

Suddenly a Spy

by: Heather Huffman

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* * * * *

*To Christine Tatum Brake: Your strength and beauty amaze me. Your kindness humbles me.
You bless all you meet, and I am forever grateful to call you friend.*

*Words seem so feeble, yet they're all I have to give, so these words are yours. Thank you for
who you are, and may God's blessings shine down on you and your family.*

* * * * *

Suddenly a Spy

by

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Chapter One

If life had taught Veronica Talbot one thing, it was that the perfect moments are the ones to be the most wary of. So when all was exactly as Veronica wanted it, from her Vera Wang wedding dress to the sprays of gerbera daisies that would adorn the tables at the reception, she should have known trouble loomed on her horizon. With one hand resting lightly on her father's arm and her eyes fixed on the man at the other end of the aisle, she remained oblivious of what was to come.

Her hands were in his now. They were smiling at each other. She tried to read his

gray-green eyes. Was there something else there besides devotion? Just a shadow maybe... he winked at her playfully and she flushed. The vows were a blur. Suddenly they were being introduced to the crowd. She was Mrs. Richard Sinclair.

Together, the newlyweds greeted the droves of friends and family that had shown up to wish them well. It was all such a blur—the endless stream of well-wishers, the photographs, the bridesmaids forever fussing over her blond curls and the lay of her gown.

“Come on,” her perfect groom stood and held his hand out to her. “Dance with me, Mrs. Sinclair.”

“Aren’t they supposed to tell us when to dance?” Veronica hesitated.

“I don’t know who ‘they’ are, but it is our wedding,” Rick countered, still waiting for her to take his hand.

“You have a point,” she conceded, sliding her hand in his.

He motioned to the orchestra conductor, who gave a barely perceptible nod.

Veronica was only vaguely aware of the first dance being announced or the eyes on her. Rick was pulling her into his embrace. They twirled around the dance floor in a waltz.

“I know that look,” he dipped his head to whisper against her cheek.

Veronica merely raised an eyebrow in response.

“Don’t make this reception feel any longer than it does already, Ronnie,” his words didn’t stop him from pulling her even closer or from grazing her lips with a feathery kiss.

Being in Rick’s arms always left her stomach feeling like warm butter. Veronica was glad there was a short break before she was expected to dance with her father. She would have liked the distraction of her brother’s gentle teasing to take her mind off Rick and the way his breath tantalized her skin when he was so near, but Jeff was nowhere to be found.

If Veronica had to guess, he was surrounded by bridesmaids somewhere. Who could blame them? Her brother was good looking, charming, and an FBI agent. He was the kind of man who made women daydream about being the one to tame him.

Jeff’s antics with women might be eye-roll inducing to someone like Veronica, but she adored him anyway. Since childhood, he’d been her tormenter and her protector. She

didn't think that would ever change.

Of course, vying for the role of Veronica's protector was her father. When Jeff had joined the FBI, he was merely following in their father's footsteps. As a little girl, Veronica had been ridiculously proud of her Daddy and his decorated career. As a teen, she bemoaned being the daughter of a man so well known for his expertise with a gun.

Maybe that's why she'd fallen so hard for Rick. He treated her like a grown woman fully capable of taking care of herself.

"Are you sure he's good enough for you, Ronnie?" Sean Talbot asked the moment the father/daughter dance began. "You can always get this annulled."

"Daddy," Veronica rolled her eyes. "Stop it. You know I'm crazy about him."

Sean tried not to frown too deeply but couldn't keep the worry from his bright blue eyes. "I don't think he's good enough for you."

"Is anyone?" she teased.

"Not really," his face softened as he looked at his little girl. "I'm so proud of you, Ronnie. Just remember, if it doesn't work out with this joker and you need a change of scenery, I can always get you transferred to one of the field offices."

"Daddy, stop talking about my marriage breaking up. At least wait until after the wedding. And I'm a writer, not a field agent."

"I just want you to know the offer is out there."

"Duly noted," Veronica sighed. "Now stop harassing me and go dance with Mom."

Veronica looked for her brother again, but he was surrounded by a group of women. No surprise there. She gave up hope of seeing Jeff anytime soon, and Rick was quick to reclaim his bride for another dance.

Veronica loosened up a little in his arms. The night was nearing an end; she and Rick could begin their happily ever after soon. It would all start to seem more real once this night was over.

They performed the rituals of the wedding ceremony. The cake was cut—they both adhered to the previously agreed-upon pact to not smash it into the other's face. Although Rick cheated and dabbed just a little frosting on her nose.

The single women gathered to catch the bouquet, which Veronica gave a good toss, hoping it would sail right over the heads of the overly-eager ones at the front of the pack.

She tried to tell who caught it from everyone's reaction.

Confusion covered her pretty face when she turned to find someone she didn't know holding her bridal bouquet. The crowd had parted for her and the entire room openly stared at the woman with the brightly colored daisies in her grasp. How could they not? She was stunning, in a hardened kind of way.

The brunette moved towards the young couple, her movements reminiscent of a cougar stalking its prey. Veronica cast an anxious glance at Rick, wondering if he shared her confusion. The instant her eyes met his, she knew.

He knew this woman. He knew this woman and something about her presence here was unnerving him. It didn't take Veronica too many guesses to figure out what that might be. Anger bubbled through her.

"Richard," the woman practically purred. "I like the new last name. It suits you."

"Adrianna," he nodded curtly but said no more.

"As much as I'd love to meet your friend, we should probably toss the garter," Veronica gave Rick a look that spoke volumes. "Because everyone is going to keep staring at us until we do."

"Right. You're right," he turned back to Adrianna. "Whatever you need will have to wait a few minutes."

Somehow they both managed to plaster smiles on their faces as they went through the expected motions. No one was the wiser that Veronica was very vividly imagining kicking her groom in the face with her four-inch heels. He played to the crowd, hamming up the entire thing. If there was something on his mind other than his wedding night, he kept it well hidden. Attention finally turned from them, and when it did, Adrianna materialized.

"Richard, my darling man, you shouldn't have disappeared like that," there was sultry reproach in her voice.

"I'll handle this," Rick tried to dismiss Veronica.

"Like hell you will," she stubbornly refused to listen. "I'd like to hear what's going on."

"Didn't you tell her about your past life?" Adrianna's deep brown eyes widened with feigned shock. "You really shouldn't keep secrets like that."

“What do you want?” The growl in Rick’s voice startled Veronica.

“Marko isn’t happy with you.”

“No surprise there.”

“He isn’t happy, and he wants to have a word with you.”

“Someone should explain the rules to him. He doesn’t get to make demands.”

“Oh, didn’t you hear? He’s out.”

“Of course,” Rick’s expression seemed to falter briefly. “I hadn’t heard, but I did expect it sooner or later.”

“It doesn’t have to be messy,” Adrianna leaned into Veronica’s groom. “We had fun together. Come back. I’ll make sure Marko accepts you back into the fold.”

“Adrianna...,” Rick leaned away even as her hand came to rest on his chest.

Veronica narrowed her eyes and took a step towards the intruder. “I’m not above a cat-fight on my wedding day. You might want to step away from my husband.”

“Back off, little girl,” venom dripped from Adrianna’s voice. “You’re in over your head here.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“Veronica, your father is watching,” Rick warned her under his breath.

“I’m not sure I care right now,” she stepped back despite her words. “I want this... thing... out of here.”

“Do you usually let her order you around?” Adrianna’s laugh was harsh. “You’ve certainly changed. And in such a short time, too.”

“Just go,” he closed his eyes, willing the unwanted guest gone.

“Fine, but consider yourself fairly warned. And my offer won’t stand for long.”

“And you consider yourself fairly warned,” Veronica leveled her gaze on Adrianna. “You stepped into the wrong woman’s life. I will make your existence a living hell from this moment forward.”

“Careful, princess. You just might bite off more than you can chew.”

“I think I’ll manage,” Veronica retorted coolly.

“Adrianna—go,” Rick reiterated.

“Consider me gone,” she held her hands up in surrender, giving Rick one last meaningful look. “Think about my offer.”

“Not likely,” Rick promised.

Veronica watched her new nemesis leave, wanting to punch the cow squarely in her pouty mouth. Everything about the woman reminded Ronnie of a black widow. Even her walk was seductive. Adrianna, was it? Tomorrow she’d see what else she could find out about the woman who’d openly propositioned her husband on their wedding day. In the meantime, the husband in question had some serious explaining to do.

“Ronnie...?”

Veronica turned to look at Rick without a word, one neat eyebrow arched high and her face carved in stone.

“Right,” his shoulders dropped in dejection. “Right.”

“Is everything okay over here?” Sean’s eyes traveled from his daughter to his son-in-law.

“Just fine Daddy,” Veronica smiled a little too brightly. The last thing she needed was for her father to call in a few favors to have her groom declared an enemy of the state. “But I think Rick and I are ready to go. I’ll give you a call tomorrow.”

“Do,” Sean’s frown deepened.

“Sir,” Rick nodded slightly. Sean gave him a pointed look that was somewhat reminiscent of the one Veronica had given him.

Rick caught up easily with his wife and the two made the rounds, telling loved ones goodnight before making a break for the limo under the hail of bubbles.

Chapter Two

Veronica Sinclair stared at her reflection in the window as the black night slipped by. Wide blue eyes stared mournfully back at her, their earlier sparkle gone. Rick stayed in his corner, respecting her need for space and silence. A thousand thoughts at one raced through her head, resulting in nothing coherent. Truth was—she didn’t know what to think.

He didn’t have control over the actions of an old girlfriend. But something about the

woman set off warning bells in Veronica's head. She had a nagging suspicion this woman was just the tip of the iceberg when it came to things Rick had neglected to mention. That was a road Veronica wasn't ready to travel again.

Almost mechanically, she followed him up to their room. Something about the honeymoon suite had lost its appeal. She walked straight to the champagne chilling on a table set for two. Wasting no time on ceremony, she popped it open and poured herself a glass, tossing it back so quickly a little hiccup escaped. Rick eyed her warily as she poured herself another glass and turned to face him.

"Choose your next words very carefully," she warned.

"Baby..." he paused briefly, obviously running his options through his mind. "I haven't seen her in a long time. I have no idea why she chose today of all days to show up."

"Who was she?"

"I can't tell you," his eyes came to rest on hers. He seemed to be asking her for something, but it was something Veronica wasn't sure she could give.

"No."

"No?"

"No. That answer doesn't work for me. Try again."

"But I can't."

"Can't, or won't?"

"I can't," he reiterated. "I know how you feel about honesty, and I promise I've never lied, but there are pieces of my past I just can't share with you."

"No!" Rage swirled through her like a gale force wind. "You do not get to tell me on our wedding day that you haven't given me the whole truth. I think I could take just about anything but that."

"Ronnie, I'm not Seth," he took a step towards her, stopping short when she looked ready to back away—or throw something at him.

"I thought I could believe that," she blinked back the tears that threatened. "Who was she?"

"I can't tell you," a deep sigh escaped his lips. "I'm so sorry."

"Was she a lover?"

“Yes.”

“Oh,” Veronica licked her lips. Honesty was good. She supposed. “Did you love her?”

“No,” there was something close to derision in his voice.

“Who’s Marko?”

“Can’t tell you.”

“Are you in danger?”

“Most likely,” he admitted.

“Am I?”

“Not if I can help it,” he promised.

“And you’re not about to tell me what’s going on?” she tried one more time.

“Nope,” he gave her a crooked grin. She polished off her second glass of champagne and poured another.

“What am I going to do with you?” She shook her head.

“I have a few ideas.”

“Not likely.”

“Do I get some of the champagne?”

“No.”

“You’re a cold, hard woman—you know that?”

“You lied to me,” she reminded him.

“Only by omission and only because I had to,” he countered, edging a little closer to her.

“But it’s still a lie. You know how I feel about that... how many years I lost to him... stupid, pathological liar.”

“I’m not Seth,” he moved another step closer.

“I don’t think I could survive it if you were,” Veronica’s breath deepened and she closed her eyes for a moment. “He very nearly broke me.”

“But he didn’t break you, and I’m not him,” Rick moved in quickly then, catching her in his arms before she could dart away. “And I’m so sorry she spoiled your day, and I love you.”

“You’d better,” her eyes flashed as his mouth took hers hungrily. Veronica was a

little surprised by her body's instant reaction to him. Maybe it was the champagne, but Lord help her, she wanted to sink her fingers greedily into his hair as her body melted against his. She wanted to lose herself in this kiss before he scooped her into his arms and laid her on their bed, his lips tracing fiery trails across her body. She could do what she had to in the morning. It would probably mean the end of their tender young marriage, but at least they'd have tonight.

Warning bells went off in her head, breaking through the haze of alcohol and lust. She was dangerously close to seeing her plans to make him sleep on the couch skitter right out of her mind.

Maybe he wasn't the man who'd once hurt her, but he had kept something from her – something big – and refused to let her in even now. Veronica had been the trusting wife once and had ended up a laughingstock for her trouble.

That thought shattered the last vestiges of longing. He wasn't going to win this easily. She would not be steered by libido. She pulled back with a seductive smile, her finger skimming his jaw line.

"Oh I do love you darlin'," his voice took on a guttural quality she'd never heard before.

"Do ya' now?" she mimicked his accent, bringing her heel down on his foot with all the force she could muster.

He yowled, letting loose a string of curses that were new to her.

"What's with the accent?" she demanded. "You don't have an accent."

"That was not nice of you at all," he sat on the edge of the bed, taking his shoe off to rub his bruised toes. His voice was once again as nondescript as any Midwesterner.

"Lying to me wasn't nice," she countered.

"You don't know the whole story."

"Fine. Then tell me the whole story. I'm listening."

"I can't."

She took a shoe off and hurled it at him, her aim dead-on.

"Would ya' stop that?"

"Ha! There it is again. You have an accent. Who are you?"

"I'm your husband... how many glasses of that champagne did you drink?"

“I’m not amused,” she took her other shoe off and took aim again.

“Alright now,” he held his hands up in surrender. “Those bloody heels are lethal. Look...do you remember the day we first met?”

“Yes,” she lowered the weapon slightly. “What about it?”

“The cherry trees were in bloom and the sun was shining. You were sitting in the park, reading *The Scarlett Letter*. You wore blue jeans and a black sweater and your hair was piled on top of your head. Sissy was watching the ducks.”

“I remember,” she softened a bit. “...the first thing you said to me. You quoted a line from the book. Not many people quote Hawthorne. It was my favorite line, too.”

“Yes, well, something about you sitting there seemed very true. I knew it in my gut—I walked away from everything I was then... just for the chance to know you. You have got to believe that no matter what else I am, I love you.”

“I don’t know what I believe anymore,” she felt the fight drain out of her.

“Have a drink with me?” he walked over to the bar, pouring himself two fingers of whiskey.

“Sure,” she sighed, sinking into the nearest chair. Her wedding dress puffed up around her, giving her the appearance of swimming in a cloud.

“Would you like help getting out of that thing?”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Okay, yeah, I would. But I was trying to be nice. I’ll behave—promise.”

Ronnie opened her mouth to retort that she was fine, but the truth was she really wanted out of the dress.

She stood, accepting the drink he handed her before offering her back to him. He carefully unbuttoned the row of delicate clasps down the back of her dress.

“I have to admit I’d kind of envisioned doing this with my teeth.”

She responded by regally arching an eyebrow and walking off.

When she returned, her pale pink silk nightgown shimmered against alabaster skin. Her makeup was gone and her hair had been swept into a clip. She reclaimed her drink and her chair.

“Will you at least tell me where the accent came from?” she cocked her head to study the man she thought she knew so well.

“It’s Scottish.”

“You’re Scottish?”

“My mother was. My father was an American photojournalist. I split my time between the two of them growing up.”

“Why do you hide the accent?”

“You like it?” he gave her a devilish grin.

She rolled her eyes, not willing to admit to him that it made her want to do dirty things to him.

“I’ve found I blend in better without the accent.”

“It slips when you’re angry,” she noted. “Or otherwise worked up.”

“Aye, that it does,” his eyes spoke volumes as they raked across her.

She slammed the rest of her drink and held her glass out to him for more. “So tell me about your parents. I was under the impression they had both passed away years ago.”

“They did,” he nodded. “I told you—I haven’t lied. Only omitted certain facts.”

“I’m sorry, about your parents, I mean,” she wanted to reach out to him. Instead she took another drink.

“S’okay,” he shrugged.

“Are you really an analyst? You said you haven’t lied. Bad guys don’t usually hunt down desk jockeys.”

“I am an analyst... now.”

He left the room, his words hanging in the air for Veronica to take in. Had he really walked away from his entire life just to date her? She could almost picture him in the other room, getting out of his tux. She closed her eyes, allowing her mind to take a merry little romp with that one.

When her eyelashes fluttered open again, the first rays of dawn were playing across Rick’s golden skin. Veronica took a deep breath, savoring the clean, crisp scent she always associated with him. Her head was pounding; her mouth cotton-filled. She didn’t remember actually going to bed; she hoped she hadn’t done anything too stupid.

Either way, there was nothing she could do about it now. She didn’t have much time before he was awake and her chance would be over, so she quietly slipped out of the bed.

He slept like a rock as Veronica rifled through her suitcase for a pair of jeans and a

t-shirt. She shimmied into her clothes and ran a brush through her hair before grabbing her purse and darting out of the room. Her heart began to race once the door closed behind her. She'd have to move quickly before he discovered her absence.

The second she stepped onto the street, she pulled out her phone.

"Why on earth are you calling me at dawn, today of all days?" the tired voice was highly irritated with her.

"Come on Jeff, stop complaining and roll the bimbo out the door. I need you to meet me at my place."

"Not a chance."

"I'll buy you a coffee."

"Nope."

"And a bagel," Veronica quickly added.

"What's so important it has to be now?" Jeff seemed a little more alert and Veronica knew she'd won.

"I'll tell you when you get there. But hurry, I don't have long."

"Are you okay?" His big brother instincts kicked in, and he was fully awake in an instant.

"I think so; just hurry," Veronica hung the phone up and ducked into the coffee shop on the corner for the promised breakfast.

"I don't know... should I get the whip cream or not?" the woman at the counter asked the man standing next to her.

"I don't care... sure, get the whipped cream," he shrugged.

"I really shouldn't, though. It's so bad for me," she fretted and Veronica bit her lip in frustration.

"Then don't get the whipped cream."

