn’t be.

Orinthal hopped down from the stage and put a gentle arm around frozen, pale Annie. “Come on, miss, let’s get out of here.” She nodded and followed him mutely.

Susie came down and crossed her arms over her chest. “I want to stay.”

Kate didn't have time for this. Her heart was already racing and her palms were sweaty. The last thing she needed was for Susie to be dragged in any deeper.

Jake didn't give her an opportunity to say something she'd regret. Gripping Susie by the elbow, he hustled her to the back. "Well, you don't get to."

"That's not your call!" Susie dragged her feet, pulling against his grip.

"Go, Susie. It'll be fine," Kate called.

"I'll let you know how it turns out," Jake said.

"Promise?"

Their voices faded as they disappeared down the back hallway. Kate looked at Micah. She was nearly sick with fear, her stomach a tight ball. "I don't know if I can do this."

"Sure you can." He crossed to her in a few quick strides and briskly rubbed her goose-fleshed arms. "Take a deep breath."

She did, then exhaled in a halting gush. "Okay. It'll be fine. We'll be fine."

"Exactly. Get the gun." He flashed her a reassuring smile.

She slipped behind the bar. She snagged her tiny two-shot Derringer off the polished surface and pushed it into her skirt pocket. It wouldn't do much damage, and both Micah and Jake carried larger pieces, but the tiny gun lent her a little confidence. She wiped her damp hands over her skirt and gingerly picked up the lock box that sat innocuously behind the bar, and then carried it to the table.

"Let them in," Micah called.

Snake Pucelli appeared first, one hand under his single-breasted suit jacket as he peered around.

Micah spread his hands in an open gesture. "I won't say we're not armed, but this ain't an ambush."

Pucelli acknowledged him with a nod and disappeared back into the anteroom. Kate barely had time to edge closer to Micah before Poppa Paulo entered, flanked by Snake and another big six, Sneak Santoro. A nervous giggle tried to bubble up her throat but she choked it back in time. Snake and Sneak might sound ridiculous, but rumor said Sneak had killed his first man at twelve. Sneaking into the capo's home to do the deed had gotten him the nickname. He was a small man, unhealthily skinny, but he was a terror with a blade.

She forced herself to focus on the real danger. Sneak wouldn't make a move without approval from his boss, and Paulo didn't look happy to be here. His customary open smile had been replaced by a nasty scowl. Thick silence curled through the room before she could unglue her mouth enough to speak.

"Mr. Vittorelli, thank you for coming." She held out her hand.

He took it and gave it a quick shake, then sat at the table. "Let's get this over with, shall we?"

Jake appeared from the back hallway and Poppa Paulo's men jumped, putting their hands to the butt of their guns.

“Bit jumpy, ain’t youse?” Jake smirked. He put his thumbs in his pockets, which hitched his jacket open. Kate caught a gleam of leather and wood along his right side. The number of weapons present was almost absurd.

Well, it would be absurd if her heart weren’t racing in fear.

She sat opposite Poppa Paulo and waited for everyone else to get situated. Micah and Jake flanked her, and Sneak and Snake flanked Poppa Paulo, neatly dividing the table. The lock box heated under her palms.

Poppa Paulo sat back in his chair and folded his hands over his ample belly. “I must say this meeting is a bit unusual. I rarely find myself in a position where I must meet with nobodies.”

She let the insult roll off her back. In fact, she rather liked being a nobody in his world. If only she could go back to being invisible to the Vittorelli family, she’d be ecstatic. “In that case, let us get right to the point.”

“And that would be?” Poppa Paulo raised one supercilious eyebrow.

Micah beat her to the punch. “We want your pissant son to disappear,” he said. His tone of voice was so light, he could have been asking about the weather.

“You might want to watch the way you speak about my flesh and blood,” Poppa Paulo said slowly. “I don’t take kindly to people insulting my family. Guisseppi is very important to me.”

“Is that right? Then I suppose there’s a reason you didn’t bring him along to clean up his own mess? Other than the fact that you know he’s a screw-up and will never follow in your steps, that is.”

Snake planted his fists on the tablecloth and surged out of his chair with a looming glower. Kate jerked back in her chair, only to find Micah’s arm draped there. Subtly, he stroked her shoulders. The breath she hadn’t even realized she’d sucked in stuttered out in a slow, silent sigh.

“You will talk with respect,” said Snake.

“Or?” Micah flashed his brightest smile but his eyes promised slow death.

Snake growled, but Poppa Paulo settled him down with an imperious wave. “My son’s position and ability to gain the reins of my empire are not under discussion here. Your...little establishment is. And I’m afraid I do not see a reason to cease Guisseppi’s endeavors.” He looked around slowly, taking in the silvered walls and the long bar. “In fact, I now wonder if I should perhaps help him along. In part for your insolence and in part because I see the benefits of having a place to sell my own liquor. I might have to redecorate though.”

A sick, rolling anger enveloped Kate at the thought of the place she’d worked so hard for being turned into a gangster hang out. He’d probably make it even gaudier than the crimson and gold of Masseria’s place. Her muscles quivered like telephone wires in a breeze and not even Micah’s soothing touch could do anything about it.

“Not going to happen,” she snipped before she could think better of angering the evil man across from her.

“Oh, no?” In his cold, empty gaze slithered the evil that had ordered hundreds of deaths. Kate chilled down to her soul but nothing cooled her anger. “And how do you believe you’ll stop us?”

“We know something you don’t.”

“I very much doubt that,” Paulo chuckled. “I know everything that goes on in this city, from who the Mayor slept with, all the way down to the last time a pigeon took a shit. I have to. I love to know these things. They give me power.” Paulo directed a smirking wink at Micah.

Other than his gaze going ice cold, Micah didn’t respond to the mob boss’s antagonism. “Franklin McCauley. Know who shot him?”

“Certainly. That bimbo wife of his. She was found covered in his blood. Very dramatic, like a motion picture.”

“Wrong. Johnny did it. Everyone in the neighborhood is keeping quiet because they think it was part of your business. Ain’t they, Snake?” Micah shifted his intense gaze to the bodyguard.

The beefy man shifted in his chair and reached up to tug at his tie.

“Is this true, Snake?” Poppa turned to his right and fixed his gaze on his flunky. Kate wouldn’t want to be on the end of that stare for all the clubs in Manhattan.

“We thought you were in on it, boss.” He shrugged. “Like you said, you know everything and when you wasn’t asking no questions...”

The tips of Poppa Paulo’s ears turned red. Rage, not embarrassment, undoubtedly—the only betrayal of his feelings. He turned that cool gaze back to Kate, and it was all she could do not to squirm in her seat like Snake had. “It still means nothing. The people of that neighborhood will continue to keep their mouths shut and there’s no way you could have proof.”

“You seem awfully sure of that.”

“My son may be a hothead but he is not stupid. I trained him better than that.”

“Show him, Kate.”

She unlatched the box, thankful her hands didn’t tremble. After she flicked back the handkerchief, she spun it around so Poppa Paulo could see the mystery prize. The mother-of-pearl handle gleamed in the low light, looking surprisingly innocent. The rust-colored stains dotting the handkerchief painted an entirely different picture.

The blood drained from Poppa Paulo’s face and his heavy jowls quivered. Negotiations were the only thing left. The gangster knew he’d been played.

Kate curled her lips in a smile as cold as Poppa Paulo’s expression had been not two minutes ago. “Recognize it? Such beautiful craftsmanship. Johnny had four made, didn’t he? I’m surprised he hasn’t missed this one yet. I particularly like the way his initials were detailed here.” She made as if to trail a

finger over the silver work but drew back at the last second. “No, no, can’t touch. Amazing the things science has come up with lately. Everyone on earth has a different pattern to his or her fingers. I never would have imagined it. What do they call that stuff they’re doing with guns now? The papers just ate it up for those two shlubs in Massachusetts.”

She aimed a guileless look at Micah.

“Ballistics, darling.” His gaze shone with admiration and more than a speck of amusement.

“That’s it. Ballistics. Almost as interesting as Freud and psychology. What a truly exciting age we live in.”

Poppa Paulo stared at the box as if it held a nest of sewer rats. “What’s to prevent me from shooting the lot of you and walking away with that?” he asked hoarsely.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Micah said gaily. “You see, in one of the dozens of windows across the street, a friend of mine is waiting with a hunting rifle. If I don’t walk you to the door, if we don’t all smile and shake hands, and if I don’t send him the signal, he’ll shoot you down where you stand. He’s a wonderful shot. He’ll probably get all three of you before you can scatter like the dogs you are. But first and foremost, he’ll plant lead right between your eyes, Paulo.”

“Don’t forget about afterwards,” Kate prompted. She’d probably have to break her three-year ban on going to confession for enjoying others’ misery, but she loved it. This man and his son had tried to prey on her, had actually victimized countless others. Seeing fear etched in the heavy lines on his face sent relief and even joy singing through her.

“Ah, yes,” Micah said. “After this meeting, our little piece of insurance here will be packed away to a very safe location. If any or all of us die violently, or even just prematurely, it will show up on Daniel McCauley’s doorstep with a detailed account of its history. I’m sure you’ll understand our need for a safety measure.”

Vittorelli finally lifted his gaze and looked from Kate to Micah and back again. “What do you want?”

“I want Johnny to go far, far away and never bother me again,” Kate said, her voice sweet as Grand Marnier liquor.

The very picture of relaxation, Micah hitched an ankle over his knee and leaned back. “As well as your assurance no one will attempt a takeover of this place again, or bother anyone associated with it.”

Thick, purpled veins popped out along Paulo’s temples. “Do you know how this will make my organization look?”

“Not as bad as if your son goes up the river for a killing you didn’t sanction,” Micah said. “But as a measure of face saving, we’re prepared to close down The Kirk for three months, as well as promise minimal police or federal involvement in your operations for the same period of time.”