"You think I don't need the whipped cream."

"I think I want my bagel."

"It's always about you, isn't it?"

"Ma'am?" the kid behind the counter began hesitantly, hoping to steer the conversation back to whipped cream.

"She'll take a skosh of whipped cream and don't even think about asking if she

wants cream cheese,” Veronica answered for the woman.

“Excuse me?” she turned on Veronica in a huff.

“Yes?” Veronica leveled a look on the woman that silenced her immediately. The man glanced apologetically at Veronica, earning him a glare from his companion.

“That’ll be \$10.50,” the clerk took Veronica’s advice and didn’t ask about the cream cheese.

“Did you get my coupon?” the woman frowned and peered over at the cash register.

“Yes ma’am,” the long-suffering youth cast a nervous glance at Veronica.

“Are you sure? That seems awfully high.”

“Oh for the love of Pete,” Veronica threw her hands up. “I’ll buy your damn bagels. Just go away. Here, I have fifty bucks for you, kid, if you can get me a small nonfat mocha—no whipped cream—a small coffee, and a cinnamon bagel. Keep the change.”

“How rude,” the woman scowled openly at Veronica.

“Just go away already,” Veronica rolled her eyes. “You got a free coffee out of the deal. Please?”

Veronica had no idea how long she had before Rick woke up and found her missing. Would he know what she was up to, or would he wait around for her to come back? She couldn’t be sure, and that uncertainty spurred her onto heights of impatience she normally wouldn’t have scaled.

“Thanks,” she grabbed her order from the counter and sailed out the door. Hailing a cab with two cups of coffee and a bagel wasn’t easy, but Veronica managed. It wasn’t far to the condo she and Rick closed on only last week. Boxes still lined the walls of the living room.

To her surprise, she wasn’t greeted by their boisterous dogs. She wondered idly if the dog walker had been a little late to arrive. That wouldn’t work at all. She didn’t want anyone walking in and overhearing her conversation with Jeff. Besides, Ronnie liked Courtney—she didn’t want to lose a dog walker and friend in one fell swoop because of Jeff. She’d been systematically keeping those two apart for exactly that reason.

As she moved through the stark rooms, she was drawn by the sound of laughter on her back patio. Frustration bubbled up; she’d know that laugh anywhere.

Chapter Three

“There you are,” Jeff smiled cheerily as he stood to give her a hug. She was vaguely aware of the dogs giving her the greeting she’d missed at the front door. Mostly, her attention was on the smirk her husband wasn’t trying very hard to hide.

He’d obviously showered—a fact Veronica was keenly jealous of—and had taken the time to brew a pot of coffee once arriving home. She knew the whipped cream lady had been slow, but not that slow.

Realization dawned on Veronica and her jaw dropped a little. He’d been awake. All of her stealth had been wasted. The dirty rat had been awake the whole time. His grin deepened, confirming her suspicion.

“Hey Jeff,” Veronica stood on tiptoe to give him a peck on the cheek. “Sorry to drag you out of bed so early on a Sunday morning.”

“No worries,” he tapped her nose lightly with his finger. “What can I do for you, baby sister?”

“Yes, what can Jeff do for you?” Rick mocked seriousness.

“I had hoped to talk to him alone,” Veronica retorted bluntly.

“It’s not good, starting the marriage off with secrets,” Jeff shook his head.

“I completely agree—although remind me to ask later how you’d know,” Veronica’s tongue lashed out at Jeff, but her glare was for Rick alone.

“Ouch. Janet was being much nicer to me. I should have stayed home.”

“Janet? Really?” Veronica was momentarily distracted.

“What’s wrong with Janet?”

“She’s just so... needy.”

“I wasn’t planning on a long-term commitment, sis,” Jeff rolled his eyes as if to say she was a simpleton.

“Yeah... good luck with that,” Veronica grinned a little. “I’m not sure who I feel sorrier for—you, or her.”

“Very funny,” he made a face at her, to which she stuck her tongue out.

“You’re making us late for our honeymoon for this?” Rick kicked back in his chair and studied Veronica. He was so sure she wouldn’t say anything in front of him, anger rippled through her veins.

“You’re right,” she decided she could start Jeff with something simple and hoped it led her to the answers she was really looking for. “Jeff, could you please pull the security footage from the wedding to see if you can find an ID on the uninvited guest.”

“Why don’t you try asking him?” Jeff motioned towards Rick.

“I did. He won’t tell me. So I’m asking you.”

“Why won’t you tell her?” Jeff frowned at his brother-in-law.

“It’s complicated,” Rick met Jeff’s eyes.

“And I don’t suppose you’re going to let this go,” Jeff looked hopefully at Veronica.

“Either you help me, or I call Daddy,” Veronica folded her arms across her chest in a gesture of defiance.

“You really don’t want her doing that,” Jeff tried to caution Rick. “Our father is completely unreasonable when it comes to her.”

“Some things are buried too deep for even a G-man to dig them up.”

“That sounds like a challenge to me,” Veronica knew which buttons to push to operate her brother.

“It wasn’t a challenge,” Rick held his hands up in a gesture of peace, instantly realizing her game.

“Naw, I think I heard the challenge in that,” Jeff sized Rick up as he asked Veronica “What do you know about her?”

“Her name is Adrianna and she’s a whore.”

“Not sure that last part will help me locate her, but it’s certainly good motivation.”

“You have no self-respect, you know that Jeff?” Veronica sighed.

“But I am very charming and I’m helping you—so be nice.”

“I don’t suppose I can talk you into leaving this alone?” Rick tried once more.

“Nope.”

“Not a chance.”

“Figures,” he sighed, looking from his wife to her brother. The resemblance was uncanny and at the moment; they both had the same defiant expression on their faces.

“Are you even going to let me take you on our honeymoon?”

“I hadn’t thought about it really,” Veronica furrowed her brow. “I don’t know.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course you’re going on your honeymoon,” Jeff announced.

“I don’t think that’s your decision,” she set her jaw stubbornly; she wasn’t in the mood to be told what to do by anyone, even Jeff.

“Whatever. You’re being ridiculous. Go lay on a beach for a week. It’ll give me time to figure out who the mystery-whore is. If you decide to break off the marriage, you’ll have a great tan and one heck of a week to show for it.”

“I’m sitting right here,” Rick reminded them.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” Veronica asked.

“I told you, I can’t.”

“Then I reserve the right to declare this marriage tentative.”

“I told you guys getting married was a bad idea,” Jeff reminded them both.

Veronica smacked him in the back of the head.

“Stop abusing me and get ready for your flight. And get a shower… you look awful,” Jeff slathered cream cheese on his bagel.

“You are such a jerk,” Veronica rolled her eyes as she turned to go.

Both dogs were instantly at her heels, hoping for a treat when she passed through the kitchen. She didn’t disappoint them. They were an odd couple, the massive, steel-gray Great Dane Rick brought to the marriage and the pretty black-and-white Border Collie that came with Veronica. Though they seemed to be a strange pair, Brutus and Sissy were the best of friends and had been since their first meeting.

As hot water poured over her, Veronica pondered the situation she now found herself in. She wanted to trust Rick—with every fiber of her being she wanted to trust him. But trusting hadn’t exactly served her well in the past. Rick could say he wasn’t Seth all he wanted, the fact remained that he’d kept something hidden from her and refused to share with her even now. Actually, he seemed pretty intent on keeping her from finding the truth. She didn’t have a clue what her next step should be.

Maybe Jeff was right. She should go on her honeymoon as planned rather than arouse her father’s suspicions. She shuddered at the thought of her father finding out Rick had somehow hurt her. Five years after the fact, Seth was still afraid to get any closer to

D.C. than Chicago. Besides, getting Rick out of town would give Jeff the time and space he needed to dig into things a bit.

Veronica wrapped herself in a fluffy blue towel and padded into her room to get dressed. Brutus looked up from his rawhide bone to heave a weary sigh, and then went back to his snack. The same bone would take Sissy a week to finish.

"I bet you know what's really going on," Veronica bent to scratch his ears. He gave her a wary look and she made a face. "I'm not asking you to betray your master. Not unless you feel like it, that is."

"I don't think he's talking," there was a grin in Rick's voice.

"Do you ever make noise when you walk?" Veronica jumped.

"No, not really," the grin spread to his face. "And it usually works in my favor."

"Did Jeff go home?" she changed the subject.

"He's helping himself to the contents of our refrigerator."

"He should go grocery shopping for a change."

"What would he do with it once he bought it? The man doesn't have the first kitchen implement."

"True."

"So, are you going to let me take you on our honeymoon?" Rick pulled her into his arms.

"It would be a shame to waste the plane tickets," Veronica tried to look nonchalant. In reality, her stomach was fluttering because of his nearness.

"I love that you are so practical," he played along.

"Nothing if not practical," she stood on tiptoe to brush his lips with a kiss. With a low growl, Rick deepened it. Something Veronica had never felt before shot through her every nerve ending. It was white hot and all-consuming.

"Watchya doin' in there?" Jeff called from the other side of the door. The nearness of his voice made Veronica jump back.

"I'm going to hurt him," Rick promised in a low voice, his eyes devouring the site of his wife as she quickly retrieved her towel and scurried to get dressed.

"Hey, that's my sister in there."

"Yeah, well, Janet's somebody's sister, too," Veronica shot back.

“Way to ruin a good thing, sis.”

“Just stating a fact, brother.”

“Spoil sport.”

“Focus your time and energy on figuring out what Rick’s hiding.”

“That’s a horrible idea. I think you should exploit Janet while you still can,” Rick interjected.

“That’s awful,” Veronica punched his arm. “She’s a person.”

“Sorry. If it keeps him too busy to do your bidding, she’s fair game.”

“Do you hear that? Don’t succumb to his evil plan.”

“Would you get dressed already? I’m tired of talking through a door.”

“We’re almost finished,” Veronica ran a brush through her hair, waiting for him to catch her meaning.

“Aw, Ron... come on. That’s just gross.”

“I don’t know if gross is all that accurate,” Rick frowned.

“Don’t be a big baby,” Veronica swung the door open. “I was just teasing. And it’s not gross, Rick. Very not gross.”

“Aw, Ron...” Jeff grimaced. Veronica laughed.

“I was being optimistic and loaded our bags in the car,” Rick redirected the conversation.

“Okay. Let me call Daddy and say goodbye to the dogs.”

“Are you calling your father to assure him or sic him on me?” Rick asked.

“Assure him. For now.”

“So, who’s watching the pooches while you’re gone?” Jeff tried to make the comment sound off-hand.

“Don’t even think about it,” Veronica grew instantly stern.

“What?” he was the picture of innocence.

“She would eat you alive and spit you back out. No.”

“Come on...”

“Ronnie’s right. You are no match for Courtney.”

“Hey – I didn’t ask your opinion.”

“She’s my friend. Don’t do it.”

“Janet was your friend. Beth was your friend. Rachel was your friend.”

“That’s just it – was. You go through my friends like they’re Kleenexes. I am not your dating service. Keep your grubby paws off Courtney. She’s not a conquest.”

“You’re right; she’s the conquest. Mount Everest, in fact.”

“You’re a bad person,” Veronica scowled.

“And yet you love me anyway. What does that say about you?”

“Good luck with that, Jeff. My money’s on her,” Rick chuckled.

“We’ll see what kind of mood you’re in when I track down your girlfriend, Mr. Chuckles.”

“If I can’t talk you out of that, can I at least ask you to be careful?” Rick grew serious.

“You could save us all some trouble and just come clean,” Veronica suggested.

“It’s not that simple.”

“I’ll be careful,” Jeff’s mood suddenly matched Rick’s. Obviously, there was some male telepathy going on that Veronica wasn’t privy to.

Chapter Four

Lounging on the sugar-white beaches of Peter Island, staring at the bright blue Caribbean, it was hard to remember that a seed of doubt had been planted between them. Veronica wasn’t entirely sure how long they’d been there. The days of snorkeling, hiking and lying in the sun seemed to melt into each other. She assumed the resort would tell them if they missed their checkout. They’d agreed on day one to not even check their phones or log onto the Internet for the entire week. The world outside could revolve without them; this was their time.

Unless he’d somehow snuck a laptop into the bathroom, Veronica was fairly certain he’d lived up to his end of the bargain. As for herself, she was too content to care. In fact, if Jeff had uncovered something horrible, she didn’t want to know. Not yet anyway.

There was a part of her that wanted to torture Rick, to make his life a living hell. It

was the same part that wanted to hide from the world, lick its wounds, and denounce all men as low-life scum.

Then there was the other part that practically hummed when he hovered over her, tracing feathery kisses up her back while his body dripped cool sea water on her hot skin. That part imagined rolling him over, wrapping her legs around his waist and pulling him to her. Even if they were the only two humans on the quiet beach, there was something deliciously decadent about the thought of an open-air tryst.

She found herself walking a tightrope somewhere between the two.

“Knock it off, Dick,” she wriggled under him.

“You know I hate it when you call me that.”

“Why? It suits you.”

“Very funny. What, are we in junior high now?” he flopped down in the sand beside her.

“What do you want for dinner tonight?” she propped herself up on her elbows, looking down at him.

He sighed, as if to say he couldn’t keep up with her mood swings. She smiled, as if to say “good.”

His normally golden skin had deepened from so much time outside, making each contour of his muscles seem more clearly defined. Droplets of sea water gathered in interesting places and she bit her lower lip to keep from tasting him. She bet it would be a yummy mixture of salt and sunshine.

He read the look in her eyes and didn’t let the moment pass. Veronica found herself caught up in his arms discovering just what salt and sunshine actually tasted like. She loved this place. She loved this man. She loved what he was doing with his mouth at that particular moment.

As much as she wanted to spend the rest of the evening rolling in the sand with him, she wasn’t ready to yield. Until he trusted her with the truth, she was determined not to trust him with her body, her heart, or any other piece of her. There was too big of a chance she’d be left devastated if she did.

Mustering every ounce of willpower she contained, Veronica pulled away. She rolled over onto her back and laid still, her chest heaving while she tried to reel in her emotions.

“You’re killing me,” he groaned. “You’re absolutely killing me.”

“Yeah, well. Likewise.”

Veronica wondered how things had gotten so weird. Before her wedding day, life had always been normal to the point of stereotypical. She had an over-involved mother, an over-protective father and an obnoxious-but-endearing brother. She got good grades, rebelled as a teen, and grew up somewhere in her twenties. She’d even had her heart broken in the typical way.

She felt completely unprepared for paradoxical feelings that cluttered her mind as she lay there, not quite touching him as she watched the sun sink lower in the sky.

“Come on,” he finally stood and reached a hand out to her. “My stomach’s growling. Let’s wash the sand off and head back.”

“I think we should just move here. Send for the dogs. We could live in a little hut where no one could find us.”

“The idea has merit,” he played along.

“But I would miss shoe sales.”

“Ah, the opportunity cost.”

“And nonfat mochas.”

“I’m losing our island dream to shoes and coffee, then?”

“A girl’s gotta have priorities,” she looked at him apologetically.

“Good to know where I stand.”

“I’m honest,” she shrugged teasingly before her smile faded briefly.

“I’m honest too,” he caught the look in her eye. “Just not entirely forthcoming.”

“Is it an ‘I’d tell you but then I’d have to kill you’ kind of thing?” she tried to rekindle the teasing mood.

“In not so many words,” he stopped short and turned to face her in all seriousness.

“I was kidding...,” fear fluttered through her stomach for the briefest of moments.

Sadness tugged at his eyes as he seemed to read her thoughts. But the sadness was quickly replaced by the mischievous grin that flickered across his face.

“Don’t you dare...,” her protest turned into a squeal when he scooped her into his arms and headed towards the water. Even if she had been planning to swim, being chucked in unceremoniously hadn’t been part of the design. “Richard Reid Sinclair...

you put me down right now.”

“Wow, the middle name. Pulling out the big guns now, are we?”

With that, he tossed her. She went in sputtering, but quickly dove deeper so she could pull his legs out from under him. They both came up laughing. Rick wrapped his arms around Veronica, pulling her back against his chest.

Then he stilled. She could sense the tension in him without seeing his face and instinctively froze as well, her heart racing as she tried to see what had caused the change in his demeanor.

A soft whir reached her ears and she somehow knew this is what he was tuned into, even as he began tugging her towards the shore.

“Come on. We need to hurry.”

“It’s probably just another group of tourists headed to the resort,” she frowned at his urgency.

“No. We flew in on a Sikorsky. This is a loach.”

Veronica knew enough to understand the difference between a commercial bird like the S76-D they’d flown in on and the smaller helicopters often referred to as loaches, like the OH6 or Defender 500. But it took a trained ear to discern the difference from sound alone.

“Why would a low observation helicopter be approaching an exclusive resort island?” She struggled to keep up with his long stride, barely making it into the jeep before it roared to life.

“You know one use for the loach? You can load them down with weapons. Soldiers ride on the skids and the chopper brings them in close to drop them off. If I can hear it, they’re already in our pocket.”

“And you really think a helicopter loaded down with bad guys is headed this way?”

“I was really stupid to have brought you here,” he ran his hand through his hair in frustration. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Veronica sat back in her seat and tried to process what he was saying.

A soft whine joined the whir of the rotors, signaling that the chopper had drawn even nearer. Rick punched the gas, barreling towards the resort with little regard to things like

staying on the road. By the time he wheeled into a parking space, Veronica had a death grip on the car. She couldn't hear the helicopter anymore, but the look on Rick's face told her that wasn't necessarily good news.

Veronica crawled out of the jeep on shaky legs; Rick was already at her door. He twined his long fingers through hers and intentionally slowed his pace. Aware of the other guests within view, Veronica tried to match his unconcerned appearance. Her heart was drumming so wildly out of control she was surprised no one else could hear it.

"What's going on?" She finally asked once they were alone in their room.

"I think Marko had less patience than Adrianna led me to believe. Maybe she held less sway than she thought," Rick moved from room to room as he spoke, gathering their things and shoving them into bags.

"What are you doing?" Veronica felt like she was watching events unfold through a haze. Her brain felt too thick and sluggish to work properly.

"Packing. We have to leave here. Now."

"But what if that helicopter had nothing to do with you?"

"What if it has everything to do with me?" He stopped mid-stride, his eyes unable to meet hers. "I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you."

Veronica took a deep breath, willing away the fear and doubts that blew like a tornado through her mind. "Would it be more helpful if I packed or secured a way off the island?"

Rick paused, as if considering the option that she could help for the first time. "Pack, and don't let anyone in."

Veronica nodded, moving to take over the chore of packing as Rick dressed. She tried to ignore the gun he slid into the back of his jeans but couldn't help wondering how he'd managed to get it on the island, even if they had flown a small private plane to San Juan before boarding the island's helicopter.

She moved into the bathroom, raking toiletries into a plastic bag with little heed to order. Head down, she ran right into him as she hurried back into the bedroom. He wrapped his arms around her waist, both steadying her and pulling her closer. She raised her eyes to his, not sure what to say or do. He responded by claiming her lips with a ferocity she'd never known. She fiercely but briefly kissed him back before stepping

away.

“You’d better go,” she averted her gaze so he wouldn’t see the emotion in her eyes.

“I’ll be right back,” he promised, grazing her temple with a kiss. “Lock the door behind me.”

The room seemed hollow once he’d gone—hollow and sad. It didn’t take Veronica long to finish packing their things. She had the bags by the door before he’d returned. She took another pass around the room to check for lost articles and donned a pair of capris before sitting nervously on the edge of the bed. She gazed at the ocean just outside. The sun was nearly gone now. The water appeared inky, eerie. Veronica stared at it with such intensity she jumped when Rick let himself back into the room.

“Good thing you’re a desk jockey,” he smirked. “You’d make a lousy spy.”

“Very funny,” she made a face at him and, in light of his snarky comment, restrained herself from rushing into his arms. “Did you have any luck?”

“Yes. Remember the Jamisons?”

“The couple we had dinner with our first night?”

He nodded. “They have a yacht and plan to head to Tortola at first light.”

“So we have to stay the night here?”

“Not in this room.”

“There wasn’t anything else we could do?”

“No, it’s already too dark to convince the helicopter pilot to take off and I don’t feel like trying to wiggle out of felony theft charges.”

“Are you trying to tell me you could fly it if you wanted to?”

“In a pinch,” he admitted.

“Anything else you’d like to share?”

“Not at the moment, not particularly.”

“You said ‘not in this room’... do you have any idea where we will stay for the night?”

“Out there.”

“I’m sorry—I thought I just heard you say we were spending the night outside.”

“It’s safer than this room.”

“I’m going to tell myself this will be romantic; like a scene from *Blue Lagoon*.”

“I’m way hotter than that doofy blonde kid,” he informed her.

“You were supposed to say that I’m hotter than Brooke Shields,” Veronica crossed her arms.

“That goes without saying,” he amended.

“Nice save.”

“Thanks.”

“So, are we taking our bags with us?”

“We’ll leave them here and come back for them in the morning if we can. It would look too suspicious for us to load them now.”

“If we can?”

“I will make every attempt to save your things,” he assured her as he stuck his head into the hallway. “Come on, let’s get moving.”

Veronica followed him down to the jeep, glaring a hole in the back of his head as she did. Instinct told her to follow Rick’s instructions if she wanted to get out of this situation. Every other part of her was screaming for an explanation—or revenge. First the wedding and now the honeymoon. Apparently nothing was sacred anymore.

They drove the jeep to the other side of the island and parked it, crisscrossing through the jungle for reasons unbeknownst to Veronica. She hated feeling like an idle passenger on this crazy ride but didn’t have a clue what other options were available at the moment.

By the time Rick found what he considered a suitable stopping place, the pitch black of night had enveloped them. Veronica clutched Rick’s hand, sure she’d never find him again if she lost contact with his fingers.

“Sorry we can’t have a fire,” he tried to pull her close as they settled in under a rocky crag.

“I may not be a super spy, but I do understand that fire means bright,” she bristled, pulling away from him. “I’m warm enough, thanks.”

“I didn’t mean to insult you. Just apologize.”

“Apology accepted,” she turned her back to him and rested her chin on her knees. She hadn’t accepted his apology and they both knew it.

“Come on now, love. You can’t stay angry forever.”

“I bet I could if I gave it a try.”

“Is that what you want?”

“I want my honeymoon back. I want an honest husband. What I want apparently isn’t an option here.”

“We’ll talk when everything settles down,” he promised; his voice was low, his breath brushed her ear. “Get some sleep while you can,”

“I’m not tired.”

“Just try.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be fine. I just want to keep an eye out for a bit.”

“You don’t feel the least bit silly doing this?” Veronica wondered aloud. Maybe it’s all just one big misunderstanding. “I mean, what if they aren’t even here?”

“They are.”

“Who are they, anyway?”

“Not now, Ronnie.”

“Sure, sure,” she sighed, angry tears brimming in her eyes. Her pulse pounded in her temple. How had she been so stupid as to trust another man? Apparently they were all pathological liars. At least Seth had never endangered her life. “Will you at least give me answers once we get home?”

“We’ll see.”

“Do you have any clue how much strain you are putting on our marriage?” Veronica sniffed. Rick chuckled. She held out little hope for sleep, but tried to calm herself nonetheless. She must have found a way to doze off sitting straight up, because she awoke with a start when a branch snapped about twenty feet from them.

Rick was there, pulling her closer to the rocks that sheltered them. Before Veronica had time to process what was happening, Rick had leaned over her and fired a shot, the silencer lending to the surreal nature of the moment. The sound of something heavy hitting the jungle floor said his bullet had found its mark.

Veronica worried that some hapless tourist had just met their demise when a return shot sent a spray of dirt in her face. She felt it more than heard it. They had obviously silenced their own weapons as well. Rick fired again and another body fell. This time, he

was tugging her along after him.

She pulled free as they passed the first body, stooping to pick up the weapon at her toe. He doubled back to claim her hand again and the pair made their way silently through the trees. Whatever Veronica was expecting next, it wasn't to be led back to their room.

"They wouldn't have sent more than one crew after us today," Rick explained as he held the door open for her. "At least, I don't think they would have. Might as well get some rest while we can. Another few hours and we'll be meeting the Jamisons."

"Sure," Veronica willed her hands to stop trembling. Her groom had just killed two people. She stared down at the 9 mm Makarov pistol still clutched in her fingers. She'd grabbed it without thinking. Would she have been able to fire it had there been more than two men? She wasn't positive she could answer that.

She sank into an oversized chair, eyeing Rick warily as he pried the gun from her fingers.

"I'm just going to set it here," he promised her, placing the weapon on a table within her grasp. "You don't want to doze off with that thing in your hands."

"My daddy taught me how to handle a gun."

"That doesn't surprise me at all. Just the same, I'd feel better with it over here. You know, if you want to lie down, I'll sit in the chair for a while."

"I'm fine, thanks."

He surprised her by settling into a chair where he could still see her. They sat staring at each other—her gaze filled with anger and confusion, his with... pain? Regret, maybe?

Whatever it was, it was the look that she carried with her to her restless dreams.

Chapter Five

It took a full two minutes for the anger to settle over her in the morning. For the first sixty seconds, the morning light cast a soft glow on his features and her heart was bursting with love for him. Then sadness swept in with the memory of what she hoped

their marriage would be. Then came the anger—right on the heels of remembering the night before.

She knew he was watching her through half-closed eyelids, probably trying to assess her mood. She scowled at him just to clarify her position on the subject then stood to stretch out the kinks in her back. These were not the kind of sleepless nights she'd envisioned.

The newlyweds were silent as they quickly readied themselves to go meet the Jamison's at their yacht. Veronica hesitated only briefly before shoving the handgun in her bag. It was a short drive to the marina in Sprat Bay, but she managed to plaster a smile on her face by the time they arrived.

If Rick was as nervous as she, he was doing a great job hiding it. Veronica watched him chat with Matt Jamison as the two men poured their wives drinks and wondered what she should feel. Terrified? Furious? Aroused?

The man she saw now was the one she married. Handsome, easy-going... normal. Not at all like the creature who needed only two bullets to shoot two people in total darkness. Based on his behavior from the moment he'd heard the helicopter, she'd lay money on him being a retired operative of some sort. He'd alluded to as much on their wedding night. The only question in her mind was—retired from what?

"I'm so sorry to hear about your mother," Alicia Jamison interrupted Veronica's thoughts.

"Thank you," Ronnie replied cautiously, wishing Rick had let her in on whatever story he'd given their ride—if for no other reason than to keep it straight.

"It must be really difficult caring for your caregiver."

"It can be."

"Especially when their mind is gone like that."

"It's not so bad," Veronica looked at Rick. His lips twitched ever-so-slightly and she inwardly seethed.

"Don't be so stoic. I can't imagine what I'd do if my mother had a psychotic break like that. And to think of you two leaving your honeymoon early... Rick is a good man to insist you go check on her after that phone call last night."

"Well, Rick is no stranger to mental instability," Veronica patted the leather seat next

to her, and batted her eyelashes sweetly. “Isn’t that right, honey?”

“Whatever you say, my lovely wife,” he handed her an orange juice and kissed her lightly on the lips. The look in his eyes said he had read hers well enough and found the threat they contained no more than amusing.

She resolved to unleash the full measure of her wrath upon him just as soon as they were alone. Well, possibly after they were alone and safely on American soil because she had no idea how they planned to get home at the moment.

The Jamisons were a nice couple, if not the most riveting conversationalists. By the time Veronica could see the port at Tortola, she’d decided to fling herself into the ocean at the very next mention of a ladies’ tea or yacht gas mileage.

She was eternally grateful when they arrived in Road Harbour. Tortola was vibrant and beautiful; Veronica would have liked to spend some time browsing through the brightly colored tents that made up the waterfront marketplace. As it was, she bid the Jamisons farewell and followed her husband to procure a way to the next island.

So it went for the rest of the day and the one after as they hopped from tiny island to tiny island. She’d lost count of the means of transportation used by the time they boarded the small plane that would take them to Miami. All she really knew was that she was exhausted.

As their home country drew ever closer, she began to worry about the handgun she still carried in the bottom of her bag. She’d refused to give it up initially, feeling slightly less helpless with it in her possession. Now the reality of customs loomed large.

Sweat broke her brow as they stood in line, waiting to gain entrance to the United States. Having guessed the source of her anxiety, his lip seemed to twitch with amusement. With an irritated scowl, she fished her passport out of her handbag. Relief warred with panic when she realized the weapon was gone.

She wondered how she could possibly have missed the fact that her purse was lighter, but didn’t have time to give that too much thought, because a customs official was reaching for it. She handed the bag over, silently fuming.

“You look like you want to kill me, not thank me,” his stupid lip was still twitching.

“Thank you?”

“Yeah, you know... for keeping you out of prison.”

“Sure. Okay. Thanks, Dick.”

Veronica was pleased to note that his temple had taken on a slight twitch, a small but definite sign of his irritation.

“Next time I’ll leave you to your own devices.”

“Oh, you mean next time we get ambushed on our honeymoon? Shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Are you tired?” he switched topics, sensing there was no way to win the current one. “Because I’m beat. We could probably check in to a hotel.”

“I’m exhausted. But right now I just want to go home.”

“Fine. Let me see what I can find.”

As he had for the past two days, he came through on transportation. This time he held out for first class tickets on a real airplane. It might not be the same as a bed, but there was at least enough room to lie back and catch a nap.

She should have been asleep the second the lights dimmed, but Veronica couldn’t seem to quiet her racing mind. As she watched Rick get some much needed rest, it occurred to her that this had taken its toll on him. She’d been so wrapped up in being angry, she’d missed how stressed and tired he was.

She reached out to gently stroke his cheek, wishing she could wipe away the lines of worry that creased his face. Even in his sleep, he leaned into her touch. She knew then, in that moment, that she didn’t have the power to end their marriage when the plane touched down. The reality was they were bound together. Long before any wedding ceremony she’d known his life would be forever linked to hers. That wasn’t going to change now, even if his life was suddenly scary and confusing.

She leaned back in her seat, situating herself so she could study him while waiting for sleep to claim her.

“What I wouldn’t give to be able to peek inside that murky brain of yours,” she murmured. With a sigh, she succumbed to the exhaustion.

Chapter Six

They looked remarkably like a normal couple just returning from vacation when they finally crossed their threshold. The dogs greeted them enthusiastically, which made the past few days seem like a bad dream.

“Hey guys,” Courtney called from the kitchen. “I was just leaving you a note.”

“Were they good?” Rick asked as Ronnie greeted Courtney with a hug.

“Angels,” she answered. “Now your brother is another matter entirely.”

“You have my full permission to beat him,” Veronica reminded her.

“Nah, he’s harmless. Just irritating.”

“Please let me tell him she said that,” Rick looked to Veronica, who merely rolled her eyes.

“How was the trip?”

“Fascinating,” Veronica answered as truthfully as she knew how.

“Not what I was expecting, but okay,” Courtney considered the description. “I have a date with a couple of dachshunds. Maybe we can catch up over a cup of coffee later?”

Veronica agreed, watching Courtney leave before going to help Rick unload the car. With that done, she didn’t really know what to do next. She should call her brother, check in at work or at least do a load of laundry. All she really wanted to do was get a hot shower and sleep for about 100 hours.

She settled for a hot shower and a cat nap. When she woke up, the 9 mm Makarov pistol was on her bedside stand with a note that read, “try not to lose it again.” Veronica made a face at the note and got dressed.

There was a longer note in the front room. That one told her he’d be gone for a week and left her a list of safety instructions. By the time she made it halfway through, she was so angry little red dots danced in front of her eyes.

After she’d decided to stand by him, to face this mess together, he’d taken off to solve it on his own and left her a note that insinuated she had the brain power of a gnat. With a curse, she realized she’d done it again. She’d been led by sentiment. Her libido quite possibly had a say as well, but her brain certainly hadn’t checked into the conversation.

She called to see if anything urgent was happening at work. Once she was sure there

wasn't anything going on that couldn't wait another day, she headed to Jeff's office. Maybe she could buy him lunch and either get the scoop on Adrianna or lecture him about hitting on Courtney.

"Look at you all tanned and gorgeous," he wrapped her in a bear hug and gave her a sloppy kiss on the cheek as soon as she entered his office.

"I told you to leave Courtney alone," she shoved him away. "Don't try to charm your way out of it."

"Would I do that?"

"Do you breathe?"

"I really do wish you'd be nicer. Especially in light of everything I found out for you."

"You found something?" Veronica's interest was piqued. "What is it?"

"You're not even going to buy me lunch first?"

"Fine. Come on. Your choice."

Veronica made small talk with the receptionist while he wrapped up what he was working on. She bit her lip to keep from avalanching him with information and questions on the way to his black Chevy Camaro. Once she was seated and her seatbelt securely fastened, she turned to him expectantly.

"It sure is nice weather we're having this week," he mentioned mildly.

"Yep," she tried not to take the bait.

"You know, they say it might rain on Saturday."

"Okay."

"Did it rain much on your trip?"

"You brat—you're killing me here. What did you find out?"

Jeff smiled, relishing his little victory. "Your mystery whore works for an antique dealer in New York."

"The bad guys are antique dealers?"

"I know, priceless, isn't it?" Jeff chuckled. "That's why he didn't tell us."

"Very funny," she made a face at him. "You know as well as I do that one of the major black market imports is looted antiques."

"Yeah, but they're old bowls and crap. Please promise you'll tell me if you find out

he was undercover with the Antique Road Show.”

“Absolutely,” the corner of her lip twitched just a little. It was an amusing picture.

“At the risk of finding out more than I want to know... how was the honeymoon? Did anything interesting happen?”

“Someone named Marko sent two assassins to kill us. Rick took them out and made it look easy. Then we hopped islands home. Other than that, it was pretty typical.”

“So the antique dealers are really pissed at him. Maybe he broke a Ming vase or something.”

“I bet that was it.”

“Did you say Marko?” Jeff grew serious as a light bulb clicked on in his brain.

“Yeah. That name seems to keep coming up, actually. Adrianna mentioned him at the wedding, too.”

“That would have been good to know,” he scowled at her.

“Well I’m sorry. Rick had me all flustered that morning.”

“A guy named Marko Kulenović popped up on our most wanted list about two weeks ago. He just walked away from a high-security facility buried in the Appalachians. Heads rolled over that one.”

“I didn’t see that name with updates to post,” she frowned. One of her jobs was to oversee text on the FBI’s website—including the most wanted lists.

“This is our super-secret list. The one we don’t want the average citizen finding out about; it could alter their spending habits or something.”

“Cynic.”

He gave her a look that said she was naïve beyond words.

“What was this Kulenović guy in for?”

“Human trafficking, among other things. He was part of a ring brought down by Batman last year.”

“Batman?” Veronica arched an eyebrow.

“Not really. That’s just our nickname for the guy. He’s a private contractor who helps in these situations. The guy is unreal.” Jeff parked the car outside his favorite Chinese food restaurant. Veronica mulled over this new information as they followed the hostess to their table.

“Why was Rick so confident you couldn’t find anything?” she asked after ordering some hot tea and egg drop soup.

“I didn’t exactly show him my security clearance when we met,” Jeff shrugged, making Veronica think his job might be more than she’d always assumed. “I have friends.”

“So, if you were me, what would your next step be?”

“Boot Rick’s ass to the curb.”

“Seriously.”

“Fine. I’d learn all that I could about Everdale Antiques. And I’d attend the antique auction they’re hosting in New York on Sunday.”

“Care to be my date to an auction?”

“Where’s your husband?”

“Good question. Cowboy went off to fix things all on his own.”

“Tell me again why you can’t let him do that.”

“Assume you were in the same situation and it was your wife leaving you behind to clean up a mess from the past that she’d hidden from you. Would you be content to sit home and knit while you waited for her to come back?”

“Your logic is totally flawed. I don’t knit, and I’d never get married in the first place.”

“I don’t knit either,” she snapped at him. “Focus, Jeff. Would you sit home and wait?”

“Okay. Fine. I’ll go with you,” he conceded after a moment. “But we’re going to need costumes. Adrianna will recognize you.”

“Sounds fun. Do you need anything from me?”

“A good word with your friend would mean a lot.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“You’re brutal. You know that, don’t you?” he informed her as he helped himself to the plate of Mongolian Beef sitting in front of her.

“Seriously. What can I do to help?”

“Research the dealer. Study the auction list for Sunday. Maybe drop by the range a few times between now and then. Wouldn’t hurt to brush up on your aim.”

“Okay,” she nodded, feeling better now that she had a plan and a homework assignment.