Kate flinched. What was this? Micah hadn’t mentioned closing The Kirk in any of their preparations. And he didn’t have the pull or the cash to back up his police promise. She kept her expression neutral, since

any hint of dissension in the ranks might raise Poppa Paulo's blood and make him think there was more room to negotiate. But annoyance and confusion flooded her, set her thoughts spinning. The suggestion was understandable, but he should have run it by her first. If he hadn't thought of it on the fly, that was.

"I won't be blackmailed, Trent."

"This isn't blackmail, not by a long shot. It's tit for tat and I'm sure you'll see this is to everyone's advantage, seeing as you're such a sharp business man."

A long moment of quiet wound around everyone at the table as Vittorelli stared at the pistol once more. He wanted to grab it and kill them all, surely, but the possibility that a sniper waited somewhere behind the silvered bank of windows across the street held him at bay. The air in the room grew heavy and oppressive, and Kate tried to drag in a quiet breath.

"All right. It's a deal." Vittorelli stood abruptly, his chair squealing loudly as it scraped against the floor.

Kate's breath gusted out and she felt lightheaded and shaky. She watched Micah walk the three men to the door as if it were happening miles off. Jake trailed them, alert to danger. Cold enveloped her and she trembled with relief. She was finally free.

Chapter Thirty

Micah sauntered back into the bar and grinned at Kate. He swept his arms open. “Well? How’d we do?”

Released from her frozen shock, Kate laughed and jumped out of her chair. She shook with relief, but at the same time she zinged and tingled. In a couple long strides, she launched herself into his arms “We did wonderful. The cat’s meow. I feel like I’m on top of the world.”

Wrapping her in his strong arms, Micah twirled her. The room spun to match her insides. She could go flying off the walls at any moment.

Gliding to a stop, he planted an exuberant, smacking kiss on her. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“You can do better than that.” She twined her fingers through his silken hair and dragged him down to her, kissing him with all the joy she felt, a fitting way to cap off her happiness. The kiss melted into something slower and more languid, steadying her.

A throat cleared behind them. “I can see I’m not needed here any longer.”

“Oh, Jake!” Kate pulled out of Micah’s arms and hugged the other man. He’d had no vested interest in The Kirk but he’d come through. For her or for Micah, it didn’t much matter. The end result was the same. “Thanks so much. I don’t think I can ever repay you.”

“Really, it was nothing.” With a squeeze of her arms, he set her back a step. “I’ll go tell Susie, like I promised, and she can pass the news to everyone else. You should probably take it easy for the day.”

They walked Jake out to the street and Micah slung an arm around her shoulders. Jake turned right, off to Susie’s apartment, and Kate and Micah turned left, up the stairs to her brownstone and inside. “Come on,” she said, gripping his lapel. “You, I know how to thank.”

“Is that right?” His eyes turned dark as his pupils flared. “Am I going to like your thank yous?”

“You’ll love ’em.” She licked the curve of his jaw, below his ear, and then nipped. He tasted like salt and man and she loved it. One hand danced over his clothes, loosening his tie. She slid the other down his lean torso to his groin and squeezed gently. With a light push, she moved him to lean against the foyer wall.

His head dropped against the wallpaper with a solid *thunk* and he groaned. “Oh Jesus, Kate.”

“You know, I should be annoyed with you.” She scraped her fingernails down his length, through the cotton of his trousers. “What were you thinking, volunteering to shut the Kirk down for three months? You’re lucky I like the idea of a vacation.”

He stilled beneath her questing hands, and his muscles went taut. Slowly, he peeled her back and gripped her shoulders. "It'll make my boss happy."

A shadow swept through his eyes and his mouth flattened.

"What boss?"

He'd never mentioned one before. She'd always thought he and Jake were an autonomous partnership, independent of all the gangsters and mobsters who ran New York, at least beyond the requisite taxes. Hell, it was one of the reasons she'd accepted his help to begin with. By taking his aid, she wasn't putting herself at risk of being beholden to any other family.

But Masseria maybe? Being that awful man's lackey would explain why Micah'd felt so confident walking into that club.

He didn't answer, only stared at her with sorrow in his chocolate brown eyes.

"What boss, Micah?" she insisted.

"There's something I have to tell you. I probably should have told you long ago, but I... Well, I chickened out, to be honest."

She folded her arms around her quivering midsection. Her cheeks felt heavy. Her skin grew too tight for her body, and tried to compress her into a tiny chunk of twitching nerves. "What the hell are you talking about? Who's your damned boss?"

"There's one thing you should know first. I love you." He stepped forward as if to touch her but she held up a hand.

"Nuh-uh. You don't get to play dirty like that. It's not fair." Her eyes prickled. The first time he said he loved her shouldn't come at a moment like this, when she tottered on the brink of a cliff. And Micah was about to push her over. "Who's your goddamned boss already?"

Deep lines appeared bracketing his mouth. "Senior Agent Walton Winthrop. Prohibition enforcement."

"What? Who?" She heard the words but he spoke Greek. Or Chinese. Or Pashtu. It didn't make sense. She shook her head, trying to get her eardrums to turn right side up again. "You're... You're a... You can't be a Prohibition Agent. You're a rumrunner."

"It's called being undercover. I'm not even supposed to be telling you this now."

"You're a rumrunner," she repeated stupidly. This didn't make any sense, not a bit. Her pulse thrummed in her ears.

"Confiscated alcohol. Used for stings."

"Get out," she whispered, but it was barely loud enough for her to hear. Every word he'd said to her had been a lie, starting months ago. Every smile, every laugh. Every time they'd made love. Her stomach tumbled like she'd ridden Coney Island's Thunderbolt eight times in a row.

"Kate, we can work this out. We can find a way."

"I don't want to work it out. I want you to go away." Her voice rose, but holding it down would take way more control than she had. He was lucky she wasn't looking for something to throw.

"Trust me, Kate." He held out a large hand in supplication. She had a sudden vision of the way that hand had gripped her thigh last night. Lust warmed her traitorous skin and she nearly spit with disgust.

"Trust me," she mocked. "Trust me, trust me. That's what you've said through all of this. And I have. I trusted a no good rat bastard when I shouldn't have believed a single word out of your mouth."

He stepped forward, breaching the invisible wall she'd bricked up. His arms were warm and strong around her, and even as she hated him a little more, she wanted to lean on him. Her heart crumbled into dust in her chest. If she didn't hear the roar in her ears, she wouldn't believe it beat anymore.

"I love you," he whispered, his breath a hot fan across her neck.

She jerked back, away from his insidious touch. "I don't even know you," she hissed.

"What's going on here?" Patrick stood on the top step, one hand on the railing for balance.

"It's private," Micah answered.

"Micah was just leaving. For good."

He studied her. If she didn't know better, she'd think the concern in his tightened eyelids was genuine.

"This isn't over."

"Yes. It is. Don't come back here."

"I'll be back. I'll make this right. You can't stop me."

"I'm sure we'll find a way," Patrick piped in, his voice low with menace.

Micah made as if to reach for her one last time, then dropped wearily when she stepped away. He went out the door quietly, with none of the dramatics she expected. Or half-hoped for. Shoulders slumped, she made her way upstairs. Patrick blocked her.

"What was all that about?"

"We're done."

"I caught that part. I meant why." His brows drew together. Yet another man whose concern was a lie. Patrick didn't care about anything but where his next drink was coming from.

"What's it matter? You didn't like him anyway."

"Maybe not. But you did." His eyes were filled with false, dark sympathy. The empty crevasse inside her filled with tears. Her eyes stung and her nose prickled.

"He's..." Even now, with his deception swamping her, she couldn't bring herself to betray Micah's secret. "He's not who I thought he was."

Aching down to her bones, she pushed past him, headed for her room. She wanted nothing more than to pour herself into bed and yank the blankets up to her nose.

"Kate, I'm here for you. If you'd like to...I don't know, talk maybe?"

“Are you?” Head down, she released a short bark of laughter. Brittle and exhausted, she wasn’t up to mollicoddling him. “If you’re here for me, why did I just have a meeting with Paulo Vittorelli? One of the most vicious mobsters in New York and your sister met with him. And where were you, Patrick?”

“I didn’t know.”

“How was I supposed to tell you? When were you sober enough?” The words flew like gunfire and hit with the same accuracy. Patrick flinched, but said nothing in his own defense. “Micah Trent and his friends were there for me. But it turns out I can’t depend on him either.”

Patrick stood there, his blue eyes soulful and haggard. He clenched the wooden railing until his knuckles stood out in white relief. “Kate, I’m sorry—”

“You have no idea how sick I am of hearing you say you’re sorry. Go get drunk. It’s what you’re good at. Don’t worry, in a couple hours you won’t give a damn.” She shut her bedroom door behind her and leaned against it. After a minute, his slow steps shuffled away.

Kate sank to the floor and sobbed.

Chapter Thirty-One

Johnny lay on his couch in his darkened living room and took another swig. Everything was going to shit. Those idiots he'd gotten to bomb the Kirk had fouled up the job but good. Wasn't nothing wrong with the place that a broom hadn't fixed, from what his sources told him. And Earline had up and left him, the stupid bitch. That wasn't much of a hardship, but for some reason she'd fired the maid before she left, so now his apartment was a mess. He toed a three-day-old newspaper with a stocking-clad foot and it spun to crash into the floor, knocking over a stack of unwashed dishes.

Tomorrow he'd hire both a new maid and someone who could actually kill Kate Kirkland. A body couldn't hire good help for nothing these days. Maybe he'd do it himself. The killing, that was, not the cleaning.

A key turned in the front door lock with a quiet scratch. That dumb Dora had been the only one with a key, and heaven knew she was long gone to momma's house. He patted his trouser pockets for his gun but didn't find it. The pistol was all the way across the room, on the bar where he must have set it while he made his last scotch and water, easy on the water. He was halfway there when he saw his visitor.

His father.