Chapter Seven

Veronica fidgeted with a bobby pin in the brunette wig she wore.

“Stop that,” Jeff smacked at her hands. “You’ll ruin all of my hard work.”

“It itches.”

“You seriously suck at this, you know that, right?” he straightened her hair for her.

“Now stop moving your hair around. You’re drawing attention to yourself.”

“I’m sorry... and I’m not that bad.”

“If we get home without being shot, it’ll be a miracle.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“What did you tell Dad?” Jeff changed the subject.

“That we were still recuperating from the trip and you were still recuperating from the beating Courtney gave you.”

“Nice.”

“It’s what came to mind,” she shrugged. She rationalized the lie by telling herself she was saving the entire family a lot of grief by circumventing a fight between Sean and Rick. That didn’t make her any better of a liar. The reality of it was her father had probably begun checking the situation out the moment Adrianna appeared at the reception. He was just waiting in the wings for Veronica to ask for his help. On some level, she found that reassuring. On another, it irritated the hell out of her.

“Do you have our story straight?” Jeff leaned in closer, just in case someone in the busy terminal had decided to eavesdrop.

“Sure, sure. We’re from Peoria, we’ve been married six years and simply adore a good old Chippendale,” Veronica paused for him to snicker. “You are so juvenile. Anyway, we’re there in search of Roman artifacts for our summer home in the Carolinas. Anything else?”

“Don’t forget you have to convince them of your abject submission to me.”

“Very funny.”

“You have a disposable cell in your purse. If we get separated, I’m speed dial number two. If you can’t reach me, Batman is number three.”

“Would you stop calling him that? It sounds so ridiculous.”

“Our guy on the inside... does that sound better?”

“Am I supposed to call him Batman if I need him?”

“To his face, I’d recommend Vance. He doesn’t like the nickname so much.”

“See?”

“Hey Ron....”

“Yes?”

“Don’t get caught. Just in and out, okay?”

“Absolutely... hey Jeff?”

“Yes?”

“Do you know where Rick is?”

“He’s completely off radar. Dad started digging into his name after the shenanigans at the wedding. Babe, this guy didn’t exist two years ago.”

“I was hoping Dad wouldn’t get involved,” Veronica frowned, hating that she’d been right but not at all surprised.

“Yeah, good luck with that. Don’t you dare tell him I helped you do this. He thinks he’s being sneaky; he doesn’t want to upset you.”

Veronica sighed; she knew her family entirely too well.

Jeff took her hand in his as their plane began to board. As much as he delighted in harassing her, she was glad to have a brother willing to sacrifice his weekend to help. She tried to be decent company on the short flight and during the dinner afterward.

She even tried to get him to take the one bed in the room of their hotel. He’d refused, sleeping on the couch instead. She curled up with a pillow in the giant bed and wondered where her husband was. She also debated whether to greet him with a thousand kisses or a sound trouncing.

“Are you awake?” she called out softly.

“I am now.”

“Do you think I’m a fool for not leaving him?”

“I can’t tell you if you made the right decision or not. No one can.”

“Okay. Sorry to wake you.”

“I can tell you that he loves you. He thinks he’s doing the right thing by handling this himself.”

“That helps. Thanks,” Veronica clutched her pillow even tighter and tried to go to sleep.

Her cell phone broke the silence with the chorus from “Born to Run.”

“Really? You couldn’t find anything newer than that for your ringtone?”

“Classics never go out of style,” she retorted. “And that’s Rick’s ringtone.”

“If you tell him we’re here, he’ll be knocking on that door long before morning.”

“I know, I know,” she wrung her hands together as she debated whether or not to even answer the phone. It fell silent and she took a deep breath. Problem solved.

“I’d hate to see you in a truly high pressure situation,” he rolled over, determined to go back to sleep.

Bruce Springsteen was serenading them again even before Jeff had finished rearranging his pillow.

“Just answer it.”

“Hello?” she tried not to sound nervous.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack, woman?” Rick’s accent was so thick Veronica could barely understand him. She liked having this new ability to gauge his emotions, and she wondered if he was that bad at controlling it or that worked up over her absence.

“You’re one to talk,” she spat back. “Where are you?”

“Home. Where exactly are you, my dear?”

“I needed some time to think... to clear my head. I thought I was okay, but then you just took off without even saying goodbye. That was really rude, Dick.”

“Ah now, would you stop that?”

“Why couldn’t you even say goodbye?” she demanded again.

“Because I knew you’d kick up a fuss. The instructions I left told you to stay in D.C. —didn’t you even look at them?”

“I stopped reading somewhere around ‘don’t forget to lock the doors.’ If I want to be treated like a child, I’ll move back in with Daddy and save myself the mortgage payment.”

“I might have gone a wee bit overboard,” he conceded. “Why don’t you come home now and we’ll... damn it, Ron; why are you in New York?”

“Who says I’m in New York?” she struggled to keep the panic from her voice.

“Your bloody phone does darlin’.”

Veronica winced. She should have known he’d trace her phone. Jeff wasn’t going to let this one slide.

“I needed to get away for the weekend. I have a spa appointment tomorrow, and then I’ll be home,” she lied without missing a beat.

“Which spa?”

“Really? You’re going to question my honesty now?”

“Fine. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Unless you’re planning on taking off again,” she retorted.

“I don’t want to fight with you, love.”

“Are you ready to talk to me?”

“No.”

“Then there’s really nothing else to say. Goodnight, Rick.”

Veronica stared at her phone after hanging up. She’d never lied to him before. If nothing else, she’d walked away from her first marriage with a brutal honesty.

“Next time you decide to go a-sleuthing, turn the GPS feature off on your phone,” Jeff grumbled, his face buried in the pillow.

If she hadn’t been so upset over lying to Rick, she might have been more embarrassed about the GPS thing. Miserable, she sank back onto the bed to toss and turn the night away.

Ronnie wasn’t sure what to think when Rick didn’t show up on her doorstep. As she readied herself for the auction, she jumped at every sound.

“You’re as nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs, little sister,” Jeff commented as he put the final touches on her makeup. “You’ll be fine today.”

“I keep expecting him to come busting through the door any second now,” she

inspected her reflection in the mirror. Jeff had done a good job of transforming her. From her muted brown hair pulled into a nondescript bun, to the boxy suit meant to hide her figure, she was the kind of woman who wouldn't garner a second glance from most. Her eyes had been dulled with non-prescription contacts and then hidden behind glasses, her nose made a little larger with prosthetics. The one thing of her own that she retained was the shoes. Brown leather pumps with a rounded toe and cutout detailing on the sides, they were feminine and tailored. Most importantly, they were comfortable. She was glad he'd caved and let her wear her own shoes.

"You sound a little disappointed that he hasn't," Jeff continued the conversation, oblivious to her shoe moment.

"That's not it," she shook her head. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered if that was exactly it.

"When we get there, follow my lead, okay?"

"Sure," she nodded, tension building as they left their hotel room and made their way to Everdale Antiques. "Thanks for doing this."

"No worries," he gave her an easy grin.

They were silent on the cab ride over. Veronica wondered what she really expected to find. Would seeing Adrianna again do anything to help anyone? What if Rick had already taken care of it and she was about to stir the pot? She resolved herself with the thought that this was completely his fault. He's the one that kept it a secret from her. If he'd let her in on his plans, she wouldn't have felt the need to take things into her own hands.

And that was what steeled her as she took Jeff's hand and walked through the doors of the auction house. As they took their seat, she scanned the crowd for a familiar face. There was no guarantee that Adrianna would even be here, but Jeff seemed pretty sure this was the road to take. Ronnie was inclined to believe him.

"What do we do if we see her?" Ronnie leaned into Jeff to whisper.

"Nothing. Let them come to us."

She wasn't sure what voodoo-magic he'd worked to make that one happen, but there wasn't much to do but trust him on that, too. She tried to work through every possible scenario in her mind as she watched the lots come and go.

The one thing she wasn't prepared for was Jeff jumping into the bidding fray. When he committed her to paying \$2,500 for a black jug, she nearly had an aneurism.

"What are you doing?" she leaned over and whispered with a smile plastered on her face.

"You weren't getting in there, so I took matters in my own hands. From now on, you're the tightwad, and I'm the big spender, okay?"

"I can play that one convincingly. Are you writing the checks?"

"This is your party, babe."

Veronica took a steadying breath when the price tag hit \$3,000. Apparently he took a liking to the small bronze eagle statue that came up with the next lot, because he stayed in the bidding war up to five grand for that one. Veronica felt herself start to breathe again when he allowed himself to be outbid.

The relief didn't last long. She was soon the proud owner of a set of first century dishes and a statue of a ripped naked guy. She silently kissed the Christmas trip to Europe goodbye.

His little game worked, because Adrianna approached them later that afternoon as they sipped at wine and mingled with other enthusiasts.

"You have amazing taste," Adrianna lapped Jeff up with her eyes.

"Thank you," he acknowledged.

Veronica seethed. She wanted to snap the woman in two like a brittle twig. Instead, she kept her attention firmly on the balding man in front of her. If she focused hard enough on the small-framed glasses perched on the end of his nose, the thirst for blood dissipated ever-so-slightly.

Jeff was currently dressed as a slightly effeminate man with thinning blond hair and a rather pompous-looking goatee. There was nothing about his khaki slacks, blue button-up or white sweater vest that would make the average woman want to rip the clothing from his body.

So that left three possibilities. One, Adrianna had an illness and truly couldn't control herself around men. That thought did little to garner sympathy from Veronica. Two, Jeff's magnetism was too great to tame. That one left her feeling a little nauseous. Three, his plan had worked and they looked like a great way for a smuggler to unload

merchandise.

The chance it was option number three led Veronica to play nice. So she did her best to keep up with the little man who loved old Roman stuff while tuning out the conversation going on next to her.

“The unrest in Eastern Europe has been really fortunate,” the little man got her attention back with that one.

“That’s an interesting view point,” Veronica nearly choked on her first response. It was hard for her to find much good in things like civil war, genocide and human trafficking.

“It’s been a real field day for the antiques industry. So many treasures unearthed, so little regulation,” he didn’t try to contain the glee in his voice.

“Lucky for us,” Veronica tried to keep her tone light. The new direction of the conversation had captured Adrianna and Jeff’s attention. Veronica wished she could read the look in his eyes. This discussion seemed to have gotten away from her, and she wasn’t sure what to do with it.

Adrianna opened her mouth to join the exchange, but her attention was drawn away by a brute of a man striding across the room with purpose. He wasn’t any taller than the average guy, but his build left no question that he was a pillar of solid muscle under the black suit he wore. Without thinking, Veronica moved a little closer to Jeff.

The intimidating man whispered something in Adrianna’s ear.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have something pressing to attend to. Don’t leave without saying goodbye,” she kissed Jeff on the cheek and brushed Veronica with a dismissive glance.

Ronnie watched her leave, boring holes in the woman’s back for a second time.

“Easy there, Cujo,” he whispered through a smile.

“I think I need to visit the powder room,” she abruptly broke away from his grasp. “You boys will have to carry on the conversation without me.”

“Behave,” Jeff called out sweetly after her. Veronica didn’t even want to think about how that was going to be taken by the little man.

Ronnie left the reception room, entering a long and deserted hallway. The bathrooms were down the hall and to the left. It all seemed so stark and white, Veronica felt like she

was sneaking through an art museum. Voices from above told her Adrianna was headed up the stairs to her right. Pausing long enough to take off her heels, Veronica headed up the marble staircase after them.

She kept close to the wall and continually glanced about. Her heart was lodged firmly in her throat and beating a thousand miles an hour. She wondered how it didn't give her away.

"I'm tired of excuses," Adrianna whispered harshly. Veronica stopped short, surprised by how close the voices were.

"You should know as well as anyone how hard he is to kill."

"Is that supposed to be funny?"

"Marko called for a status update," the man was telling her.

"What did you tell him?"

"I gave him Sampson's message."

Adrianna let a string of curses fly. Veronica wondered what the message was.

"What does he see in her? Marko would have forgiven him for disappearing if he'd come back when the offer was extended," Adrianna's voice was rife with contempt.

"I didn't get close enough to ask the details on his love life."

"Did you ever consider that it was him?" a third voice chimed in.

"No," she answered with a little more vehemence than necessary. "I played him, not the other way around."

"Of course," the first man answered. "So this isn't personal for you at all?"

"Do you have anything else useful to tell me?" she demanded.

"Marko gives you until the end of the week to get rid of the problem. He's headed this way after he wraps things up in Italy. He'd like your assurance this will be handled before he arrives."

"Have I ever let him down before?"

Silence hung in the air. Veronica held her breath, afraid they'd hear it.

"What about the girl?" the first man asked.

"That's already in motion. The silly little princess will live only long enough to regret threatening me."

"She thinks she's safe because of her daddy," the second man sneered. "I wonder if

that's why Sampson married her. With all those feds around she makes a good shield."

Veronica paled at the thought. Adrianna had mentioned Rick had a new name that first day; she now knew it must have been Richard Sampson at some point. Was he using her? It wouldn't be the first time she'd been blind. She started backing down the stairs, not wanting to hear any more. Her stomach churned; it would be so humiliating to lose her wine and crackers on their white marble stairs. When she made it to the last step, she paused to put her shoes back on.

"May I help you?" Adrianna's voice was smooth as silk.

"I was just on my way back from the ladies' room... my heel felt wobbly, so I stopped to see what was wrong," Veronica looked up to where Adriana stood.

"Bo, take a look at the lady's shoe," Adrianna motioned to the brute Ronnie had seen earlier.

Ronnie shifted her weight nervously, handing the perfectly good shoe to the man. She wondered how quickly she could run in her current state. At least she'd die giving Adrianna a good laugh.

"Look at that," he held up two pieces of a shoe for the others to inspect. "The heel came right off in my hand. Good thing you stopped when you did, or you could have taken a nasty spill."

"It's so hard to find things of quality these days," Ronnie stared at her shoe with a mixture of relief and dismay. She was happy to have her story corroborated, but those had been her favorite pumps.

"Do you need assistance getting back to your husband?" he offered her his arm.

"I wouldn't dream of it," she reached for the remnants of her shoe. "I'm already so embarrassed."

"Nonsense, I insist," he held the shoe out of reach, instead offering his arm.

"As riveting as this is, I really must be going," the other man kissed Adrianna on the cheek. "I'll call you when I'm across the pond."

"Do. Have a nice flight, love," she kissed his cheek back.

Obviously dismissed, Veronica took the brute's arm and allowed him to lead her back to Jeff. She could tell her brother was amused and curious, but he did an admirable job of concealing both.

“Mrs. Wilkes, what’s happened to your shoe?” the little man fretted over her.

“I told you not to have a second helping of dessert last night. Your poor shoe couldn’t take the strain,” Jeff informed her.

“It appears to have succumbed to inferior craftsmanship,” she chose to ignore both Jeff and the horrified look on the other man’s face.

“Perhaps you should see your wife back to the hotel,” the brute she now knew as Bo suggested.

“Of course,” Jeff nodded his head ever-so-slightly before turning his attention to Veronica. “You must be exhausted after your ordeal, sweetie.”

“Quite,” she agreed with Jeff and turned to the man whose arm she still held. “Thank you so much. I seem to be in capable hands now.”

“Glad to be of service,” he kissed her hand and gave a slight bow. Their eyes locked for the briefest of moments and Ronnie felt a smile tug at the corners of her mouth, completely of its own accord. She tried to read the glint in his eye. His gaze made her feel warm and safe. Not something she’d expect from one of Adrianna’s associates.

“Did my eyes deceive me or was my newly married little sister flirting back there?” Jeff asked once they were safely in the taxi cab. “You do know he was one of the bad guys, right? Oh, and not Rick.”

“I was not flirting,” she rolled her eyes. “But I’m not convinced he was a bad guy.”

“Any particular reason for that?”

“Instinct.”

“Oh, well then. Let’s invite him for dinner sometime.”

Chapter Eight

There was something about the scene before her that made Ronnie want to believe none of the craziness had happened. Her husband padded around their townhouse barefoot and shirtless. His jeans hung on his hips in a way that made her mind go momentarily blank.

“Ah. Love—you’re back from the spa just in time. I almost have our surround sound working,” he looked up and grinned.

Guilt settled over her like an iron cloak, but she was determined to muscle her way through that pesky emotion. She forced a smile. “We’ll have to get takeout and watch *Phantom* to celebrate.”

“*Phantom of the Opera* is your idea of celebration, not mine.”

“Spoil sport.”

“How was the spa? Do you feel properly rejuvenated and ready to forgive me?”

“I’m thinking about it,” Ronnie answered warily. There was a mischievous gleam in his eye usually reserved for tormenting Jeff.

“Come on. Why don’t you join me on the couch and we’ll test it out,” he flopped on their black leather sofa and patted the seat next to him.

“Um... sure... just let me put my bag away.”

“Well hurry up. This should be fun.”

Ronnie gritted her teeth and dropped her carry-on and purse on the bed. He was definitely up to something.

“What are we watching?” she settled uneasily at his side.

“Just wait, you’ll love this,” he pushed the button on the remote.

With a sinking feeling, Veronica watched the inside of the Everdale Antiques flicker on the screen. The time stamp at the bottom told her she should be walking through at any minute.

“This is your idea of exciting television?”

“It gets pretty good here in a second.”

And then there she was, hobbling across the screen in all her single-shod glory. She tried not to wrinkle her nose in distaste. The costume and camera had not been kind.

“That poor woman seems to have lost a shoe,” she innocently noted. He looked at her as if she’d completely lost her grip on reality.

“I have to say, my favorite part was the look on your face when he handed you back your favorite shoe in two pieces.”

She hadn’t felt this busted since the time she’d snuck out of her bedroom window to go on a date with a guy from the Naval Academy in Annapolis. She didn’t like being

made to feel like a rebellious teenager by her husband, and she certainly wasn't into working out any residual daddy issues with him.

"Yeah, I was pretty pissed about the shoe."

"You do realize he saved your life by doing that, right?"

"Do you even want to hear what I learned? It might be helpful."

"No, I had someone for intel already. What I'd bloody like is for you to stop trying to kill yourself."

"Then let me in."

"No. Trust me to take care of this."

"How'd you get these tapes?"

"You're a terrible liar. It wasn't hard to figure out why you were really in New York. I asked a friend to keep an eye out for you. After the shoe incident, he figured you'd been snooping and was kind enough to scrub the surveillance tapes. He sent me a copy of the unedited version for laughs."

"Right. I'll have to remember to watch for cameras next time."

"Next time? Don't you listen, woman? There is no next time. Cross me on this and I'll tell Sean."

"Seriously? You'll tell my daddy on me? That's real mature, Dick."

In a flash he was on top of her, pinning her with his body and holding both of her hands above her head with one of his own.

"Damn it, Ron. Leave this alone," he growled so close their breath mingled.

Part of her wanted to injure him. Part wanted to forget it all and have her way with him right here on the sofa. The force of her desire and its ability to override her brain infuriated her. It also caused her breathing pattern to change and suddenly oxygen felt like a rare commodity. His eyes turned more gray than green, and his own breathing became jagged, and she knew—his body was responding to the change in hers.

And that gave her an idea. She caught his lower lip in her teeth, delighting in the groan that elicited. She proceeded to kiss him with the full intention of driving him completely insane.

When every muscle in his body hummed with desire, she pushed him back on the couch, straddling his lap to gain better leverage. Something very primal and basic in her

wanted to toss aside the mission at hand and just see this ecstasy through to the end.

The need was so great, she knew it was time to make her move or all would be lost. She whispered against his skin “teach me.”

“Oh darlin’, you seem quite accomplished already,” his accent was so thick she could barely understand him.

“No, my love. Teach me. If you think I’m inept, make me better.”

“What? No,” he came out from under her as if the couch was on fire.

“Let’s do this together.”

“You were seducing me to get what you wanted,” his chest was still heaving.

“Isn’t that what you do?”

“That’s not the same.”

“A man-whore is still a whore.”

“And you kiss your mother with that mouth,” he tsked reproachfully.

Seething with anger, Veronica grabbed the first thing she could get her hands on and hurled it at him. He batted the pillow away with ease, but was caught off guard by the remote when it whacked him in the head.

“What is wrong with you? Would you stop throwing things at me?”

“Stop treating me like a child.”

“Stop acting like a child.”

“I’m not. I’m acting like a woman whose wedding day and honeymoon were ruined because her groom lied to her. If you won’t stop holding me at arm’s length, then how am I supposed to know that Adrianna isn’t the one telling the truth? How do I know you aren’t just using me? Maybe you really are one of the bad guys.”

“Do you truly believe that?” his voice was now gentle, wounded.

“I don’t know what I believe.”

“If you don’t trust me, at least trust yourself. Stop reacting, close your eyes, and quiet your mind.”

“If you tell me to listen to my heart, I’m going to start throwing things at you again.”

“Do you at least understand that I’m only trying to protect you?”

“Yes, but do you understand that I’m supposed to be your partner in life, not your ward?”

Rick sighed, falling to his knees at her feet. He took her hands in his and looked up at her with imploring eyes. "Take a leave of absence from work. Go stay with your cousin in Denver. I will come for you when it's safe."

"So your trip didn't go as well as hoped?" she couldn't seem to help sinking her fingers into his hair.

"It's going to take longer than I anticipated to fix this."

"What message did you send?"

"Excuse me?"

"They said you sent a message to Marko. Adrianna was pretty upset about it."

"You never answered about Denver."

"No, I won't go to Denver. But I am going to call Courtney to see if Sissy, Brutus and I can crash with her tonight."

"I fired Courtney today."

"What?" Ronnie shrieked.

"I'm worried someone would use her to get to you. You need to take the dogs and go."

"If you think I'm the kind of woman that can go hide until you declare the coast clear, then maybe you should have gotten to know me a little better before proposing. Heaven knows I should have done a better job getting to know you."

With that, she pushed him away and fled to her room where she crammed some clean clothes into her bag with the dirty ones. After only a moment's hesitation, she grabbed the Makarov pistol from her nightstand and shoved that in there as well.

"Brutus, Sissy, come," she whistled as she grabbed their leashes off the hook by the door. The dogs were instantly there, lured by the promise of an adventure.

"Ronnie, don't just barge out of here like this."

"You told me to go; I'm going," she concentrated on fastening Sissy's leash.

"Not like this. And not to one of the first places they'll look for you."

"You don't get a say in where I go anymore, Dick. If we aren't partners, then what's the point in calling it a marriage?"

"So you're blackmailing me now?"

"This isn't an ultimatum; it's a fact. I will not live like this."

He stopped short. The look in his eyes nearly broke her heart. With her jaw set in determination, she straightened herself, collected her bags and turned to go.

She tried to pretend he wasn't standing on the front porch watching her with wounded puppy-dog eyes. As she waited for Brutus to cram his giant body into the little back seat of her Volkswagen CC, she tried very hard not to think of the look they'd exchanged before she'd walked out the door.

Veronica managed to refrain from crying on the drive to her friend's house. She attempted to take his advice, to clear her mind as she drove, but it didn't work. Her thoughts were every bit as jumbled when she pulled into Courtney's driveway as they had been when she'd pulled out of her own.

"I think maybe it's time we had a talk," Courtney greeted her at the door, the confusion evident on her face.

Ronnie opened her mouth to speak and burst into tears. Ten full minutes after being ushered inside, she finally had enough control over her emotions to semi-coherently fill Courtney in on the events since her wedding.

"Oh, well, being fired today makes so much more sense now. I will no longer fork your lawn."

"I appreciate that. You know what the most disturbing part is?"

"I can't even imagine what that would be."

"I'm more attracted to him now than I was two weeks ago. I'm furious at him. I'm confused by him. But I also want to eat him up. Is that really sick of me? How can I even think about that right now?"

"I'm not the person to ask that," Courtney admitted.

"What do you think I should do?"

"I'm not the person to ask that, either."

"You're no help."

"Want to order a pizza and watch movies that require no thought whatsoever?"

"You're back in my good graces."

"That's a relief."

"Oh, before I forget, you know who's been amazing through all of this? Jeff. He's been a real sweetheart."

“He put you up to that, didn’t he?” Courtney rolled her eyes.

“Yes, but he really has been a doll. Otherwise I would have blown off his request.”

“What do you want on your pizza?”

“Surprise me,” Veronica leaned back on the couch, tossing her arm over her eyes.

“Why don’t you get a hot bath while I order?”

Veronica stood and stretched; Courtney’s offer had appeal. As she walked by the back door, she paused to watch the herd of dogs in the postage stamp backyard. In addition to her two, Courtney’s golden retriever, Sadie, was racing in circles around two visiting bulldogs named Bert and Ernie.

“Sometimes I’m jealous of your job,” Ronnie couldn’t help smiling at the dogs’ antics. “Dogs are more fun than people.”

Courtney merely grinned in acknowledgement as she dialed the number to the nearest pizza place. Veronica grabbed her bag from the foyer and carried it with her to the guest bathroom. Once there was a sufficient mountain of bubbles, Ronnie piled her hair atop her head and sank her weary body into the hot water. She leaned back, closed her eyes and allowed images of Rick to lap at her mind.

She wasn’t sure how long she’d been there or even if she’d dozed off when Courtney called to the dogs. “Quiet. You’re not going to bark the squirrel out of the tree.”

Ronnie sat up a little straighter, straining to hear over the cacophony of canines. It almost sounded like a scratching sound out front. Courtney’s scream jarred her into action as the door splintered and gave way.

Veronica grabbed her handgun from the bag, tucking a towel around her body as she prayed her own stupidity had not cost a friend her life.

She burst from the bathroom, drawing the intruder’s attention away from Courtney, who took the opportunity to drop to the ground. He took aim without hesitation; Ronnie ducked back into the bathroom just as the bullet exploded from the barrel of his gun.

Acting purely on instinct, she swung back out, aiming as she did. She barely verified Courtney wasn’t in the line of fire before pulling the trigger. He moved with catlike reflexes and the bullet caught his shoulder instead of the bull’s-eye.

He swore but still got off another shot. She returned with another of her own, blinking in shock when it found its mark.

She would have expected to feel fear or revulsion or even remorse over having killed a man. Instead, she was strangely calm as she approached the body. Although he was most assuredly dead, she'd seen enough horror flicks to take the gun out of his hand and set in on the kitchen counter, well out of reach.

"You okay, Courtney?"

"Yeah... you?"

"Yeah. We don't have much time, though. Grab the dogs while I put my clothes on."

"Should we call the cops?"

"I'm sure your neighbors have already, and I'd love to be gone by the time they get here."

"I know I'm not the one that works for the FBI, but isn't leaving the scene of a crime bad?"

"We're sitting ducks in jail—and whoever sent this guy will find someone to finish the job. If you want to live, you'll get those dogs loaded in my car."

Courtney nodded, springing into action. Ronnie dressed faster than she ever had in her life.

Under any other circumstance, the scene in her backseat would have been comical. Brutus had a very long-suffering expression on his face and four dogs of varying sizes shoved under him like Russian nesting dolls.

As it was, the sound of sirens drawing nearer caused her to slam the car into gear and peel out. She forced herself to slow down to the speed limit, knowing it would be just her luck to get a ticket.

"I am so sorry for bringing this to you, Courtney."

"You had to go to someone," she answered without hesitation. "I'm glad it was me."

It took Veronica a second to swallow the lump that had formed in her throat, when she did, she instructed the car to call her brother.

"Jeff, thank God you answered."

"Miss me already?"

"I'm on my way over. I need your help."

"Twice in one weekend? You're really going to owe me."

"This is serious."

“When will you be here?”

“Two minutes? I need to park in your garage; I don’t want anyone seeing my car from the street.”

“I’ll be right down.”

She hung up and stopped on the street in front of his house, waiting for him to move his car out of the garage. Once the cars had been shuffled, she opened the back door and began untangling canines.

“How many dogs do you have in there?” he asked, pulling his attention away from Courtney. “It’s like a freaking clown car.”

Chapter Nine

The light from the computer screen flickered in the dark room. Veronica studied the monitor with pursed lips. With Courtney under Jeff’s protection, she had borrowed his car and gone to the office. The FBI Headquarters seemed as safe a place to be as any, even if it was late on a Sunday evening.

As happy as Jeff had been to have Courtney staying in his home, he’d been a little reluctant to part with his beloved Camaro. Not that Ronnie could blame him. She loved her Volkswagen and the way its sleek engine purred. But there was something rather delicious about the way his Camaro’s powerhouse engine growled. She felt like she could take on Marko Kulenović himself when driving Jeff’s car.

But now, staring at a computer screen and running dangerously low on coffee, she felt like she could barely put a coherent thought together. The phone on her desk rang and she jumped, quickly steadying her coffee cup before it spilled on her keyboard. She recognized the number on her display screen and hesitated briefly before answering it.

“So, I’m standing here—in the morgue—looking at what I can only assume is your handiwork,” the frustration was thick in her husband’s voice.

“I told you I could take care of myself.”

“Taking care of it would have been somewhere along the lines of quietly disposing

of the assassin with one shot. Preferably not in our dog-walker's living room."

"Ex-dog-walker. You fired her, remember?"

"To protect her. Fat lot of good that did with you running straight to her house."

"I've already apologized to Courtney, Dick."

"Well I'm sure that made it all better."

"Jeff called in a few favors. The Feds are claiming jurisdiction. There won't be any trouble with the police over this. I'll replace her door. It'll all be okay."

"When are you going to start listening? This isn't a game."

"You're right; it is time to stop playing around. I'm done waiting for you to come clean, to include me. I'm going to take care of this myself."

"That's not what I meant."

"I've got to go. I've got a flight to catch and a lot of work to do beforehand."

"To Denver, right? Please tell me to Denver."

"If that'll help you sleep at night," she hung up the phone with a certain amount of satisfaction. She turned back to her computer screen with a new resolve. After another hour of rifling through countless computer and paper files, she felt reasonably sure that Marko would be in Bari, Italy if she got there before he wrapped up the business he'd mentioned.

A few phone calls and favors later, she was pretty sure she could find him, too. In fact, by the time her flight to Italy was taxiing on the runway, she was feeling pretty darn proud of herself. She'd even managed to dismantle her handgun to store it in a lead-lined secret compartment in the luggage she'd snagged from Jeff's basement.

"Sir, you really should be in your seat already," the flight attendant was saying. Veronica glanced up and her heart fell.

"Sorry about that," Rick gave the flight attendant a charming smile as he settled into the seat beside Ronnie. It was obvious from her flustered return smile that all was forgiven.

"Well hell," Veronica muttered.

"I'm happy to see you too, my love," he tried the same charming grin on her, without the same effect.

"What do you want?"

“You’re like an angry kitten, you know that?”

“Ah, you came to patronize me. That could have waited until I got back. It would have been cheaper.”

“Well, when I saw that you spent three grand on a vase this afternoon, I assumed maybe you inherited some money or something. Was there a rich uncle you didn’t tell me about?”

“Jeff spent that.”

“And the statue?”

“Yeah, that was him too.”

“I hope he realizes that’s his Christmas present for the next twenty years. And I didn’t come to patronize you.”

Ronnie didn’t answer, choosing to focus on the ground dropping out from underneath them as the plane took off. The slightly dizzy feeling that induced seemed preferable to another fight with Rick.

“I came to tell you that you’re right.”

Veronica warily turned her head towards him.

“I owe you an explanation. And we should do this together. I don’t want you getting yourself killed because I backed you into a corner. I love you too much to lose you over this.”

Veronica didn’t budge, unsure what to do with that.

“Ron?”

“I’m processing.”

He cocked his head to study her, as if trying to somehow read the direction her thoughts were taking.

“You know I think public displays of affection are gross.”

“Yes, my little romantic.”

“So this flight’s going to feel really long now, because I’d like to kiss you.”

“Does that mean you accept the truce?”

“Maybe,” Veronica nodded ever-so-slightly.

She didn’t like feeling awkward around Rick, but she didn’t know what to do or say. She didn’t expect him to tell her anything while they were on the plane but she didn’t

know quite where they stood until she'd heard the whole story. Should she make small talk? Pretend nothing was wrong?

Rick seemed to understand her conundrum. He took her hand in his, kissed her fingertips then rested their hands in between them.

"So, what hotel did you book for us?"

"Adria."

"Not bad."

"It's supposedly close to the airport, railway and most historical monuments."

"Is that straight from their website?"

"Pretty much," she admitted.

"You'll like Italy. Too bad we're going to be busy with death and destruction. It would be nice to explore."

And so the conversation continued until she finally dozed off on his shoulder. When the fasten seatbelts sign dinged, it startled her awake and she cracked Rick in the nose.

"Sorry."

"It's okay," he tenderly touched his nose to assess the damage.

"Sorry," she said again, frowning in sympathy.

"I probably deserved it. Come on, let's go grab some lunch before we check in."

"Lunch? I hate time changes."

"You get used to it."

"That's comforting."

She had to admit she was glad to have Rick there as they gathered their luggage. It was her first trip to Italy, and her grasp of the language was shaky at best. He moved with a confidence she envied.

"What did work say about you being gone again?" he asked as they settled into the taxi.

"I'm working remotely this week. What about you?"

"They think I have a stomach virus."

"You're playing hooky? What a bad employee."

"I hate that job."

"Really? Why don't you work somewhere else then? You're smart enough to work

anywhere you want.”

He merely cast a look her way before turning his attention out the window. “I like this port. The travel books trash on it, but I think it’s fascinating.”

She took that as her cue to drop the subject. They ate lunch at a café overlooking the water. Conversation stayed light, but the longer they were there, the more restless Veronica became. She was eager to be alone with Rick, ready to have no more secrets between them.

This new creature in front of her was intriguing, but she missed her best friend. Was it too much to want him to be both?

“You ready to go?”

“Yes,” she agreed a little too eagerly. A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. She tried to conceal her jittery nerves as they rode to the hotel. His hand rested lightly on the back of her neck, drawing lazy circles that made her want to forget they were going someplace private to talk and they did, in fact, need to have the conversation first no matter what her teenage-esque hormones were telling her.

That’s what she told herself all the way through the check-in process. Still, by the time they stood alone in their room the electric currents running between them were nearly palpable.

He took a step towards her, and she scurried to put some distance and furniture between them. He chuckled, feinting to the right and then to the left just to watch her move in the opposite direction.

“Stop that. I don’t want you coming any closer until we’ve talked.”

“Then let’s talk,” he motioned for her to sit in one of the room’s oversized chairs. She cautiously accepted the seat, watching him as he stretched out in the other chair.

“Were you really part of that gang?”

“It’s more of a major criminal syndicate than a gang, but no. I was an undercover agent. I worked with a gentleman named Vance Davis.”

“Batman,” Veronica interjected without thinking.

“He hates that nickname. But yes, that’s him.”

“That’s who sent you the footage of me.”

Rick gave a barely perceptible nod before continuing. “I was undercover with them

for almost a year when the bust went down. Marko was put in a high-security prison. A lot of his guys were rounded up; the rest went underground. It looks like they were merely regrouping. I guess the expectation was for me to rejoin them once they resurfaced.”

“Adrianna seemed pretty hell-bent on believing you weren’t the one that betrayed them. There was a man there that didn’t seem convinced, though.”

“That would be Marko’s half-brother, Petrov Kulenović. He hates me.”

“Why?”

“Adrianna has him wrapped around her little finger,” Rick answered with a bit of discomfort. He seemed less than inclined to remind Veronica of his own ties to Adrianna.

“Nobody likes a man-whore.”

“I wouldn’t say nobody does.”

“Moving on,” she rolled her eyes.

“Right. There’s not much else to tell. The arrest happened in early spring. I planned to go in for debriefing then take a vacation before reporting to my next assignment. Instead I met a pretty Hawthorne fan and asked to be reassigned to a desk.”

“Which you hate.”

“I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me this from the beginning?” she felt herself soften under his loving gaze.

“Aren’t you the least bit mad at me for putting you in danger? If I had walked on by you that day, you’d still be living a perfect and quiet life.”

“Quiet, yes. But far from perfect,” she thought about how very empty her life had been just two years ago. “What’s your real name?”

“Richard Reid Sinclair. Sampson was the alias.”

“That makes me feel a little better.”

“Where do we go from here?” he seemed afraid to hope that her calm was anything more than a façade.

“Are you willing to work together to reclaim our life?”

He took a deep breath, as if every fiber of his being wanted to say no. “Yes. If we don’t, I’ll spend all of my time following behind you and cleaning things up.”

“That’s rude.”

He gave her a look that said it was also true.

“I just lack training. And you know I can help you.”