Johnny pivoted and flopped back down on the couch. Sitting before Pop told him to was a bad idea but his limbs were too loose and alcohol-tingly to remain standing. "Hey pop, how'd you get a key to this joint?" There, that was clear, not a bit slurred. He hoped.

Poppa Paulo didn't deign to answer and shot him that one eyebrow raised look that said *I know things you'll never be good enough to know*. "You're drunk," he said instead.

"I suppose so." No point to lying. Pop had always seen right through him. Even that time he'd knocked up Marie Patrice Puccelli and tried to claim it had been his cousin, Matteo. The sanctimonious prick had believed his nephew over his own son. Johnny's head was muzzy, and he shook it in an attempt to clear the cobwebs. "Can't a grown man have a drink in the privacy of his own home?"

"It's the middle of the afternoon." Poppa Paulo pinched a dirty glass between two pudgy fingers and lifted it to inspect a crimson lipstick smear. "And this is not your home. It is where you keep your whores."

Johnny said nothing. A sharp edge to Poppa Paulo's words cut through the haze.

With a negligent flick of his wrist, the old man sent the glass flying at the wall. It shattered, spraying glass shards in a glittering fan. "You have fucked up again, Guisseppi," he roared. "And I have had enough. You have embarrassed me and put me in a position where I have had to bow to some know-nothing shit-

for-brains. All to save your useless ass. If your poor, sainted mother ever heard of this, she would drop dead where she stood.”

“I didn’t do nothin’.”

“You killed Franklin McCauley.”

“That wasn’t me.”

Poppa Paulo stalked to the window and pulled the drapes back. “And now you lie. I raised you better than this, Guisseppi. I raised you to be a shrewd businessman who could earn the respect of the neighborhood. But never did you absorb any of it.”

The lousy bastard. Johnny had absorbed every speck he’d been taught. His father’s arrogance made him deny it, so he’d never have to give up his power. “McCauley was business. He ran numbers in our territory.”

“Did you bother to do a bit of investigation? He also had a brother at Tammany Hall. A brother who is not just some ward boss. A brother who is one of the most powerful men in the background of city politics. A brother who is out for blood even against his own sister-in-law because he thinks she was the killer,” Poppa Paulo roared, his face mottled. Spittle flew from his lips. “What do you think he will do if he finds out you were the one to kill McCauley? Eh, Johnny?” he sneered with a bitter influence on the nickname.

“Don’t know.” Feeling about eight years old, he hated the petulant tone spilling out of his mouth.

“Kate Kirkland and Micah Trent have your gun. What do you suppose we do about this?”

“I’ll kill them both. I’ve got a plan.” He didn’t, not even an idea for a plan but he could come up with one if his father gave him enough time. “I’ll fix this, Pop. I will.”

“No, Guisseppi. I’ve given you enough chances. By the holy saints, I’ve given you too many chances.” He turned back to the window with a huge gust of a sigh and folded his hands behind his back. “You’re going to Chicago.”

Johnny sat up straight, suddenly feeling a lot lighter. Chicago wasn’t so bad. Men made money there. They made names for themselves there. “Hey, that’s all right, Pop. That’s good. I can help our organization branch out there.”

“You will do no such thing. You’ll keep your head down and stay out of trouble. And knowing you, you’ll drink and gamble and whore your life away. But that’s all right because you’ll no longer be a stain on our family name.”

“What? But Pop—”

“I’ll send you money. What you do with it, I don’t much care. I disavow you as my son.”

“Pop...”

He trailed off, unsure of how to finish a thought, much less a sentence. He couldn’t feel his feet or his hands. Disavowed? He’d no longer be Poppa Paulo’s son? Blinking, his gaze landed on the newspaper at his feet. *McCauley Calls For Investigation*, it blared. *Sister-In-Law May Hang!* The irony wasn’t lost on

him. If he'd actually read the paper when it came in, rather than worrying about that whore Kate Kirkland, maybe he could have headed this off at the pass, fixed it all before he got banished to Chicago.

"You leave tomorrow," his father said as he swept to the door. "I shall not give you time to create more problems." The door shut with a resounding thud.

Loose ends, huh? There was one loose end he could definitely tie up. Maybe he'd put a pretty bow on her damned casket. This was all Kate Kirkland's goddamn fault. If the fucking bitch had known what was good for her, she would have fallen to her knees and sucked his cock when he offered to step in as a partner. Instead, she'd been stubborn. Willful. A bitch.

He poured another scotch with a hand that shook with rage, skipping the water this time. A dusky haze slipped over his vision. He clenched the crystal glass, then chucked it at the same wall his father had used.

So he was no longer Poppa Paulo's son? That was fine by him. It was time to make a name for himself.

If he had a little fun with the bitch before she died a painful death, he'd write himself an even bigger name.

In her blood.

Jake stared at apartment 4B for a solid five minutes. They'd done a good thing today, that much he was sure of. The Vittorellis couldn't be left to prey on small business owners without being checked. But Micah had probably killed his career by orchestrating today's little show down. Jake wasn't worried about himself. Micah would ensure everyone who helped him was safe. That wasn't in doubt.

The woman inside the apartment confused the hell out of him.

He'd always been sure he'd end up with a woman like his mother. Genteel and poised, Eleanor Sterling had turned their home into a peaceful haven from the reckless world. Jake always thought he would need a woman who could do that for him.

Susie couldn't. She was crass and rude, everything Jake had grown up to abhor. Any man who hitched up with her would have tumult and chaos in his home.

Yet every time he saw her, Jake came alive. He was invigorated.

Abruptly, he knocked. There was a muted hum of voices and Susie cracked open the door, clutching a silk robe closed at her throat. A smile lit her face and her brown eyes sparkled. He wasn't foolish enough to think that was for him. "Jake," she breathed. "Everything's okay?"

"Yeah. Just fine. Micah and Kate managed to defang Vittorelli, for now at least."

"Oh, good," she sighed.

“Who’s at the damned door?” The door jerked out of her hand and a tall man loomed behind her. He was well groomed, with carefully oiled black hair swept straight back from his high forehead. Jake couldn’t remember the last time he’d bought hair oil. He passed a hand over his own head. Yep, just as much of a mess as it’d been when he’d rolled out of bed that morning.

The man looked from Susie to Jake and back again, seeing something he didn’t like. His mouth pulled flat and a muscle ticked in his jaw. “Who’s this, Suze?” A scowl darkened the man’s face. Jake’d like to darken it with a fist.

“This is Jacob Sterling.” A wan smile quirked her lips. Bright red polished nails drummed the doorframe. What did she think was going to happen? He’d use the jackass as a broom and sweep out her hallway? Okay, so maybe she had a point. “Jake, this is Ricky Andersen.”

“Her beau.” Ricky slung an arm heavily around her shoulders. A fat gold ring on his pinkie thumb thumped into her delicate collarbone. The skin around her eyes tightened almost imperceptibly. “Suze here is my number one gal,” he added, but his eyes never left Jake’s.

“Number one? How many others you got?”

Susie gasped, jerking Jake’s attention back to her. A pink blush spread up her neck and her eyes flashed. Not embarrassment. Anger. She was righteously furious with him.

Great job. Just great. What he wouldn’t do for an eighth of Micah’s charm sometimes.

“Jake here was just leaving,” Susie bit out. “He just needed to deliver a message.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’ll be going.” He shoved his bowler down over his head and turned to leave. He was halfway down the narrow hall before he halted. Fuck it. Yanking his hat off, he ran his fingers through his hair. He’d never been known to keep his mouth shut before. No good reason to start now. “You’re selling yourself short, Susie.”

She cocked a hip and adopted that seductress act she did so well. Her breasts thrust against clinging silk, full and ripe. “I don’t much care what people think about me. I never figured a reputation was worth much more than a headache.”

“I’m not talking about reputation. It’s these morons you keep choosing to spend your time with. They’re not worth even breathing the same air you do.”

Ricky sputtered and stepped forward. Susie planted a hand in his skinny chest without looking at him.

Her eyes narrowed. “You offering anything else?”

Jake’s mind shut down. He hadn’t thought that far ahead. He hadn’t thought at all beyond opening his mouth. “No. I’m not.”

“Then how ’bout you keep your nose out of my goddamn business?” After shoving Ricky into the apartment, she slammed the door so hard it rattled.

Jake jammed his hat back on his head. Yeah, that had gone well.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Two days later, Micah sat in Winthrop's office, waiting on his boss. He might appear calm, with one ankle hitched over his knee and his hands folded over his belly, but inside he was a mess. His head throbbed and his eyes felt as if he'd scrubbed them with wire. No sleep in three days could do that to a man. Unfortunately, every time he lay down to sleep, Kate appeared before him, her eyes huge pools of pain and her bottom lip trembling.

Jesus, he still couldn't believe that scene in her foyer. He'd known it would be bad but that...that had made him feel about as low as a sewer rat. He hadn't expected to fall in love with her. None of his plans had included that step. And now that he had, she hated him. Maybe worse than she hated Johnny Vittorelli.

Hell, if he were going to be truly honest, he was no better than his father. Dad's double life had been a second family, but Micah's mistress had been his job. The lies came easily, about his daily activities, about the truth of his reasons for helping her. Kate was right. She didn't know him, not all of him.

Still, she knew the important parts. What he wanted for the future, what made him laugh. She made him laugh. Real laughter, not the fake stuff he was often forced into. With her, Micah could be himself. Even if he hadn't told the truth about his job.

He pinched the bridge of his nose where it throbbed and shut his gritty eyes. He had to fix this. There had to be something he could do to make her forgive him. He'd been to her house the past two days at three in the afternoon on the dot. She hadn't even come to the door. The roses he'd left on the front stoop were still there, wilting, when he went back the second day. There was a strong probability the gold wrapped box of chocolates he'd left would be waiting for him today, a melted mess.

The door behind him opened and closed quietly. Micah dropped his hand and sat upright. He'd been so wrapped up in Kate, he hadn't even worried about the meeting Winthrop had asked for. When the slender man plopped a thick folder on his desk and sat without a greeting, it was a bad sign.