“It might come in handy having a woman on the team.”

“Team?”

“Your buddy Batman is helping out.”

“I look forward to meeting him.”

“You have.”

“I mean for real.”

“He should be here in about three hours,” Rick glanced at his watch.

“So I guess you want to wait to make a move until he gets here.”

“That’s the general idea.”

“Three hours, huh?” her eyes met his. Something sparked in them. Veronica found herself pulled to her feet and kissing her husband passionately. His touch was like a waterfall after a month in the desert.

Two days without shaving had given his jaw a sandpaper feel that heightened the sensation as he worked his way around her neck. His movements were both fierce and reverent. Hers were hungry.

Piece by piece, their clothing disappeared until he finally laid her back on the bed with nothing but delicious fire between them. His perfectly honed muscles were her playground. He delighted in every curve of her body.

They moved in concert, creating a symphony of emotion. Ronnie was back in his arms and she was fully alive. That’s all that mattered.

Chapter Ten

Veronica felt like a cat that’d been satiated with a bowl of milk as she stepped out of the steaming shower. Rick looked up from shaving to smile at her.

“So what did you have in mind when you climbed on that plane?”

Ronnie wrapped herself in a towel and padded into the bedroom. She set the suitcase on the bed, opening it to feel along the bottom for the release on the hidden compartment. Rick stood watching curiously, a towel around his waist and his face half covered in shaving cream. In a few deft moves, she assembled the gun and set it on the bed next to the case.

“Are you just going to walk in and shoot him? Gee, why didn’t I think of that?”

“I don’t know, honestly,” she shrugged prettily.

“Minx. You know it’s not that easy, right?”

“Maybe,” she replied flippantly, moving to get dressed. She had no sooner shimmied into the pretty cerulean dress that emphasized her girlish curves and honey-colored legs when Rick was there, trying to coax her back out of it.

“Stop it. You’re getting shaving cream on me.”

His reply was a kiss that very nearly convinced her that the mess didn’t matter. A knock at the door brought her back to reality. Rick grimaced at the interruption and slipped back into the bathroom to finish shaving. Veronica straightened her clothes and answered the door. She recognized Vance instantly.

“Hey. Good to finally meet you. Thanks for saving the day with the shoe,” she stood aside for him to enter.

“Happy to help,” his grin held a touch of amusement. “I think you missed a spot shaving.”

Ronnie furrowed her brow and rushed to the mirror. Sure enough, her husband had left a swatch of shaving cream on her neck and cheek.

“Damn it, Rick,” she muttered, grabbing Kleenex to wipe the white foam off of her face.

“What?” he appeared in the doorway of the bathroom, still in a towel but now clean-shaven.

“Would you please put some clothes on?”

“Is it too distracting?” he teased, grabbing a pair of jeans from the bed and heading back to the bathroom.

“I’m so sorry. He’s apparently not used to having company,” she ignored him and turned her attention to Vance. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“A bottle of water would be great,” he sat in one of the room’s chairs, waiting for Rick to reappear.

“You work as an independent contractor?”

“Yes.”

“So, you just go around catching bad guys all the time?”

“Busting up human trafficking rings is sort of a specialty of mine.”

“Ah. I’m good at grammar. I can spot a misplaced comma from a mile away.”

Another grin tugged the corner of Vance’s mouth. Something told Veronica full-out smiles were a rare occurrence for this man. He was actually fairly attractive, with sandy brown hair and hazel eyes. But his build and countenance were so imposing she wondered if many women looked beyond those.

“You remind me a little of an old friend.”

“Old?”

“Long-standing. Not old in age,” he assured her.

“Really? What does she do?”

“Well, actually, she was a prostitute.”

“Do I want to know?” Rick joined them in the room.

“Vance was just saying I remind him of an old friend.”

“That’s a good thing,” Vance once again assured her, his lip twitching in what appeared to be the third hint of a grin. Veronica considered that a real boon.

“So, what’s the word, my friend?” Rick turned to business.

“From what I can gather, Marko is looking to expand business. He’s joined with a group of Nigerians bringing girls to Lampedusa. He’s already using Italy as a transit state for his girls from Bulgaria and to legitimize the antique business. Now the Nigerians will be piggybacking across the pond with the rest.”

Veronica involuntarily winced at the thought. It was hard to wrap her brain around the idea of trading human like cattle in this day and age.

“I spoke with Interpol on my way over,” Vance continued. “Their intel puts him at a warehouse on the marina today. That seems as good a place as any to strike.”

“Let me get this straight... the plan is to just walk in and shoot him?” Veronica practically purred the question.

“More or less—it seemed the most direct way to get him off your back. Is there a problem with that?” Vance seemed confused.

“Nope,” Veronica grinned. “I think it’s a great plan.”

She made a face at Rick and he made one back at her. “You might want to change clothes, princess.”

“I will, now that I know the plan.”

“How long have you two been married again?”

Veronica ignored the question and pulled a nondescript black t-shirt and some jeans out of her bag. She changed quickly in the bathroom, mentally promising the pretty blue dress its chance another day. With her hair swept into a ponytail and a pair of black boots donned, she was ready to go.

“Forgetting something?” Rick held the handgun out to her.

“Whoops. Thanks,” she accepted it and stuck the gun in her boot.

“Better hope that doesn’t go off,” Rick warned.

“How is sticking it in my boot any worse than you shoving a gun in your waistband?”

“My safety is on.”

“So’s mine,” she waited for him to turn his back before double checking that the safety was, in fact, on.

Many things seem good in theory until put into practice. This reality settled over Veronica as she stood pressed against a wall in the dark, waiting for the signal to move in on the warehouse.

It seemed utterly absurd that she would be participating in an assassination. It hadn’t been that long ago her idea of pressure was picking out a china pattern.

Vance might have worked with Interpol on some level to obtain his intelligence, but they were conspicuously absent now. Ronnie had the feeling they were looking the other way, allowing this little crew to take care of an inconvenient problem in a less-than-legal way.

Vance disappeared around a corner. Rick stayed attached to her side. Maybe he was babysitting her, but his presence was reassuring nonetheless.

“You sure you want to go through with this?” his breath brushed her ear.

“You were expecting me to chicken out, weren’t you?”

“Not so much expecting as hoping.”

Veronica wished he could see her glower in the dark—or at least sense it.

“Remember, you stay out of sight. Guard those doors. If anyone besides me or Vance comes out, shoot them in the leg. If they’re carrying a gun, you can shoot higher. Got it?”

“Got it,” she doubted the instructions would be the same for a seasoned professional; he was worried she’d kill the janitor. Her irritation dissipated after he vanished into the shadows. She suddenly felt very alone and exposed.

And then a world of chaos exploded around her. Gunfire and shouting resounded through the night air. An explosion rocked the building; men spilled out of the doors in front of Veronica. Rick and Vance were nowhere in sight, so she did as she’d been told. The first shot caught them by surprise. By the second, they were returning fire.

Veronica exchanged volleys with them, managing to successfully dodge being shot herself. A scream ripped through the air and she poked her head around to see a tall man standing in the middle of the group with a female hostage as a shield.

From her vantage point, she could tell the girl was terrified, and Veronica’s heart broke for her. Her blood also boiled. The man had unwittingly just made himself Ronnie’s prime target. She ignored the shots zinging past her head and leveled very careful aim. She didn’t need a kill shot, just one that would loosen his grip.

The first bullet ripped through his side and the gap between he and his victim widened for the briefest of seconds, which was enough for the second bullet to catch him a little further in and drive them a little further apart. The girl screamed again and tore from his grasp.

She would have gone for the kill with the third shot, but pain reverberated through her shoulder, and she was knocked backwards. She didn’t have to look to know she’d been hit. Flames of pain were now lapping at her arm like a fire.

With an outraged cry, she fired again, but the men were climbing in their SUVs and out of her range. Knowing she could easily become the hunted, she melted back into the shadows. The pain from her shoulder was now rolling across her in great waves.

Sirens wailed in the distance and the sky glowed orange. She was bathed in a cold sweat. The scenery around her seemed distorted, and she knew she was in danger of

passing out. She'd never live it down if that happened.

Veronica gritted her teeth and made her way back towards the warehouse once the coast was clear. A whimper from an alleyway caught her attention.

"Hello?" she called out softly. A young woman with perfect ebony skin stepped tentatively into the light at the sound of a warm female voice. Her eyes said she recognized Veronica as the one who had freed her earlier. Ronnie motioned for the girl to join her.

After a wary glance at the gun in Veronica's hand, the woman scurried to her side. The two moved together in silence through the night. They weren't far from the rendezvous point, but it felt insurmountable.

Emergency crews had arrived to put the fire out. Ronnie hesitated at the intersection of light and shadow. She was covered in blood, was accompanied by a woman smuggled into the country, and she spoke little Italian. It seemed prudent to stay out of sight.

Strong arms grabbed her from behind. Panic flared until she recognized the one who held her. She relaxed and allowed herself to be pulled away from the growing crowd. Vance was reassuring the other woman in a hushed language she didn't recognize.

Rick led her to a dark van, holding the passenger door open for her to climb in.

"You're hurt," he gaped at the blood now on both of their shirts.

"A little, maybe."

"How much blood were you going to leak before you admitted it?"

"Can we fight about this later?" she licked her lips; her mouth felt so very dry. As she leaned back in her seat, the adrenaline that had been propping her up seeped away. She gave him what was supposed to be a reassuring smile and closed her eyes. She just needed to rest for one minute.

"Ron? Veronica?" the fear in his voice made her want to open her eyes, but it was so very difficult.

A deep blackness gripped her. By the time she was close enough to the surface to fight it again, the air was different. It was cool and artificial... sterilized. A white world slowly came into focus through heavy-lidded eyes.

Her shoulder pounded dully against a binding. Confusion prickled at her brain. She was heavy with exhaustion; it seemed to pin her to the bed.

“Rick,” her voice sounded harsh and raspy to her own ears.

“Yes, love?” he was instantly at her side, taking her hand in his.

“There’s something on my shoulder.” She tried to move and winced. The dull pounding was replaced by a flash of searing pain.

“It’s a bandage. You were shot.”

“That’s right,” the memories crashed into place. “How is the girl?”

“She’s going to be fine, thanks to you.”

“Good. Then it was worth the trip.”

“Marko got away.” Rick picked up a Styrofoam cup and offered her an ice chip.

“Thanks,” she was grateful for the drop of moisture in her parched mouth. “I didn’t get a good look, but I think I at least gave him a few souvenirs to take with him.”

“Are you trying to say I should have seen the other guy?” Rick’s lip twitched.

“Something like that.”

“They weren’t all supposed to come out that side door.”

“I thought I did okay.”

“Right up until you got shot.”

“Besides that part.”

“Good Lord, you scared me, Ron.”

“I’m sorry,” the original sassy retort died on her lips. He seemed so upset; she hadn’t meant to cause him worry. Veronica reached up with her good arm to cup his face. He seemed incredibly vulnerable in that moment as he leaned into her touch.

Through a haze of pain, she marveled at this man who brought such sparkle to her life. What had caused love to blossom there? What magic tie bound them together?

“I love you, Richard Reid Sinclair,” she breathed the words as much as spoke them.

“How much morphine did they give you?” he rested his forehead against hers.

“I don’t know, but I think it was a lot,” her quiet laugh mingled with his. It tapered off with a sigh. “I’m sorry; I’m not a very good spy.”

“Are you kidding me? To hear Anuli’s version of things, you’re a regular wonder woman.”

Veronica couldn’t help feeling just a little proud. It felt good to have helped someone.

“There were other women. We’re working with the Italian government to process them.”

“What will happen next?”

“They’ll be given six-month residency permits while they undergo job training. Vance works with a slew of non-profits to be sure the women are placed in safe homes while they learn a trade. That’s an important step—sometimes victims are deported before they’re identified as victims. Then they’ll just be sold again.”

“They were sold by their families?”

“Some of them. Some were tricked into leaving their homes with the promise of a job. Then their papers were taken away and they were stuck.”

They both fell silent; Rick was giving her the time she needed to process what he was telling her. Veronica tore her eyes away from him, needing a moment to collect her thoughts.

“This isn’t a hospital,” she truly took in her surroundings for the first time.

“It’s the hospital wing of a private villa.”

“Who has their own hospital wing?”

“Really rich people who often take in rescued slaves.”

“Makes sense, I guess,” Veronica mulled it over. “So, is this some sort of top secret government thing?”

“Nah. The government is too busy pork barreling legislation for crap nobody wants or needs to put something like this together. This is an international network of private citizens put together by Vance. He had to do something with the girls once he saved them. Most either don’t have a home to go back to or have a family that’s completely dependent on them for support. Actually, the prostitute he told you about earlier runs a safe house in Missouri.”

That statement hit Veronica like a splash of cold water. It was an ugly realization; whether she’d wanted to admit it or not, she’d been offended to be compared to a hooker. Perhaps she’d gotten it backwards.

“You look tired,” he misread her quiet demeanor. “I’m going to make arrangements for us to head back to D.C. You get some rest; I’ll check on you in a bit.”

“Back to D.C.?”

“Just until your shoulder heals. Then we’ll figure out what’s next.”

“But what about the people trying to kill us?”

“Like I said, I’m working out the details. Now get some sleep.”

Veronica nodded, accepting his kiss on the forehead before turning to look out the small window in her room.

A dark cloud settled over her mood. She managed to be polite to the nurse that checked in on her—especially since the blessed woman came bearing morphine. When she was alone again, Ronnie was unable to fight off the drug’s pull to sleep. Still, a heavy discontent followed her into a restless slumber.

When Veronica opened her eyes again, she wasn’t alone. Sunlight snuck through the cracks of curtains that had been pulled tight. On the other side of the sun, the woman she now knew as Anuli stood in the shadow watching her. When she realized Veronica’s eyes were open, she turned to scurry out of the room.

“Wait,” Ronnie called out, unsure if the girl would even understand her.

The young woman paused, turning partially.

“I would be grateful for the company,” Veronica extended a hand.

Anuli took a hesitant step towards her. Ronnie gave her an encouraging smile and the woman sat in the chair beside the bed. She remained poised on the edge of the seat, her entire body tense.

“You’re safe here. These are good people.”

A look flashed through Anuli’s eyes that said she understood at least the intent of Veronica’s words. Ronnie tried to think of what to say that wouldn’t be trite or hollow. The truth was, she had no point of reference. Her own life was so far removed from that of this broken, beautiful woman before her.

“I had a baby once,” Anuli began in somewhat deliberate English. “The maman steal the baby from me. She force me on the street a few days after childbirth.”

The statement shocked Ronnie; it took her a moment to blink back the moisture in her eyes. Anuli continued, telling Veronica the story of how she’d been taken from her village and shipped to a small island off the coast of Italy. From there, she’d been sent to work in Bari before being taken to the warehouse on the marina, bound for America along with a boat full of antiques and women fresh from Bulgaria.

She'd found herself in hell, daily tormented and daily subjected to violence. Her family took their share of the money and did not cry out for her return, not that anyone would have heard them if they had.

"I'm so very sorry," the words fell short, but they were all she had to offer.

"When that man wanted to kill me, you stopped him. You did something," Anuli took Veronica's hand and gave her a look of adoration Ronnie didn't feel she deserved.

Rick found the women holding hands and smiling at each other. Veronica tried to read the look in his clouded eyes. She couldn't be sure, but she might have seen a tear meandering down his cheek before he disappeared from the doorway.

Chapter Eleven

Veronica should have been happy to be home. Lord knows the clean cotton sheets and familiar mattress felt like heaven to her weary body their first night back. Rick had retrieved the dogs from Jeff's, and they now flanked her protectively at all times.

Maybe it was surreal being back in her sedate world after such a whirlwind adventure. Maybe sitting on a couch editing Web text didn't hold much appeal after the rush of putting your life on the line for that of another. It all just seemed so hollow now.

"I know that expression," Rick sat down on the couch next to her, careful not to jar her shoulder.

"What expression?" she closed her laptop with a little more force than intended. "It's nothing. I'm just sick of looking at this text."

"What are you working on?"

"Editing the breaking news from our Chicago bureau. There's always something. New terror threat. New kidnapping. More breaking news from some bureau or another."

"That's how it goes."

"I tell the stories so often; I guess I'd forgotten there were people behind them."

"What's going on, love?"

"I don't want to write the stories anymore."

“Okay,” he answered slowly. “We’ll get Marko off our backs and then the world’s our oyster. Whatever direction you want to head, we’ll go.”

“I want to be a part of them.”

“Them?”

“The stories. I want to live them, not write them.”

“You want to be on the most wanted list?”

“I want to do what Vance does. I want my life to be about helping others—making things better.”

“Not everyone has to be in the thick of it, you know. There’s other ways to help.”

“But someone has to be in the thick of it. Sometimes sending a check isn’t enough.”

“There’s no room for 2.7 children in Vance’s world. Having two dogs is even a stretch.”

“You’re such a party pooper,” Veronica frowned. He had a point. “I don’t have all of the details worked out. I just know I can’t frolic through my merry little life anymore.”

“I think you’re being too hard on yourself.”

“I think I’ve lived my life in a protective bubble so far. Did you know there are sex slaves right down the street from my favorite store? I was buying shoes while women were being brutalized 100 yards away. How did I not know that? How can I turn my back on that now that I know?”

“I’m all for a change of pace, love. I just don’t know that you’re in the right frame of mind to be making a life decision.”

Veronica set the laptop aside and snuggled up against Rick’s side. He kissed the top of her head and stroked her hair.

“I’m not sure I could handle you being in danger all of the time. Italy nearly killed me.”

“Can we at least work together to dismantle Marko’s organization? I mean, if we just take him out, you know his brother will step in and fill the role.”

“True,” he agreed.

“But if we completely dismantled the organization... from the inside out... that would be something, right?”

“It would be nice to finish what I started.”

“And then we’ll see where that takes us.”

He regarded her for a moment before relenting. “We’ve got to get you healthy first. And you’ll need a bit of training.”

“You can train me.”

“Of course. I can train you,” he laughed. “Wait...you’re serious.”

“Very.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m afraid you’re going to kick my ass if I start bossing you around.”

“Nah, it’ll be good for us. Bonding and all that.”

He didn’t look convinced, but the doorbell cut their conversation short. With a frustrated sigh, he ran his fingers through his hair before shoving himself off the couch to see who it was. Despite his assurances that they were well protected, Veronica tensed.