Winthrop flipped open the file, wire-rimmed reading glasses perched on his nose. The rustle of papers filled the air as he shuffled. Finally he closed the file and peered at Micah over the glasses. "Is there anything you'd like to tell me?"

It wasn't too late, not exactly. He could find a way to spin this and keep his job. After all, there was no guarantee he could right things with Kate. He returned Winthrop's direct stare as he shuffled through the options. Finally, Micah cracked his knuckles. "I'm not sure what you're talking about." Lies, more lies. They lay bitter on his tongue but he'd do anything to protect Kate. Even if it meant protecting a monster.

“Not a clue?”

“No sir.”

Winthrop had disturbingly pale eyes, to go with his pale coloring. They flashed silver with annoyance. “Maybe I should prompt your memory. Let’s start with Johnny Vittorelli. Last time we met, you said he was nearly tied up. You were about to get some leverage we could use on his father.”

“Didn’t pan out.”

“Is that right?” He opened the file and paged through it. “In that case, do you have any idea why a surveillance team spotted his father, Paulo Vittorelli, entering The Kirk two days ago? An establishment you were seen leaving approximately forty five minutes later, only to enter the house proper?”

“He wanted some coffee,” Micah answered, deadpan.

“Coffee.”

“Yes, sir.”

Winthrop pinned him with that pale gaze, and Micah fought to keep his muscles loose and relaxed. “How about we start over and this time you level with me. What is going on with you and this Kirkland woman?”

“Nothing.” At least that was the unvarnished truth, though Micah would change it if he could.

“Nothing. You expect me to believe that line of bullshit? Look, I don’t know how this woman has twisted your head—”

“It’s not like that, sir.” The words shot out of his mouth before he thought, part and parcel of an intrinsic need to protect Kate’s name.

“Then why don’t you tell me how it is?”

“I’d like to resign.”

Winthrop reared back. “Excuse me?”

“I’d like to resign,” he repeated. He was bone-weary of the job and ready to be rid of it. “Effective immediately.”

“I must say I didn’t predict this.”

“All we’re doing is treading in place to keep our heads above water. We prosecute and shut down the little guys who are just trying to make a living the same way they’ve been doing for centuries. And in the mean time, we leave them vulnerable to vicious criminals that we can’t even get a line on. I’m sick of it. It’s been growing for a while and recent events... Recent events have made me sure.”

“Let’s not go making hasty decisions. What would you do instead?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe open a grill. Maybe move to California.”

Winthrop tipped his head to the side as if trying to see into Micah’s thoughts. Good luck with that. He hardly knew his own mind anymore, with Kate gone.

“I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you take a week off to think about this?”

“I’m not going to—”

The boss held up a hand. “You’re one of my best agents. Hardworking, smart. Despite this recent incident, you are for the most part honest, and we know how hard that is to come by. I’d hate to lose you to a hasty decision. Take the week. Think about this.”

Micah nodded reluctantly. He owed the older man that much. “I will. But don’t get your hopes up, sir.”

After Winthrop dismissed him, Micah ran lightly down the steps of police headquarters, whistling the whole way. The sky was a clear, pale blue and the sun angled through the rooftops, spilling over the bustling city. A pigeon landed on the street lamp and cooed. Micah grinned. Not quite a songbird, but it would do.

One problem down, one to go.

He was off to Kate’s house.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Kate dragged herself out of bed and pulled on the first piece of clothing she found, her Chinese silk robe. She padded down the hall to the bath. Three days of getting out of bed for only the bare necessities left a girl pretty grimy. The needlepoint water stung but she stood beneath it till it ran cold. Opening her mouth, she let the water flow in and swished it around. She'd cried so much the moisture had evaporated from her mouth.

She was adrift, with no purpose to her life, and nowhere she had to be. Slowly, she toweled off, then went back to her room. Perched on the edge of her bed, she dropped her head into her hands. Though all she'd done for days was cry, she was still exhausted from worrying over her gullibility with Micah. She was still buying it, for that matter.

Every time she made up her mind to hate him, his face flashed in her memory. His smile. The way the skin over his cheekbones went taut as he strained over her, about to come. His brown eyes dark with sorrow as he told her he loved her.

She slapped her palms on the mattress and launched up. Any sorrow was his own damn fault. All the lies had come from his mouth. He concealed the truth of himself while he stripped down her soul and demanded her last scrap of trust.

With abrupt gestures, she yanked a dress over her head. She was done skulking about, hiding in her own home, when he rang the bell. This time she'd answer, tell him to go away, and slam the door. Eventually he'd get the message.

It was time to get on with her life. So what if she had nowhere to go because of that rat bastard? She'd find something to do. Maybe she'd use this time to redesign The Kirk, so the reopening in three months would be a rebirth. The Kirk would be bigger and better than ever. And maybe, if she replaced everything he'd touched, she wouldn't be haunted with his memory. If only she could replace her body, which still lusted after him. Even now she missed his smell, his touch, his taste.

Food was the first order of business. Her stomach grumbled, reminding her she hadn't eaten much. The kitchen was unsurprisingly empty. Annie had been tiptoeing around the house, and Patrick had nearly disappeared. She hadn't seen or heard him once since the meeting with Poppa. The icebox was still full though. Kate poured herself a glass of milk and grabbed a bowl of banana pudding Annie must have made. She'd just shut the icebox door with her foot when her benefactress appeared.

"You are a goddess," Kate said, waving the bowl of pudding.

“Are you feeling better, then?”

“You bet.” Or at least she’d fake it until it became true. Leaning against the counter, she pulled out a spoon and dug in. The dessert slid down cool and sweet as it eased her parched throat. “Is that a new outfit? I like it.” The pale green suited Annie’s creamy complexion and the dropped waist accentuated her slender hips.

“Yes. I bought it—” She flushed apple red and dropped her chin.

Kate knew exactly when the girl had bought it. The day life should have been fixed and instead went to hell. The bowl and spoon clattered as Kate set them down, suddenly not hungry.

Sympathy darkened Annie’s eyes. “Can I just say, Kate, I’m glad to see you up and about? You and Mr. Patrick had me a mite scared. Plus it’s strange tumbling around this house by myself.”

Kate shrugged and forced smile. “Everything’s gonna be just fine. You and I are going to get to work real soon.”

“That’d be mighty fine.” Annie’s smile was much more genuine and lit the room. “On what?”

“Haven’t really figured that part out yet. But I’ll let you know when I do.” She moved to the doorway, leaving Annie blinking in confusion. She could sympathize. At the last second, she paused, one hand on the jamb. “What’s wrong with Patrick, anyway? He go on a bender?”

“I’m not rightly sure.” Annie bit her plump lip. “I think he might be sick. He’s locked himself in the spare room and won’t let me in.”

“I’ll check on him,” she said with a sigh and trudged upstairs. He was probably drunk. Again. It was typical he’d picked the spare room and didn’t give a damn about the extra mess.

When she knocked on the door, there was no response at first. She pounded harder and finally heard the bedsprings groan.

“Go away.” His voice was strained and sharper than she’d heard in a long while.

“It’s me, Kate.” She propped an elbow on the wall and ran a hand through her hair. Every scrap of patience had fled, but it wasn’t like she had any place else to be. She tried the knob but it was locked, like Annie had said it would be. “Let me in.”

There was a long moment of silence before Patrick opened the door. He said nothing in greeting and turned around to fall face first on the bed. His hair was lank, matted down with sweat, and the air in the room was thick with rot. Kate waved a hand in front of her nose as her stomach twisted. If she’d known she had this to face, she wouldn’t have had that pudding.

“Jesus,” she muttered. “It smells like something up and died in here. What’s wrong with you? Are you sick?”

“In a manner of speaking.” The pillows muffled his words.

“Why aren’t you in your own room?”

“Too much alcohol in there.” A full body tremor shook him. He turned his face to the side and grimaced.

“Isn’t that the point?” She couldn’t help herself. She pushed a hank of hair off his damp forehead. He might have caused her years of grief, but they were still family. There was no fever to his skin. Instead he seemed clammy and almost cold.

“I locked the door to my room. Threw the key out a back window. Not sure where it went. Then came in here.” He turned green and scrambled to the other side of the bed. Hanging his head off the edge, he dry heaved. “Sorry.”

“Patrick? What’s going on?”

“I’m quitting. It’s past time.” He scrubbed his wrist across his mouth and curled up. The shaking started again, so bad his teeth rattled. “Have to say it hurts.”

“Patrick?” She knelt on the bed and cupped his face. A tiny curl of hope twisted through her, so faint it could flutter away on the slightest breeze. The longest he’d been without a drink in years could be counted in hours. “Are you serious?”

“Doesn’t it look like I’m fucking serious?” He shook his head. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to snap.”

“No, it’s okay.” She would forgive him anything, if it meant getting her true brother back. “How long?”

“Since you told me about that meeting with Vittorelli.”

“Why now?”

“You couldn’t ask me for help. I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t have asked me either. Shit, Kate, watch out.” He grabbed her shoulder and pushed over a few inches.

“What? What is it?”

“A huge spider. ’Bout the size of your head. But it’s all right. It’s gone now.”

Horror choked her throat. Good lord in heaven, what was wrong with him? She’d thought she was all cried out over Micah, but tears prickled the backs of her eyes. She couldn’t bear the thought of losing him, right when she was about to get him back. She patted his clammy arm. “I’ll go telephone for the doctor. You stay right here.”

“I’m certainly not about to dance the Charleston,” Patrick snapped.

Kate flew down the stairs, nearly tripping over the last one in her haste. She could call from the bar and be back in a flash. Yanking open the door, she came to a stuttering halt and had to grab the doorframe to keep from running through.

Micah stood there, mouth hanging open. “Kate? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, but I need you to get Doctor Abraham for Patrick. He’s just down the block.” She slammed the door in his face.

It wasn't until she was in the kitchen, filling a basin with cool water, that she realized what she'd done. She'd asked Micah to do something for her and simply trusted he'd get it done. No doubt, no worry. She hadn't even asked him politely. Even after his confession, she still believed in him.

Water overflowed the ceramic bowl, drenching her hands. With a muttered curse, she cut the tap off and snatched up a hand towel.

Upstairs, Patrick still shivered in misery. His eyes clamped shut and his face screwed up tight. When she began to remove his clothes, he offered no resistance. She manipulated his limp arms as easily as if he were an infant, then wiggled his pants down until he was left in his boxer shorts. Sitting next to him on the bed, she bathed the sweat from him. The only sound was his harsh breathing until she wrung the towel over the basin.

"Remember the time you locked me in the closet?" She wiped the sickly sweat from his damp brow. It didn't feel right, letting him suffer in silence. "I deserved it. I'd ripped up your literature essay, wasn't it?"

"History. The history of the Greeks at Thermopylae."

"Yes, that was it. I was so cruel to you."

A bittersweet smile tipped his lips. "It went both ways. You ripped up my essay because I'd dyed your doll's dress black."

"That's right! I'd almost forgotten that part." The cloth slid over his narrow chest. When had he gotten so skinny? She still remembered him as a big, strapping young man. He'd played tennis regularly and stick ball whenever he'd gotten a chance. "I guess we were both cruel."

"It's what brothers and sisters do."

"Hmm. What about the time you punched Victor Avalon for tugging on my braids?"

"That wasn't for pulling your hair. It was for trying to look down your blouse while he did it."

"You lie!"

"Truth."

"I guess that's what brothers do." She bathed him in slow, steady motions. The cloth gleamed white against his sallow skin. She couldn't look him in the eyes for some reason. "I love you, Patrick. You've been a wonderful big brother."

"Now you lie." He flung an arm over his eyes.

"I didn't say you're always a good brother. But you can be."

A raw chuckle spilled out of him, but he didn't answer.

"Kate?" Micah called from downstairs. "Where are you?"

"In the spare bedroom," she called back. Patrick flinched and put a hand to his forehead.

Doctor Abraham came in first. A short, wiry man with a mane of silvery hair, he had a permanent look of concern etched on his face. "What do we have here?" he asked in the same velvety voice he'd had

when she was ten and ill from influenza. It was too large a voice for such a small man but it never failed to reassure his patients.

"He's got the jim-jams, doc." Kate set the cloth in the bowl and retreated to stand against the wall with Micah. Against her will, she absorbed his steady presence.

"How long's he been like this?" Doc Abraham set his leather bag on the bed table and unsnapped the brass clasp. Worn and used, nicks and scratches etched the leather. The doctor had been at his profession a long time. Kate breathed a sigh of relief. Micah tried to take her hand, but she pulled away and wrapped her arms around her churning midsection.

"I'm not sure," she said. "I found him about an hour ago and he was already sick."

Patrick lurched up onto his elbows. "*He* can speak for himself."

"Sorry about that, young man. I wasn't sure if you were with us." Doctor Abraham began his exam, listening to Patrick's chest with a silver and black stethoscope. "When did this begin?"

"I haven't had a drink in three days. I was sick at first but it got really bad yesterday. Evening, I think."

"Hmm." He palpated Patrick's belly. "Seen anything unusual?"

"A spider. Once." Patrick turned his head. "Sorry about that, Kate."

"It's okay," she whispered.

"Any strange sensations? Itching? Feeling like anything was crawling over you?"

"No."

"Good. That's a good sign." With efficient moves of long time practice, he packed his bag back up. "There's a very good sanatorium I can have you admitted to."

"I'd like to stay here."

"I'm not sure if that's the best option. The first few days can be highly dangerous and after that you'll need a carefully balanced diet and regimented routine."

"Please, Kate." Desperation shone in Patrick's tight features. "Will you help?"

Kate bit her lip. From beside her, Micah's gaze was a heavy weight. She wished he would disappear and at the same time wished he'd stay forever. "Of course I will," she said. And to think, she'd been worried about having nothing to do for three months.

Patrick's chest lifted and lowered with a relieved sigh. "Thanks, sis."

"All right then." Doctor Abraham unbuckled his case again. "In that case, let me give you a shot of morphine to ease you through the next little bit."

"No," Patrick bit out.

"I don't think you understand the danger you're in. You could have seizures. Hallucinations. Death is possible."

Kate's heart clenched. Please no, Lord. It wouldn't be fair to lose him now.

"No. No more drugs. I'll either make it or I won't."

"Well, I can't force you." He stood, then paused by Kate. "Miss Kirkland, if I could speak with you for a moment?"

"I'll be right back," she said to Patrick, then followed the doctor into the hall and downstairs. Micah stayed behind her, her own private sentinel.

"Miss Kirkland, the next couple days are critical. Your brother's nearly pickled his body. Try to ensure he gets enough fluids to drink. He won't want to eat but he'll need to. Some physicians advise a significantly reduced measure of alcohol per day but I've found that merely prolongs the torture. If he makes it through this, continuing will become a matter of willpower."

"I understand." She was cold through and through. Her skin pebbled in goose flesh.

"Miss Kirkland, are you sure you can handle this? I know several good facilities, some even in the city."

He meant well, but a tornado of anger whipped through her anyway. Doubt would not help, so she refused to entertain it. Before she could answer, warm hands settled on her arms from behind.

"Kate could handle a herd of stampeding rhinoceroses and vicious lions for her brother if she had to," Micah said quietly. "This is nothing."

She laughed shakily. "Yeah, doc. I know it won't be easy but we'll manage."

"That's good then. You know where I am, if you need me." Gathering his bowler from a table, Doc Abraham settled it on his head and was gone.

Kate remained watching the door. She'd have to send Annie out to the grocer's for plain, sturdy food Patrick could get down. They'd have to switch out his bed linens too, since his had soaked through with sweat. Thank heavens for ready and willing Annie.

Micah turned her by the shoulders, until she was forced to face him. Damn, she'd been hoping if she ignored him he'd go away.

"I know this is a bad time but we have to talk," he said quietly.

"Not now. I have to get back to Patrick."

"I know. So I'll go after I've said this." His big, rough hands stroked down her arms, until he gripped her wrists. His face was so achingly familiar, yet not. What other secrets was he capable of keeping?

"I love you, Kate. And I think you love me too. I'm not going to give up quietly and fade away."

"How can I love a man when I'm not sure I even know him?" Tears stung her. She twisted a hand free, and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I have to go up to Patrick."

"I know." He nodded. "I'll let myself out."

With a sigh that left her feeling like a deflated balloon, she turned away.

"One more thing, Kate."

"What?"

He spun her swiftly and in an instant, she was in his arms. His mouth swooped down. The kiss was fast and devastating, packed with determination and resolve. He both promised and warned her that he'd be back. She clung to his broad shoulders and absorbed his strength with the taste of her own tears.

"I'm here if you need me."

Chapter Thirty-Four

“Full house.” Patrick splayed his cards across the table in a perfect fan.

Kate set her cards down. A measly pair of fours. “Huh. I’d forgotten what a good gambler you are.” She shoved the small pile of pennies across the table at him. “At this rate, I’m not going to have a single red cent left.”

“If you like, you can bow at my feet in awe of my majesty.”

“I think I’ll pass.” A glance at the mantle clock showed it to be only a quarter past two. The wire hands were stuck, surely.

“Maybe it’s not my skill. Maybe it’s the fact that you’re incredibly distracted.”

“What’s that?” The clock hadn’t been serviced in years. She should take it in.

The cards moved in a steady whirr-click as he shuffled. Everything Patrick did now was steady. Almost a month had passed since his last drink. Kate was so proud of him she sometimes thought she’d pop with it. Patrick grumbled about how often she cooed over him, but she knew he loved it.

Two sixteen. This was ridiculous. The clock had to be broken.

“He comes at three. Not a moment before.”

Kate twitched and knocked over her stack of pennies. The tips of her ears burned. “I know that. I was wondering...I was wondering if the postman would come today.”

“If that’s some silly nickname for Micah, I most certainly don’t want to hear about it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Stacking her coins took reams of concentration.

“Why don’t you just open the door to him already?”

She gave up all pretense of not knowing what he was getting at. “I don’t know.” Another lie. She did know.

Every day, rain or shine, Micah cranked the bell at precisely three o’clock. At first she hadn’t answered because Patrick had run her ragged. Then because she hadn’t known what to say. Now...Now she didn’t answer the door because she didn’t want the magic to end. Because she didn’t want to stop receiving the postcards.

He’d slipped the first under the door on the third day, as if he’d known she wouldn’t answer. One more had come every day since. He’d started with hand-colored postcards of California. God only knew where he’d gotten them. Toward the end of the second week, he must have run out of those because he’d moved on to the beaches of Florida, luridly-colored photos of neon blue water and endless strips of sand.

The fronts were fun enough. The backs were what she lived for.

Micah wrote his secrets on them.

One line a day, they ranged from the silliest absurdities to his deepest fears. His favorite color was sunshine yellow. He preferred dogs to cats. He was afraid of becoming his father. Late at night, he hated his mother for letting his father get away with the things he did.

Sometimes he slipped in a card so blindingly erotic that her stomach tumbled and she went wet. He loved her private taste. Kate crossed her legs against the sudden throb.

“Oh, you are hopeless,” Patrick said with sudden disgust and tossed down the stack of cards.

“What? What did I do?” Kate blinked and put a hand to her throat. Her pulse fluttered wildly.

He wagged his finger under her nose like an old schoolmarm. “There are some things a man never wants to see his sister thinking.”

“How would you know what I’m thinking about?”

“I don’t suppose you get flushed and start breathing hard over a hand of poker. It’s disgusting.”