“Richard,” the eyes that leveled on Rick were not happy ones.

“Look, love—it’s your parents,” Rick stood back and motioned for them to come inside.

“Veronica, we’ve been worried sick about you. Jeff will tell us nothing,” Helen Talbot entered the room with all the finesse of a hurricane. Ronnie knew her mother well enough to see she was just getting warmed up. “First that strange woman shows up at your wedding. You haven’t returned any of my phone calls. You disappeared with your brother—he came back and you and Richard take off, work says you’ve hardly been in the office since the wedding. What’s going on?”

Veronica took a breath to respond, only to be interrupted by her father.

“Keep in mind what I already know... before you start working on a lie.”

“Really Daddy? Have you ever known me to lie to you?”

“Do you want me to answer that?”

Veronica pursed her lips and thought about that one. “Right. Look, we just had a few things come up. It’s fine, really. And as for work... I’ve been thinking about taking your advice, Daddy... maybe doing something that entails a little bit more field work.”

“Great. I’ll make a phone call tomorrow.”

“Not for the Bureau, Daddy.”

“I don’t understand.”

“A former colleague of mine had offered us a position,” Rick stepped into the conversation. He exchanged a look with Veronica that spoke volumes.

“I don’t like it,” Sean frowned.

“How is this different than me getting a job in a field office?”

“I can watch you in a field office.”

“I’m a grown woman.”

“You’ll understand someday when you have kids of your own,” Helen assured her.

“About that...,” Veronica took a deep breath, her eyes locking with Rick’s. He flashed her an incredibly charming grin only she could understand.

“Just rip my heart out of my chest and stomp on it,” Helen threw her hands up.

“Mom,” Veronica rolled her eyes.

“Don’t you mom me... you know Jeff isn’t going to give me grandchildren any time soon. You were my best hope.”

“You’re not going to guilt me into having children, mother.”

“The truth is, we can’t have children,” Rick interjected.

“What do you mean?”

“It really just came up. We’re still working through it ourselves,” Rick expounded.

“We’ll find you the best medical care possible,” her mother swore.

“You know what? I’m actually feeling a little worn out. Could we talk about this later?” Ronnie ushered her parents towards the door, casting a death glare at Rick behind their backs.

After kisses and reassurances that she would be fine, Veronica finally closed the door on her parents. Once they were alone, she whirled to face Rick.

“What was that?”

“I’m so sorry. I panicked.”

“You panicked? The big, bad spy panicked in the face of Helen Talbot?”

“Your mother is a terrifying woman.”

He seemed so sincere Veronica couldn’t help the giggle that escaped. “You’re a horrible man. You shouldn’t have told her that.”

“We’ll clarify that I meant logistically later,” he promised.

“Are you planning on emailing her when we’re in another country?”

“Something like that,” he pulled her into his arms, careful not to bump her shoulder. She took a deep breath, allowing the mixture of sweet spice and woodsy to wrap itself around her senses.

“Stupid shoulder.”

“Is it hurting?” he pulled back to examine her, his expression concerned.

“Not much. But it’s keeping me from what I really want.”

“Is it now?”

“Mm-hmm,” Ronnie licked her lips, her eyes fixated at the base of his throat. It felt like ages since she’d tasted him last. Her fingers acted of their own accord, finding their way under his shirt to his bare skin. There they ran lightly along the muscles of his abdomen. A guttural groan escaped his lips as her teeth grazed the skin of his neck.

“Woman, you’re going to kill me yet.”

“Whatever do you mean?” her tongue teased his flesh.

“I’m not going to be able to control myself much longer.”

“Fine,” she reluctantly pulled away. If she ripped open the wound in her shoulder, it would set them back even further. “The doctor said it would take about three weeks to be good as new, right?”

“Three weeks,” he repeated, his voice thick. “Three very long weeks.”

Thanks to a montage moment in their lives, three weeks passed more quickly than either of them expected. Rick stayed busy making plans and preparations. Veronica would have been more interested in being a part of them if she hadn’t been so preoccupied finding her replacement at work.

She considered keeping her newly acquired art for sentimental value, but figured the money would be more useful than sentiment. She felt a skosh of guilt over moving black market goods, but told herself it was for the greater good.

Of course, everything Veronica did was from the townhouse. Rick had her under constant surveillance should anyone from Marko’s operation turn up. The lack of retaliation was eerie. Veronica wondered if they were playing mind games or truly regrouping. Either way, she was always on edge.

Courtney was back in her own home, after Jeff and Rick helped her set it right again.

Veronica was eager to hear how all of that togetherness had gone for them. The fact that Jeff was still not only alive, but following Courtney around had Ronnie intrigued. Thankfully, Courtney had agreed to be a dog nanny to their babies. Knowing they were happy and cared for helped set her mind at ease.

Helen Talbot had made it her own personal mission to get Veronica the finest medical treatment available. The endless procession of her mother's well-meaning friends calling to offer advice and referrals significantly slowed her progress. The longer she let it go without setting the record straight, the harder it would be to do so. Still, it seemed silly to fight that battle with her life hanging in the balance. After she'd taken down the major crime syndicate that was after her, maybe she'd feel better equipped to face her mother with the truth.

Chapter Twelve

It wasn't long before Veronica found herself sitting on the stone patio of a charming hacienda sipping a cocktail and listening to the soothing gurgle of water in the concrete fountain that stood as the garden's centerpiece.

Pink and purple flowers wound their way around the concrete pillar railing that lined the patio. Veronica had instantly fallen in love with the white Spanish-style home with blue trim. The roof was made of rounded tile, and a stone chimney rose from the center of the building.

Terra cotta pots with brightly colored flowers lined the patio. Tropical trees offered their branches for shade. Perhaps most heady was the delicious scent of roses hanging in the air all around her.

Rick sat at her right, completely at ease in this paradise. Across from her sat a man who defined the phrase tall, dark and handsome. His tousled hair bore the look of someone just in from horseback riding. A layer of scruff nearly concealed the dimple created when he smiled at her. His eyes were the color of her favorite toffee colored diamond earrings.

He was solid and rugged and every inch masculine. He was the kind of man that made her mind instantly start flipping through her mental rolodex, trying to find the perfect woman for him. It seemed a crime against nature that he remained single.

Behind him stood a pretty blonde who was perhaps 90 pounds, and yet there was something in her stance that said she was not to be trifled with. Veronica instantly respected her.

When Rick suggested training in the jungles of Ecuador, Veronica envisioned something much more grueling than their current setting. Oppressive humidity and rain forests had come to mind. Instead, she sat chatting easily with an ex-patriot who'd moved to South America after the Andean Trade Preferences Act had been passed in the '90s. The American tycoon had seen an opportunity and now lived a life of luxury growing roses in paradise. He fascinated her with his ability to just set out on a grand adventure. Although, she supposed her own current adventure was nothing to sneeze at.

On their way to Ecuador, Rick had explained how carefully planned their host's venture had been. He paid well over traditional daily wages in the area, provided free childcare for his workers, and even set up accounts for the women at the local grocer so their husbands could not drink away their wages.

His entire operation was earth-friendly, socially responsible and very smart. He was also quick to credit the woman standing behind him for implementing most of it. Devon McAlister and his assistant were a good team.

"Stay as long as you want," he was assuring them both. "You know we're happy to help any way we can. Sorry for the rough start to the marriage. That was kind of suckish of them."

"Yes, it was very suckish of them," Veronica agreed, a bubble of laughter escaping over his chosen description. It summed things up pretty well. "Some of the people I've encountered since embarking on this journey have put things into perspective for me, though."

Veronica still hadn't managed to escape the measure of guilt she felt when she thought about Anuli and the other women of similar fate.

"You have to stop beating yourself up for being born into better circumstances than others," Rick reminded her for the tenth time.

“I’m good at making money,” Devon interjected. “Always have been. My dad was good at making money, too. I don’t feel guilty about that—but I do use what I’m good at to help others.”

Veronica nodded, as if she were not completely sold on the idea.

“The same applies for the person who is good at fixing cars or delivering packages. They still have something to offer mankind. You are where you are for a reason. You can use it, or you can waste it.”

His words followed her through dinner and even as she lay in her bed that night. The more she thought about it, the more she realized the guilt she was feeling stemmed from how little she’d done more than anything else.

She’d been a good student, had followed all the rules and was good at her job. But her existence would leave no imprint on the universe. At the rate she was going, she would someday earn a riveting eulogy along the lines of “she took up air.”

Maybe Rick was right, maybe she was being too hard on herself. Still, it was hard to shake. From the cadence of his breathing, she knew he wasn’t asleep either. She enjoyed just being with him, soaking up his presence and the ambience of this new place.

“I’ve always enjoyed visiting Devon’s home.”

“It’s lovely.”

“Tomorrow we move to the training grounds. You might be demanding a divorce by tomorrow evening.”

“I’m not that easy to get rid of.”

“Just remind yourself you love me, okay?”

Veronica wasn’t sure how to reply to that ominous statement, so she didn’t even try. It seemed better to simply enjoy feeling the rise and fall of his chest under her cheek. She might have fallen asleep that way, if he hadn’t wrapped his legs around her and rolled her over, playfully growling and biting at her neck. Laughter bubbled up and she gladly succumbed to his antics.

The next morning, as she walked through the sticky jungle with all of her supplies on her back, the weight of the pack pulling at her shoulders, she vaguely regretted not getting more sleep the night before. It was hard to believe they were still on Devon’s property; their new surroundings were so vastly different than the homestead. That had

been a cultivated paradise. This was untamed jungle.

Conversation was sparse as they made their way through the dense vegetation. Veronica needed her oxygen to function and Rick seemed lost in thought. Sometimes she felt like she was married to two men—one that could charm a nun out of her habit and one that was brooding and mysterious. The second she knew little about, and that was unnerving.

Any hopes she had for getting to know the other side of her husband were dashed by harsh reality. Brooding, mysterious types were—by nature—not a chatty bunch. Her initial attempts to engage him in conversation were thwarted by the intense expression in his dark gray-green eyes. In fact, the more steel in his eyes, the less likely she was to even get a grunt from him. The man had a wicked scowl when he wanted to.

It didn't take long for the sheer rigor of her day to lead her to give up attempts at conversation. For a solid week, his focus was on whipping her into shape.

"Holy cow," she huffed one evening as she collapsed in a gelatinous pile on her bunk. "I used to think I was fairly fit."

Rick's bark of a laugh earned a fierce glare.

"Don't get me wrong, you have always looked amazing," he quickly amended.

"But..."

"You're kind of a cream puff."

"A cream puff?" her voice raised a notch.

"But you're beautiful, love. Love?"

"I'm not speaking to you anymore," she rolled over on her side, glaring angrily at the wall. Maybe he was right—she had wrongly equated dress size with physical fitness—but he didn't have to call her names. "Humph. We'll see who the cream puff is."

That thought pushed her onward each day—she clung to it for strength. When her muscles begged for mercy, she pushed them harder. When her lungs cried out, she steeled her mind to the burn.

After the second week of torture, he moved into the next phase of their training. For hours on end, they mocked battles as she brushed up on the martial arts she'd learned in her youth.

In stage three, he began assigning her missions to carry out undetected. Some were

seemingly silly, like the time she had to swipe her lunch from a cooler under his protection. Some were more in-depth. Some were down-right terrifying, like the exercise that unintentionally brought her face-to-face with a jaguar.

They emerged from the jungle one month after entering it, and when they did, she felt ready. She felt powerful. She wondered if she should shave her head and insist he call her G.I. Jane.

“You know, I think I’m a little sad to be leaving.”

“Is that your masochist streak coming out? Or was I too easy on you?”

“Shut up, Dick.”

A wolf whistle interrupted Rick’s reply.

“You went in a pretty woman and came out a goddess,” Devon called from the porch.

“Hit on my wife all you want McAlister—she has no use for the likes of you.”

“I don’t know; I’ve always been a sucker for tall, dark and handsome.”

“Minx,” he made a dive for her that she successfully dodged, leaving him holding her pack instead.

“Such a gentleman,” she fluttered her eyelashes prettily at him.

He grumbled something unintelligible but shouldered the extra load nonetheless. A spread was being laid out on the patio table; the aroma was making Veronica’s mouth water. Before she could reach for so much as a tortilla, Devon ushered them off to their rooms to shower.

The hot water and scented soap made it worth the wait, though. She also felt like a whole new woman in the gauzy white skirt and blouse that had been laid out for her. She brushed her hair out and let the wet tendrils tumble about her shoulders as she padded barefoot back to the veranda.

Rick was already there, listening intently as Devon discussed the U.S. recession and its impact on the rose market. Both men stood to greet her. As they settled over their lunch, talk turned to business.

“Rumor has it that your disappearance is driving Marko Kulenović a little nuts,”

Devon informed them. “When they couldn’t find you after a few weeks, Marko returned to his estate in Bulgaria. He is threatening to officially place Petrov Kulenović in charge

of New York—a fact Adrianna seems displeased with. Apparently her inability to bring Rick in has reflected poorly on her.”

Veronica didn’t bother feeling guilty over the smug satisfaction that knowledge gave her. She’d not forgotten her promise to make Adrianna regret crashing her wedding. Being in the dog house with Marko was just the beginning.

“Have you heard about Vance? Is he okay?” she asked.

“Vance is always okay,” Rick answered. “It’s scary how good that man is at his job.”

“It really is,” Devon agreed. “Oh—I almost forgot. I have a present for you.”

Veronica grabbed one last piece of bread as Devon motioned for the table to be cleared. He produced rolled-up blue prints, which he spread across the newly cleared table.

“What are we looking at?” she asked.

“Marko’s estate. Turns out I know the builder. We worked together in another lifetime. Anyway, I thought this might be helpful. Vance also said he sent some encrypted files with Marko’s itinerary for the next week. He seemed to think that your best approach would be to insert Veronica as an antique tourist.”

“I assume you mean a tourist in search of antiques and not an old person.”

“I do,” Devon said with a grin.

“No way,” Rick was not amused.

“Why did I spend the last month in the Rick Sinclair Torture Factory if you weren’t going to let me help?”

“Help, yes. Run straight into the lion’s den all by yourself, no.”

“Really? You want to have this conversation now?”

“Well this is awkward.”

“See Rick? You’re making things weird for our host. Stop being obstinate.”

“You stop being obstinate.”

“Fine. What’s your plan?”

“I’ll turn myself in to Marko. Get myself back in his good graces.”

“He’ll shoot you before you say hello,” Devon shook his head.

“You’re not that charming,” Veronica added.

“Thank you, really.”

“No one’s that charming, babe. It’s nothing personal. Marko doesn’t know me.”

“You’re assuming he hasn’t seen pictures of you, either.”

“Even if he has, that’s all he’s seen. Put a wig on me and some colored contacts and he won’t see past them.”

Rick eyed her skeptically.

“Come on, please? I’ve always wanted to be a redhead. I want short, funky red hair. And green eyes... no, gray eyes.”

“I’m in charge, though. You have to swear to me now to do as I say. No arguing.”

“No arguing.”

“That’s settled. Great. Now who wants a beer?” Devon clapped Rick on the back cheerfully.

Chapter Thirteen

They left Ecuador the next morning, after a fond farewell and a promise to stay in touch. It felt oddly like saying goodbye at the end of a holiday visit.

The trip to Bulgaria was a long one. Despite getting some sleep on the plane, Veronica was exhausted by the time they reached their hotel in Varna. It was a beautiful city nestled on the coast; she could see why it was considered the gem of the Black sea.

She was also very glad to have Rick along. If not for him, she would have gotten into a decoy taxi and been robbed blind or worse. Thankfully, he was kind enough not to say, “I told you so.”

When they got to the hotel, they pulled the drapes closed and collapsed on the bed. Veronica vaguely remembered a time when collapsing on a bed with Rick wouldn’t have been done in exhaustion. With that, she sighed heavily and fell asleep.

She awoke before he did and went to shower. By the time he roused, she’d completed the transformation process. The cerulean dress that had been tossed aside in Italy was perfect for her purposes on this day. With it and her new, sassy auburn hair and dark gray eyes she felt like a man-eater.

Rick gave a low whistle from the doorway. He leaned casually against the frame and watched her apply the final touches to her makeup.

“You like it?”

His expression said he’d like to devour her. She took that as a positive.

“You remember the plan, right?” he returned his attention to business.

“Absolutely. Go shopping. Get his attention. See if I can get an invite. Check into the new hotel when I’m done. You’ll contact me when it’s safe. If I get into trouble, send the bat signal.”

“Very funny.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, you crazy wench. Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“The careful-est,” she stood on tiptoe to brush a kiss against his lips.

Despite the confidence she exuded for Rick’s sake, she was a nervous wreck on the inside. Warnings about traveling in Bulgaria from the state department’s website bounced around her brain. She wasn’t so much worried about things like pickpockets or even civil unrest. It was the scams like charging \$10,000 for a drink and then breaking the person’s kneecap when they couldn’t pay that had her nervous. Accidentally ordering a 10-k glass of wine was definitely within her realm of stupidity.

Since cash was king in this country, she was also carrying around the largest amount of currency she’d ever seen. Most of it was stashed in her bra, which meant she had to fight the urge to continually pat herself to be sure it was still there. She couldn’t help discretely checking just once or twice as she wandered up and down the streets of open-air markets.

She paused to watch a painter working on a portrait of a young couple. The posing pair seemed so in love, Veronica couldn’t help smiling at them.

“You should have your picture painted,” a man materialized beside her, leaning in a little as he spoke to her.

“Of me? I don’t think so,” Veronica shook her head, a little flustered by the stranger’s nearness. He smelled delicious; she recognized cinnamon and sandalwood. There was a hint of a third scent... Italian bergamot maybe? Something citrusy.

“A woman as beautiful as you? Of course you should,” his smile was actually quite

winning.

“Does that line work for you often?”

“Ah. American women. There’s nothing like them.”

“You’re not American? Your accent is very Midwest,” she tried to figure out why this tall and handsome man seemed so familiar to her.

“No, Bulgarian born and bred, though I do frequently travel to your country.”

“Really? You don’t fit the type... you’re so tall,” she blurted, a little appalled at her own rudeness.

“There might be a touch of Yank on my mother’s side, but don’t tell anyone,” he whispered conspiratorially. “You really aren’t the least bit affected by my charm?”