She lifted her chin. And uncrossed her legs. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I swear by all that’s holy, Katherine Marie Kirkland, if you don’t answer the door today, I will.” He pushed back his chair with a heavy scrape. “I’m going upstairs until then to lie down.”

He hadn’t been sleeping much, she knew. In the middle of the night, she woke to hear him wandering the quiet house. She grasped his wrist as he passed by. “It’s good to have you back.”

“It’s good to be here.” He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.

Kate lasted a minute more. She stacked the deck neatly. Shoved the pennies into a tidy pile. Then she broke and dashed upstairs, a silly grin across her face.

Retrieving the postcards from their hiding place in her desk, she launched herself across her bed on her stomach. The satin ribbon she’d tied around them, yellow for Micah, slid free with one pull, and she spread them across her coverlet in a sweeping arc. Her toes waved in the air as she picked one at random. His favorite food was chicken and dumplings, but only the way his mother made it.

Kate felt like a schoolgirl mooning over Photoplay magazine but she couldn’t seem to stop herself. She indulged in this almost every day. She told herself she’d only read one and before she knew it, she’d lost a half hour reading every single one. If she closed her eyes, she saw his bright, flashing grin. The hard ridges of his abdomen. Tasted that indefinable tang that was only his skin. Felt the way he shuddered in her arms as he came.

She would have to answer today. They couldn’t go on like this much longer.

Maybe she’d make him promise to give her a new postcard on special occasions. Like their anniversary.

The ringing chimes of the doorbell filled the air.

Kate sat bolt upright. Oh lord, he was here. And a bit early, too, by the gold clock on her desk. Guiltily, she scrambled to hide the evidence of her mooning. She had half the postcards scooped up when she stopped. If she had her way, she and Micah would be in this bed before too long. He might appreciate knowing she'd kept every card. With a naughty chuckle, she tossed the rest over the bedspread, where they scattered like autumn leaves. Micah's cards were better than rose petals any day.

She tugged her shirtwaist so the seams lay straight, then smoothed down her shin-length skirt. If only she'd planned ahead, she could be wearing something flashy, with sex appeal, rather than an everyday brown skirt and white blouse, adorned with only three inches of embroidery around the hem. Oh well, it didn't matter much. Micah would want her even if she wore sackcloth and ashes.

Pressing her hands flat to her sternum, she felt her pulse throb wildly. She hoped he still wanted her. She prayed he did. A month was awfully long for a man to go with no hint of encouragement. She couldn't quell a sudden tumult of doubt, though it made no sense to be tied up in knots. A tiny, irrational fragment of her brain insisted he could be there just for the perverted pleasure of telling her he was done, which would be no more than she deserved.

He rang the bell again and Patrick stomped down the hall. "I warned you, didn't I?" he called as he passed her room.

A semi-hysterical giggle threatened to escape. Patrick answering the door first bought her a few minutes to try to calm her fluttery insides. Deep breaths did nothing for her. She was a hopeless case.

Smoothing her hair one last time, she went downstairs. Her last smidgen of pride kept her from dashing into the foyer the way she would like to. This was the beginning of the rest of their life. A grand entrance was entirely appropriate.

Neither Patrick nor Micah was in the entryway.

One hand on the polished newel, Kate bit her lip. She heard nothing, not even a hint of where they were. Patrick better not try to intimidate Micah. She'd beat his butt if he tried it.

The sitting room door swung slowly open and Kate turned toward it.

Not Micah or Patrick.

It was Johnny Vittorelli.

He stood between her and any chance of salvation, the front door, a great hulking mountain of menace. A pellet filled sock dangled from his clenched fist and a knife sheath was strapped to his ample waist. His wet grin sent a chill down her arms and a tremble up her spine. Instantly, Kate spun and ran upstairs.

She made it up five steps before he grabbed a handful of her skirt and yanked hard. Her knee and chin connected with the risers. White-hot pain ricocheted through her. She drove her foot back and slammed it into his soft gut.

"Oof. You'll pay for that, bitch."

Sinking her nails into the carpet runner, she scrambled up another step, but his grip hadn't loosened. Her foot flailed behind her, trying to kick him again. He twisted her ankle in a punishing hold. She whimpered as her bones ground together and hated that weak sound.

He flipped her over. She lashed out with her nails, scoring his cheek. His immense weight levered over her, slamming her into sharp edges. In one hand, he trapped her wrists and pushed them over her head, then pinched her chin and bent her head back.

"I knew you'd like it rough." Spittle flew from his lips. An unholy light gleamed in his eyes.

"Fuck you."

"I think you've got that backwards."

Her heart pumped like a wild bird in her chest, but her thoughts ran with crystal clarity. Micah would be here on the hour. She needed to stay near the front door. When he rang the bell, she could scream. Otherwise he'd think it was the same as any other day, slip the card through the door and disappear. If she delayed and made noise, he'd break down the door if he needed to.

"What did you do to Patrick?"

"He's fine. A little bump on the head but he'll survive. I need him to sign the paperwork, after all." He spread his meaty fingers over her throat and caressed her skin. "You and me are gonna have a little fun. Before I kill you, of course. It's taken me a month to get away from the bulls Pop sicced on me, and I've planned for right now every goddamned second."

Bile rose in her mouth, cutting acridly through her fear. "Sign what papers? You think you're still going to get The Kirk? You're insane."

"If you and Trent are dead, there won't be no one to stop me. Not that sodden drunk of your brother, at least."

Johnny's hand moved down to her collarbones, ducking beneath her collar. She cringed. The hard edge of wood cut into her hips, her spine, her neck. "Didn't your father tell you? If we die, you're done for."

"I ain't gonna worry about him anymore. I'll gather my own men. I don't need that piece of shit."

"More like he doesn't need you. Everyone's seen it. Daddy doesn't let you even lick his boots."

He crushed her neck again and Kate's vision swam. Her mouth was going to get her in trouble. Goading him into killing her quickly wasn't going to get Micah here in time. Might keep her from getting raped through. The disgusting bulge at his crotch pressed against her thigh.

"Johnny, you haven't thought this through," she choked out, once he eased up a fraction. "If you kill us both, the gun goes to the police and you go to Sing-Sing. And Patrick's not a drunk anymore. He won't be a pushover."

"No problem. I'll kill him too. Thanks for the warning."

The easy way he said it chilled her blood. She had to get out of this, she just had to. No way would she'd allow her legacy to be that she was raped and killed by a low-level gangster. Neither Patrick nor Micah would be able to live with that. She bucked, drawing her knee up into his swollen groin. Taken unaware, Johnny released his grip and Kate tried to wiggle free. It wasn't enough. He slammed her down again. Despair swamped her.

The doorbell rang.

Kate screamed, long and lusty, like a moving picture ingénue.

"You bitch," he snarled, and both hands encircled her throat.

She clawed him, sank her nails into his hands. It wasn't enough. Her air cut off, her vision turned gray.

The front door slammed open in a hail of shattered wood.

"Let her go." Micah's voice drifted toward her. Her white knight, come to the rescue again.

"I don't think so." Johnny hauled her up by her hair and put a knife to her throat. Micah stood in the doorway, his pistol leveled at Johnny but also at her. Her stomach flipped. She arched away from the pressure, gripping Johnny's forearm as if that would make a difference. Terror coiled through her, winding tighter and tighter until she thought she might snap.

She wanted to tell Micah that she loved him, just in case. "I would have answered the door today," she said.

A wide grin slid across his handsome face. "How about you answer it tomorrow, all right, darling?"

"Sure thing."

"Sorry to break this up, but you two ain't gonna have a tomorrow."

The smile disappeared and Micah's eyes narrowed into glittering slits. "I have no problem with shooting you, Vittorelli."

"Maybe. Maybe you can't get a decent shot before I slit your girlfriend's throat." He ran his wet lips down her neck. "It's a pity I'll have to do her so fast. We were gonna have some fun."

Revulsion and terror warred in her guts. Johnny was right. He'd hunched his hulking body behind her, and the razor sharp blade balanced at her throat. No way in hell was she self-sacrificing enough to want Micah to shoot through her.

"You've got no way out of this." Micah cocked the hammer with an ominous snap. "You so much as put a scratch on her and I'll fill you so full of lead you might as well be a pencil."

"Nope. See, her and me are gonna back away real slow. You get smart and let us leave out the back, and I might just let her live. Though she'll end up wishing she was dead."

"I think I like another plan," said a voice from the right.

Johnny whipped his head to the side but Kate only moved her eyes, too afraid to risk the knife. Patrick stood in the open doorway to the sitting room, her two shot Derringer in his hand.

He fired.

Kate screamed with terror. Johnny fell, a neat, red-circled hole between his eyes. She went to her knees, gasping in fear and the acrid tang of gunpowder. Micah was there instantly. He scooped her into his arms, and she tucked her face into his clean shirtfront. Clinging to his waist, she tried to hold back the shakes. It was hopeless.

Patrick still stood in the open doorway, gun dangling from his loose fingers.

“Well,” he drawled, a bitter smile pasted on his face. “This’ll be hard to live through without a drink.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Police came within minutes, marked cars swooping to the curb. They swarmed her home like flies in their black uniforms. Micah shielded her and Patrick the best he could, but they were still swept off to Central Headquarters, where they'd been separated. Patrick went into a tiny room she glimpsed as she was marched by. Two metal chairs and a single bare light bulb hanging by a wire were the only decoration. The police sneered at him like a suspect, instead of a hero for saving her life.

Kate they treated a little better, taking her into an open office on the third floor filled with desks. Stale coffee and cigarettes permeated the air, and officers buzzed here and there, all appearing very important. The two young officers, her escorts, handed her over to a Detective Rabiart. Micah dropped a kiss on her temple and rubbed her shoulders briskly.

"I'll be back as soon as possible," Micah said. He shot a narrow eyed glance at the Detective. "You go easy on her, Al."

"I'll be as gentle as a butterfly."

Kate didn't like his thin-lipped smile. Neither did Micah if the tightening of his jaw was any indication, but he dropped another kiss in her hair before leaving. "I'll be back in no time."

"Okay," said Rabiart, as he drew a notepad in front of him. "Let's get down to the bottom of this."

Kate gave him an edited version of the story, beginning only with Johnny's appearance at her house. She left out all their prior dealings and especially didn't mention Poppa Paulo. She had a nostalgic wish to keep breathing.

"So your brother shot Mr. Vittorelli in order to save your life," Rabiart eventually said for what had to be the third time.

"Yes," she snapped, unable to keep frustration from lacing her tone.

"Are you sure there's nothing you're leaving out?"

She hauled down her neckline to show off the purpled bruising that had to be blooming there. "Does it look like I'm making this up, Detective?"

"No, no," he said in a fake soothing voice. "I've no doubt Mr. Vittorelli was a physical danger to you at that moment."

"Good."

"Miss Kirkland, you run an establishment that illegally sells alcohol, do you not?"

"I run a social club. Dancing. Singing. Conversation with friends."

“Conversation that’s lubricated with alcohol.” An intelligent gleam shone in his eyes.

“No, sir.” Kate crossed her arms over her chest. “What does that have to do with today, anyhow?”

“Guiseppe Vittorelli was a known underworld figure.” He slid his pen between pudgy fingers. “If you did run a speakeasy—”

“I don’t.”

“Understood. But if you did, you might understand my thinking that perhaps there was a little more to this situation than you’ve described. A business deal gone bad, perhaps. In these kinds of events, there’s often an escalation of violence on both sides, if you understand me.”

She understood perfectly. If Patrick were a righteous man defending his sister, nothing would happen. He’d be released by the end of the day most likely. If she and Patrick were shady characters caught up in dirty violence, he wouldn’t see the light of day for years. Maybe not until he had a dawn appointment with the hangman’s noose.

Patrick was no worry. He liked his neck its current length, so he’d keep his mouth shut.

But Micah could get trapped between his feelings for her and his duties as a Prohibition Agent. Her guts clenched for a moment, then slowly released in a flood of assurance. Not going to happen. Micah wouldn’t sell her out.

“Detective Rabiert, I can assure you no such interests are at play here. Would you perhaps like to inspect The Kirk?” The secret door would hold up to a dozen raids. It had before. When she’d had the rest of The Kirk inspected after the bombing, they’d double-checked the door, as well.

“No, that’s quite all right.” Rabiert also knew they wouldn’t find anything. Otherwise he wouldn’t be digging around with her.

“I assume I’m free to leave, then?” She was tired of waiting for Micah. She wanted nothing more than a long, hot bath and a gin and tonic.

“As you wish, Miss Kirkland.”

“And my brother?”

“I think he’ll be a little longer. I’m terribly sorry.” His smirk said the opposite. “There’s a lot of paperwork involved when a man’s killed. We’ve got to make sure all the I’s are dotted and the T’s are crossed.”

She’d like to cross his T, right upside the head. Damn. No, she’d have to figure out how to get Patrick out. A good lawyer would help.

“Thank you for your understanding,” she lied as she stood and tucked her purse under her arm. “I’m terribly tired and I’m going home to rest.”

“I’ll be in touch, Miss Kirkland.” He frowned as he stood, obviously frustrated that he’d been unable to get what he wanted out of her.

“I bet you will.”

Kate threaded her way through the desks and stepped out to the dimly lit hallway. She went down the stairs, lost in thought. Finding a good lawyer at half past five on a Friday would be nearly impossible. When Hubert retired six months ago, she hadn't put anyone else on retainer, lulled by a false sense of security since she hadn't been raided in nearly a year.

"Kate," a warm, familiar voice called, pulling up her head. Micah stood at the huge three-sided desk station that dominated the marble lobby. Beside him stood Patrick, looking a bit haggard and as disheveled as usual, but otherwise none the worse for wear.

Kate froze, four steps up and one foot hovering in the air. Unable to believe what she was seeing, she blinked. Detective Rabiart had implied it would take forever to bust her brother out.

"I'm sorry it took so long, but I had to spring Patrick. I figured you could hold your own against Rabiart." His brows were drawn down and his expression troubled, like he'd been worried she wouldn't understand.

Kate whooped with joy and launched herself at Micah. Her legs wrapped around his narrow hips and he steadied her with his hands gripping her ass. She planted a huge, smacking kiss on his mouth. "You're amazing. How'd you get him out?"

"I used the little bit of pull I had left." He smiled, warming her through to see that beautiful, reassuring grin. "I guess it's good you're happy with me, because I'm washed up here. Think maybe you'll take me on as your bootlegger again?" he whispered quietly. Wafting over the shell of her ear, his breath made her shiver.

A giddy laugh bubbled up from somewhere way down deep in her soul. "I'm not so sure," she teased. "I think we may need to renegotiate our contract."

"You little baggage." Transferring her weight to one arm, he wrapped the other across her shoulders and kissed her long and slow. She didn't care they were in a bustling lobby of people who had all come to a screeching halt to watch the spectacle unfold. She melted into him, absorbing every ounce of love that poured from his mouth to hers.

Finally she drew back and looked into his chocolate brown eyes. "I love you."

His face lit up. "I know you do."

Patrick cleared his throat off to the side. "That's quite charming, I'm sure. But do you think we might be able to go home? I've had a hell of a day."

Micah cocked an eyebrow and let her slip down his body. "Well?"

"By all means. Let's go home."

Epilogue

Three months later, Kate stood alone at the back of the room. The resurrection of The Kirk had gone well. With people packed wall to wall for their grand reopening, there was hardly enough room between bodies to slip a piece of newssheet through, even after taking into account the newly doubled room.

Strong arms wrapped around her waist. Micah rested his chin on her shoulder and she leaned back against him. "It's going fabulously," she said.

"I knew it would. The Kirk's infamous. Johnny Vittorelli died upstairs."

She made a moue of disgust. "People are morbid."

"True enough. Business may slack off a bit once a new craze comes along."

"Maybe not. We've got Susie after all."

Susie had spent the last month before The Kirk's reopening singing at various clubs, being feted. She'd become a sensation. People flocked from all over the city to see her. She was even in talks to cut a record. Right now she crooned out a mournful song, her eyes nearly closed as she swayed on stage. They'd had to increase the grandeur, fitting of her new status. Deep blue velvet drapes framed her white dress. She looked like a lost angel.

"Where's Annie?"

"Upstairs in bed. You know, I think we've shocked her Puritan sensibilities, living together."

"I didn't have a choice, after I quit the Agency," Micah said.

"I had to put a roof over your head, didn't I?"

"It's a good thing you're marrying me in a month."

The wedding was all planned, an intimate ceremony in St. John the Baptist, the church she'd attended as a child with her mother.

Micah gently turned her jaw so that Jake was in her line of sight. He scowled at Susie, his hands clenched hard on the back of a chair. "What do you think is going on there?"

"Hmm. Not sure," she answered. "Susie hasn't said anything to me. Though I can't believe I have a Prohibition Agent in the house on opening night."

"He looks like he's about to bore a hole in her if he keeps staring at her like that."

"I bet he'd like to bore a hole in her," she said.

Micah chuckled in her ear. It sent a lusty shiver through her. "That's one of the things I love about you. Your dirty mind."

“Speaking of my dirty mind...” She whispered in his ear just what she’d do to him once they were alone, involving his body, her mouth and a whole lot of time and attention. His erection prodded her backside, hard and insistent.

“Great. Just great. Now I can’t move from here.”

“I guess you’ll just have to hold me a while longer.”

“I guess I will. How’s forever sound?”

“Perfect.”

About the Author

After semi-nomadic lifestyle throughout California, Lorelie Brown spent the last few years of high school in Orange County before joining the US Army. While in the service, Lorelie met and fell in love with her husband. Once she became a mother, she left soldiering behind and now works for the government as a civilian.

Continuing her nomadic lifestyle, Lorelie now resides in Tucson, Arizona—until it's time again to load up the family for the next adventure. She and her husband have three active sons who are definitely momma's boys. To add to the insanity, the family dog is even male. Writing romance helps her escape a house full of testosterone.

You can contact Lorelie either at her website, www.LorelieBrown.com, or on Twitter, [@LorelieBrown](https://twitter.com/LorelieBrown).

Saving her people could mean losing her man.

Freya's Gift

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In the months since an unexplained sickness wiped out most of their women, Sif and Ragnor have managed to hold their people together. Yet nothing can overcome the tribe's overwhelming grief, and their future as leaders—and as a couple—is at a dangerous crossroads.

A series of sensual omens convinces Sif that a fertility ritual to honor the goddess, Freya, is the only path to healing, but it requires a sacrifice. One Sif is more than willing to make—but puts Ragnor's heart in the middle of an emotional tug of war. He would give his life for his people, but share Sif's body with his greatest rival? The goddess asks too much.

Refuse, and Ragnor will fail his duty and doom the tribe to violent destruction from within. Accept, and their trust could be rewarded with renewal for their people and themselves. Or shatter a love already stretched to the breaking point.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Freya's Gift:

Gunnhilda turned to face them. No longer did she seem a feeble old woman. Instead, backlit by the blaze, dressed in her finest clothing, it seemed some of the goddess inhabited her.

"Kneel," she said to them.

They all knelt. Sif closed her eyes, to shut out the brightness. It burned.

"Clasp hands," Gunnhilda said.

Ragnor grabbed Sif's right hand with a reassuring squeeze. Gerhard slipped his hand around her left, with a grip not too tight but not too loose, either. His hand was smaller than Ragnor's but callused in the same places. It also gave off more heat than she'd expected. He seemed absolutely calm. As a child, Gerhard had had a habit of going still like this before an explosion. Would it be the same tonight?

Sif took a deep breath, inhaling smoke both from the fire and the torch Gunnhilda still held. It smelled different. Gunnhilda had put something else in with the tar on the torch. Sif took a deeper breath, inhaling more, and her throat burned.

Gunnhilda laid her hand on each of their heads, calling on the gods to bless this night with life, with fertility. She started with Gerhard, calling on Thor. Next, Ragnor, and calling on Odin. When Gunnhilda put her hand on Sif's head, it felt like the weight of the world. Sif's neck bowed of its own accord.

"Repeat after me," Gunnhilda said.

Sif gathered saliva, hoping her voice would work. Her head felt so heavy, so strange. Gerhard rubbed his thumb along her wrist, sending tremors down to her toes. If he'd meant to be reassuring, he wasn't.

Gunnhilda repeated the same blessing she'd used for the men, only calling on Freya this time. Sif repeated it, her voice steady, at least for now. Gunnhilda motioned for the three of them to stand. Sif allowed the men to stand first, content to use the support of their hands to keep her own balance. Her head spun. The night seemed nothing but fire. She closed her eyes against the brightness. When she opened them again, three women had appeared beside Gunnhilda. For a moment, she thought they were illusions, until she recognized Bera as one of them. All three held cups full of water. Gunnhilda took the first cup and handed it to Gerhard, urging him to drink it all. He took it all in one long swallow. Ragnor did the same when it was offered.

When Gunnhilda presented the third cup to her, Sif didn't know which hand to drop to seize it.

"I will help you," Gunnhilda said.

Sif nodded. Gunnhilda held the cup to her lips and tipped it. Sif swallowed, the bubbling spring-water taste mixed with something a little grittier, something she'd not tasted before. Fear gripped her, tightening her stomach. What had Gunnhilda done? She squeezed the hands holding her tighter. Gerhard entwined their fingers, allowing her to squeeze harder. Ragnor seemed not to notice the extra pressure.

The world spun a bit more but the brightness vanished. Sif focused on Gunnhilda as she finished. The old woman bent to her ear.

"You will be Freya's vessel tonight, Sif," she said. "This will help you get closer to her. No fear."

"Thank you," Sif whispered.

Gunnhilda nodded. The three women melted back to the crowd. Gunnhilda raised the torch to speak to the tribe but Sif couldn't hear the words. Sounds from the crackling fire roared in her ears. The sky seemed bright with all sorts of light, shooting off in all directions. Her skin felt covered with living smoke, prickly, intense, hot, throbbing.

Freya, help me.

Gerhard dropped her hand, only to put his arm around her waist, steadying her but also bringing her closer to him. His arm enclosed her back, sending that strange second skin enclosing her humming. She licked her lips, her whole body awakening to the touch. Ragnor followed Gerhard's example and she was enclosed by both of them. She bit back a moan, almost turning to watery clay in their hands.

Her breathing grew faster, her face hotter, the lights in the sky more intense. No longer could she tell which hand was Ragnor's and which hand was Gerhard's. They seemed as one, all the same person, her body ready to reach out and absorb both of them.

The arms around her tightened.

"Sif," Ragnor whispered. "Are you well?"

"More than well."

He kissed her cheek, the soft brush of his lips setting her face as aflame as the bonfire in front of them. Vaguely, she realized that both men had moved behind her, their shoulders touching, to better

support her. Ah, now, if they would just touch her... If she could strip off her clothes, fall to the ground with their bodies entwined with hers...

“To the spring.”

Gunnhilda’s voice again. Sif shook her head, wondering what exactly had been in that cup. And had she given the men the same? If so, why did they seem able to stand on their own?

The walk seemed less of a walk than floating above the ground. Colors kept flashing in front of Sif’s eyes. The noises of birds flapping overheard and animals rustling in the brush felt amplified and strange. Her feet seemed to not feel the soil and grass under them. The hands that connected her to both men seemed to burn, almost scald.

They took the new path created to the spring and reached it in what seemed like no time at all. They stood, bathed in moonlight so bright that Sif squinted against the glare. It even reflected off the water, which seemed to double the glow. Imagination? Or some blessing from Freya?

Gunnhilda bowed to them, said one last blessing and retreated with the torch, leaving them alone before the goddess.

A night breeze, moist and crisp, blew through Sif’s loose hair. The breathing of the men beside her seemed loud enough to drown out all other sounds. Someone should move, do something, and it should be her but she didn’t know what should be done or how to break out of this trance.

“Goddess,” breathed Ragnor, and she couldn’t tell if it was a prayer or a curse word.

Her knees buckled and took her to the ground. The moonlight seemed to be pouring blessings into the spring. She reached a hand forward, cupped the water into her palm and drank. Liquid magic, bubbly, poured down her throat and into her.

The men followed her example and drank too. Gerhard threw back his head and screamed, equal parts anguish and challenge. In the forest, something screamed in return. Gerhard seized her shoulders and scrambled to his feet, pulling her with him.

He crushed her against him.

Scandal, murder and passion—an ordinary day for Richard and Rose.

Eyton

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Richard and Rose, Book 5

When Richard and Rose visit his family estate in Derbyshire to celebrate the christening of their firstborn, Rose comes face to face with some hard realities about the powerful Kerre family. The vast majority of them are far from delighted with Richard's choice of wife. Plus, they think a man who shares his bed with his wife every night must have something wrong with him.

Rose is driven half mad by Richard's overly careful love for her. Somewhere underneath that smooth, sophisticated surface lies the passionate, intense lover she longs for—and she takes steps to seduce that savage lover back into her bed.

Their joyous occasion is marred by the theft of a valuable necklace. Richard's family looks to him to solve the crime—but something isn't adding up. Evidence pointing to two trusted servants seems too convenient...and then they're murdered.

From the tangle of jealousies, secrets and desperate lies, Richard and Rose once again dance on the edge of danger to achieve justice—without dragging the family name into public scandal.

Warning: Sharp-shootin' Rose goes gunning for her man in this one. So steamy sex ahoy!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Eyton:

"I suppose I was naïve." He laughed. "You can read about it, and men do exchange knowledge about such things. Some even boast of their conquests."

"Did you?"

"I didn't need to. I merely made no secret of it." He smiled and touched my face with one finger, his breath catching in his throat when I firmed my grasp on him. "But that was before you. I took great care of you. I touched you, felt where I should go, what I should do, and I knew I must be gentle. Even then I hurt you."

I smiled back at him. "Not much. And what you've brought to me since makes up for it a hundredfold."

"Thank God the woman I fell in love with loves this as much as I do. Or do you? Is this all an act, to please me?"

He was teasing me, but I replied, "Do you think I'm that good an actress?" I let him go and swung myself on top of him, propping myself up on my elbows. I pushed my now-tangled hair back behind my ears. "I never expected this, but when we first met—no, the day after, when you were helpless and hurt—I

saw the man beneath all the affectations, the finery. I wanted you although I didn't know it was desire. My body seemed to recognise you first."

He smiled and shifted a little under me, sliding his now-hardened member between my thighs, touching my cleft but not going any further. "And there you were in that hopelessly outmoded but obviously new riding habit, standing next to your sister who was so lovely she could make the sun come out at night, and I knew I wanted you, knew I had found you at last. I was horrified."

That made me laugh. "Did you fight it?"

"Not for long. You wouldn't let me. If you hadn't been so openly responsive, the moment might have passed and I might now be married to Julia Cartwright."

Even the name made me shudder. "Don't let's talk about her now."

"No." He looked at me, his gaze sweeping over what I was revealing for him, his smile telling me he was enjoying the sight. "I don't want to bring either my error in judgment or her noxious husband into our bed anymore. Let them do as they please, so long as they leave us alone."

I could do nothing but concur with that. I bent my head to kiss him, feeling his hand still on my breast crushed between us. I sat up, and his hand followed me. His other hand held my waist, and he lifted his knees, giving me something to lean on. I sat up and looked at him, decided to tease. "I was told tonight about some of your exploits."

His look never left mine. "Which ones?"

"When you seduced two rivals in a week and spurned them both at a ball."

He smiled reminiscently. I had not expected that, especially in this situation. "They deserved it. They had started their own book on which one could get me first, so I obliged. After I put a substantial wager on the winner. But she was only a winner by an hour or two."

"Don't you miss it?" I looked down at his face. I found it difficult to connect those stories with this person I knew so well.

"No," he answered immediately. "It was pleasure engendered from a mixture of boredom and desperation. I didn't care. You made me care."

"I didn't mean to."

"I know. But there's nothing to miss. I have so much here I can't imagine ever wanting anything else. You shouldn't listen to them."

"I want to know what you were like before."

He shook his head, serious now. "No, no you don't. I spent twelve angry years trying to destroy myself. I'm not angry anymore, I have all I want, and it fell into my life before I went looking for it."

I smiled and watched him. He lowered his eyes to look at my body and back up to my face again, taking his time, his loving gaze lingering on me. I delighted in the pleasure he took in me. "It's like they're talking about a stranger. I don't know that man."

“If you had known him, you’d never have taken me seriously. You’d have watched, as others watched, without coming close.”

“I’d have run away. I didn’t like hurt or distress and you went looking for it.”

He frowned. “I wouldn’t have let you. I love you too much to let you go.” His face cleared as he looked up at me. He reached his hands up to hold my breasts. I moved into his hands and lifted, so he found his way back home. I sighed in contentment as I felt him fill me. Our immediate needs, the desperation was gone now. This was loving. “And now?”

“Now,” he replied, “I don’t care what anyone else does. I have you, and I mean to keep you. Whatever it takes, I’ll take care of you and love you. Remember what I told you. This is love, this is making love, and whatever anyone else says can make no difference to this.”

He began to move slowly, sensuously, and I responded, my movements an echo of his. I kept my eyes on his face and watched him until his hands slipped down to my waist and I leaned back against his knees, putting my hands behind his legs to pull myself onto him.

This always engendered some of the most intense feelings in me, and I cried out, hearing his murmur of “Yes, that’s it, oh, my love, yes,” from below me.



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