“Sorry, I’m a woman on a mission. I only stopped to admire the paintings for a moment.”

“A mission? That sounds quite intriguing. Do tell.”

“Well,” she reasoned that this man might be able to point her towards her target. “I heard Varna has some amazing deals on Roman artifacts.”

“You like the old Roman empire?”

“I’m a fan.”

Laughter rumbled low in his throat, and he looked quite proud of himself. “Then you are in luck. I happen to be an excellent resource for finding ancient Roman artifacts.”

“Are you now? I’m not sure I believe you. How do I know you aren’t just luring a naïve American off to her doom?”

“I’m quite harmless, I assure you. Here’s my card. Stop by this evening. We’ll have dinner, and I’ll show you my personal collection.”

“How do I know ‘personal collection’ isn’t code for something nefarious... Marko Kulenović?” she read his name off the card. Suddenly his familiarity made perfect sense, although the pictures she’d seen had not done the man justice.

“So distrustful...”

“I’ll come to dinner,” she held up a hand to stop his reproach.

“Seven o’clock,” he smiled, his brown eyes locking with hers as he bowed to kiss her hand.

He left her standing alone, a little shaken by the sensation that rippled through her

hand from his kiss. Of all the realities she'd tried to prepare for, the possibility that Marko would be undeniably attractive hadn't even crossed her mind. Not just hot, but appealing... charming. It stood in direct odds with everything she knew about him.

A little dazed, she wandered back through the crowds to the hotel she would be staying in while undercover. The Grand Hotel Musala Palace was a beautiful building with a yellow and white exterior that made Veronica smile. It was happy, like a bouquet of daisies.

The ornate scrollwork, both inside and out, spoke of grandeur. It was elegant, if not a little overly so. The décor was reminiscent of the Victorian era, which had always made Ronnie feel a little uneasy. Still, she found herself pulled in by the ambiance of the place. She wondered if Rick had chosen this hotel as a treat for her or as part of the persona she was playing. Probably the latter.

When she gave her name at the front desk, she was handed a room key without the normal check in process. So she wasn't entirely surprised to find Rick in her room when she arrived. He had said he'd contact her.

"Vance, good to see you!" she was pleasantly surprised by his presence. "Isn't Adrianna going to miss you?"

"I'm here to oversee a shipment of antiques back to New York," he looked up from his laptop to smile at her.

She kissed his cheek before turning her attention to Rick, ignoring Vance's blush.

"So... that was a lucky break, eh? I'm glad he approached me. I didn't even recognize him from his pictures."

"So you were flirting with him for fun?"

"I wasn't flirting, I was being polite," she stared incredulously at him. "Why are you scowling at me? I did what I was supposed to do—made contact with Marko Kulenović. He invited me to dinner."

"That's a bad idea; I don't want you to go."

"Don't be stupid. Of course I'm going."

"I don't like the way that guy looks at you. He was undressing you with his eyes the entire time."

"Did it ever occur to you that's a good thing?"

“Yeah, I get it. Tall dark and handsome. Nice, love.”

Vance arched his eyebrows, looking from Rick to Veronica and back to his computer screen.

“If he is attracted to me, we should use that to our advantage.”

“What exactly are you proposing?”

“Only that I stay undercover, and we see where this leads.”

“I’ll tell you where it’ll lead,” his voice was a growl. “It’ll lead to you in his bed. Call me crazy, but I’m not sold on the idea.”

“I have no intention of hopping in bed with him.”

“How do you plan to avoid that?”

“I’m not breaking his knee caps,” Vance interjected, causing Rick and Veronica to stop and stare blankly at him. He shrugged and went back to work. Rick and Veronica squared off.

“You’re being an obstinate fool. What was Ecuador... playing in the jungle? We trained for this chance. Now it’s been handed to us. Don’t blow it because you don’t trust me,” angry tears welled in her eyes. Sure she had noticed that Marko was an attractive man, and maybe her hand had tingled just a little bit... but that was a far cry from hopping in the man’s bed, and Rick should know her better than that.

“It’s not about trust; it’s about safety,” his voice was low, but his accent thick. Veronica knew he was as angry as she; he was just better at controlling it in front of company.

“You guys do know that Marko’s hosting a party tonight, right? There’ll be about fifty people there—including me,” Vance interrupted. “I don’t think it would hurt anything for Veronica to keep the date tonight and regroup in the morning.”

“Poor choice of words,” she whispered loudly to Vance.

“Very funny, Ron,” Rick ran his fingers through his hair. She knew he wasn’t happy, but he was conceding.

“I’ve downloaded everything I have to the laptop,” Vance stood and stretched. “Now I have to get moving before someone wonders why I haven’t shown up yet.”

“You’ll keep an eye on her tonight?” Rick nodded to Veronica. She shoved him in the chest.

Vance nodded to Rick and left before Veronica could turn her wrath on him.

“I don’t want to spend what time we have together fighting,” she told Rick when they stood alone in the room.

“I don’t either,” he softened just a little around the edges. Still, he seemed distant and Ronnie wasn’t sure how to bridge the gap between them.

“What can I do to make you feel better about this?”

“Run away with me to a remote island.”

“Besides that.”

“Be prepared.”

“Okay then,” she placed her hands on his shoulders and looked up into his troubled eyes. “Let’s stop wasting time and start preparing. What data did Vance drop off?”

The next few hours were more boring than she would have expected. When she watched spy movies, everything seems to happen so quickly. She was finding the reality to often be slow-moving and tedious. Stupid movies, always making things seem easier than they were.

By the time she changed for dinner, she knew the ins and outs of Marko’s plans and his crew. Her brain also felt a little like it had in high school after a long evening of preparing for a trigonometry exam.

She chose a little black dress for the night and did her best to ignore Rick’s sour mood. In fact, she told herself the darker his expression got the better she should feel about her ensemble. She stood back from the mirror and examined her reflection, tugging at the capped sleeve to cover the scar left by the bullet in Italy.

“If tonight goes... well,” he forced himself to say the word, “then you will most likely be put under observation. He likes to watch people for a while before deciding to trust them. Until you pass that test, we will have to sever all contact.”

“How long will that take?”

“It’s hard to say. Two weeks? A month?”

Veronica frowned. She didn’t like the idea of being cut off from him. They’d discussed it before, but now it loomed close and that was changing her perspective a bit.

“Undercover work means long stints away from those you love. That’s why I walked away.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll actually return to being pleasant by the time I see you again.”

“I’ll be pleasant again when my archenemy is no longer wooing my wife.”

“Who says wooing?”

“It’ll be a miracle if Marko survives you.”

“I should go,” Veronica felt rooted to her spot. She didn’t like feeling weird around Rick. She didn’t like leaving things this way.

“Don’t forget to only use a taxi with its rates marked on the passenger side of the windshield,” he cleared his throat.

“Um. Okay,” she nodded.

They stood there uncomfortably. She wanted him to drag her into his arms and kiss her as if his life depended on it.

“I’ll contact you when it’s safe.”

“Okay,” she nodded again, feeling like a fool. After another painful silence, she snatched her small black purse off the dresser and fled out the door before she could do something very un-James Bond—like bursting into tears.

Chapter Fourteen

Veronica fidgeted nervously with her dress while she waited for the door to be opened. She’d managed to escape the tears and had brutally shoved all thoughts of Rick as deep into her psyche as possible. She had a job to do; she could ponder the complexities of their relationship later.

The house was more modern than she’d expected, with a hint of Spanish flavor and a dash of medieval. The architecture was actually quite unlike any she was familiar with.

A pretty young girl with large doe eyes and fragile bone structure opened the door. She wore a classic maid’s uniform, which Veronica found oddly disconcerting.

“May I announce your arrival?”

“Elizabeth Gorman,” Veronica supplied the pseudonym Rick had given her.

The young woman nodded and led her to the back of the house where a party was

obviously in full throttle. Ronnie was vaguely aware of being announced. She was trying not to panic over the size of Marko's little get together.

People spilled out of the back of the house into the large expanse of yard. Some were eating, many were drinking. A full orchestra played. It was the kind of party her father would have drug her to kicking and screaming, at the request of some politician or another back in D.C. She'd hated those, too.

Veronica saw Vance standing next to a buffet table, engrossed in a conversation with a man she recognized from the auction house in New York—Petrov Kulenović. She had to remind herself that here Vance's name was Bo and she did not know him.

With the maid having vanished, Ronnie found herself alone and feeling like she was at her first boy-girl dance in junior high. Her acute discomfort compounded her misery over Rick. So when Marko appeared with a pleasant smile and a welcoming kiss on her cheek, she was genuinely relieved to see him.

His attention was so complete it had the effect of turning several eyes her way. She went from being invisible to interesting in a heartbeat. Maybe her imagination was running away with her, but it seemed suddenly that the women hated her and the men wanted her.

"Come on, I want you to meet my brother. He's a real ass."

"Then I can't wait."

Marko laughed. His obvious delight in everything she said was a little unnerving after her fight with Rick. It just felt strange. And, truthfully, a little good.

"Petrov, this is Elizabeth. Elizabeth, this is my brother Petrov and our associate, Bo."

"Please tell me you don't expect me to remember this one's name," Petrov looked Veronica over disdainfully.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, too," she gave the hateful man her prettiest smile and nodded acknowledgement to Vance. Though his expression remained stoic, she recognized the spark of amusement in his eyes.

"So, tell me again Petrov... how long have you been Adrianna's puppet?" Marko tossed back at his brother.

"Leave her out of this."

"That's what I thought," Marko turned his attention to Veronica. "Come on; let's see

if we can find someone with a personality.”

Veronica allowed herself to be led away. She tried to take in as much of her surroundings as she could but decided she’d be a horrible witness to a crime. She’d barely left Petrov’s presence and already wouldn’t be able to describe him if necessary. Other than an average build and brown hair, she’d be hard pressed to give any further descriptors.

“Too boring, too drunk, too stiff, too loose…” Marko assessed the various pockets of people around them. “Looks like we’re the only interesting people here.”

“I often have that problem.”

“I bet you do,” his eyes swept over her again.

The intimacy of the look reminded her that he’d yet to let go of her hand.

“So what do the only two interesting people in the room do in this neck of the woods?” she attempted to keep the conversation going. Judging from the look on his face, she’d possibly just propositioned him in her nervousness.

With the devil in his eyes, he pulled her up against him even as he gestured to the orchestra. It sparked a memory—one of Rick pulling her into a flawless waltz at their wedding. Only this time, the melody seamlessly transitioned to a tango. Her body obeyed his commands of its own accord, her movements melded effortlessly with his.

He was tall, taller even than Rick. In her highest heels, she came only to his shoulders. And he danced delightfully; her body hummed. She’d had dance partners who’d known the motions but never one who moved with such grace and assurance.

By the time the last strains of music clung to the air, her chest was heaving with an emotion she dare not name. They stood a breath away from each other—she flustered, him aroused. A smattering of applause broke the spell that held them.

He smiled at the crowd they’d gathered, nodding acknowledgement. As he spun Veronica around, her eyes locked briefly with Vance’s. His held a bemused expression that made her blush. Has she really been attracted to Marko, if even briefly? Would Rick hear about it? Should that matter?

As the evening progressed, she combated the effects of Marko’s nearness by picturing him doing horrific things like kicking puppies and running down old ladies.

It seemed easier to conjure those images than the ones she knew to be true—ones of

him buying and selling human beings. Even if he'd never laid a hand on the women he sold, their plight was on his head.

"Gregory, so good to see you," Marko was shaking hands with a middle-aged man who reeked of wealth. Veronica could tell with one look that he came from old money. It was her experience that men from old money were often bored with life. There was little left to conquer.

"It's good to be seen. Are we still on for tomorrow night?"

"Nine sharp," Marko promised before steering Veronica on to the next guest.

"A party two nights in a row? How do you keep up?" Veronica fished for information.

"Stamina. Lucky for you, tomorrow's gentlemen only, so you can rest up."

"Am I resting up for anything in particular?" she placed a hand on his shoulder and gave him a look filled with promises she had no intention of keeping.

He paused for a breath, as if considering tossing her over his shoulder right then and there. "I was thinking a boat ride sounded fun. Let's go soak up some sun together."

"Absolutely. Although, I do wonder if you were all talk... I've yet to see my Roman artifacts."

"All talk? Me?"

She shrugged saucily and looked away.

"Alright, I'll take the bait. Come on," he grabbed her hand and led her to a quiet room at the other end of the house. He threw the doors open and flipped on the light, bringing to life a museum within his home.

Veronica's reaction was genuine as she sucked in her breath and then let out a low whistle. She'd never much seen the appeal of old stuff, but in this room she could almost feel the story of the ages come back to life again.

"I wonder if the woman who made bread with this bowl knew it would one day be considered a thing of beauty. I have to admit I've never considered my Kitchenaid mixer to be art."

Marko's laughter rumbled low in his throat again. It was a pleasant sound.

"How did you get all of this? Do you have more?"

"I run a little antique business."

The conversation was interrupted by the padding of feet. Veronica instinctively knelt and held a hand out to the massive dog that loped into the room.

“He’s not very friendly...” Marko’s voice drifted off as the Doberman sniffed Veronica’s hand, and then submitted quite happily to her touch.

“I have a way with dogs,” she shrugged.

“Apparently,” Marko snorted. “And apparently he’s a horrible guard dog.”

“Do you need protected from me?”

“Sometimes I wonder.”

“This is lovely,” she changed the subject, standing to point to a black vase not unlike the one she’d sold to help fund her trip to Bulgaria. Her fingers still absentmindedly scratched the dog’s ears.

“Then it’s yours.”

“You don’t have to do that; it’s too much.”

“Nonsense,” he waved the gesture off as if it were nothing.

“That’s a three thousand dollar vase.”

“True, but I want to do this. Please?”

“Thank you,” she conceded.

“I’ll have it sent to your hotel.”

“I’m staying at the...”

“Grand. I know.”

“Am I supposed to be impressed or creeped out?”

“Impressed.”

Veronica seemed to consider. In truth, she was surprised he’d admitted as much to her.

“It behooves me to know as much as possible about the people I spend time with,” he reached out to stroke her cheek.

In that tender moment, Veronica wondered if she would have trouble killing him when the time came. A part of her hoped that task would fall to Rick. One of them would have to do it—as long as Marko’s heart beat, there would be no peace in their life.

“You look sad,” the concern in his voice seemed genuine, and that made Veronica feel even smaller.

“Just tired. I should go,” she stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

“I’ll have my driver take you.”

She nodded, grateful to not have to deal with a taxi again.

“And he’ll pick you up again at noon on Sunday.”

“It’s a date,” Veronica turned to leave but Marko caught her by the hand. He twirled her into his arms and leaned her back. His mouth claimed hers in a kiss that was both thorough and sweet.

God help her, she kissed him back. In her mind she rationalized that it was all part of the cover. In her heart, she had to admit that the reaction had come before the rationalization of it.

Marko set her back on her feet again, taking her dazed look as a compliment. He called for his driver and loaded her into a sleek, black sedan, his lips brushing her fingers one last time. Veronica stared at her reflection in the window on the way back to the hotel. Her lips declaring to the world by their appearance they’d been properly kissed. So that’s what a whore looks like, she told herself.

Mechanically, she made her way to her room where she took a long, hot shower and changed into her pajamas. Then she curled up in the fetal position under the covers, turned on her iPod, and cried herself to sleep.

She dreamed of the time Rick had chased her around their bedroom for the remote control. He’d tickled her mercilessly when he caught her and she’d laughed so hard tears had streamed down her face. When she caught her breath, she’d made the discovery that he had a ticklish spot of his own.

Of course, their wrestling had turned to lovemaking. Playful and tender and... innocent. At some point, Veronica realized the feathery kisses being placed all over her face were not a part of the dream.

He was there, warm and hard and real and all around her. When he realized she was awake, he captured her mouth with a white hot kiss that left no doubts in her mind who she truly belonged to—body, mind and soul.

“What are you doing here?” she finally pulled away. “I thought it was too dangerous.”

“I had to see you.”

“I kissed him,” she blurted. “Well, he kissed me. But I kissed him back.”

“I know. I saw. You didn’t think I’d let you go there without making sure I could help if you were in danger, did you?”

“I’m so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?”

“I know Marko well enough to know he won’t waste any time trying to get you in his bed. Why do you think I was so against this?”

“You’re so calm.”

“I wasn’t. I might have destroyed public property. Okay, I definitely destroyed public property. But then I figured that I certainly hadn’t left things on a good note with you—and I decided I could either pout, kill Marko with my bare hands now, or come see you.”

“I’m glad you chose door number three.”

“Are you?”

“Really happy.”

The moonlight that crept through the curtains illuminated his roguish smile as he lowered his mouth to hers once more. On this night, Veronica was the one who could not get enough of him. She wanted to memorize the curve of every muscle.

Maybe she was trying to prove her love. Maybe she wanted to sear him into her brain so the next time she stood so close to Marko, it wouldn’t befuddle her quite so much. Maybe she just wanted to delight in the one she’d chosen to forever be her lover and best friend.

Later, as they lay intertwined and staring up at the ceiling, Veronica finally processed something that had been nagging at her for hours.

“He’s going to sell girls tomorrow, isn’t he?”

“The gentlemen only party? Most likely.”

“Let’s crash it.”

“You forget that you’re being watched.”

“Which is a perfect alibi. If I can slip out without his thugs knowing it, then I’m accounted for and can’t be blamed for the raid on his house. Right?”

“But he could think you’re an informant.”

“We’ll just have to give him someone else to blame.”

“Who do you have in mind?”

“Adrianna... I haven’t forgotten my promise to her.”

“Trust me; she’s already paying for meddling with you. Marko’s pretty pissed at her for not being able to find us.”

Veronica smiled. It made her feel warm and fuzzy inside, knowing Adrianna was suffering. But she was nowhere near being done with her.

“You’re a cold, hard woman when you want to be.”

“Yeah. So anyway, about tomorrow—if we get those girls out, do you think you can get them to safety?”

“How do you plan on getting away?”

“I was thinking we could pay housekeeping to smuggle me out in the trash.”

“Might work,” he considered her plan. “What about getting you back in?”

“Dinner cart?”

“I’ll set it up.”

Veronica nodded. She felt better knowing they had an immediate plan. After so much planning and waiting, it was good to have some action on the horizon.

“I wonder how Courtney and Jeff are doing,” her mind switched tracks.

“I’ll check in with them tomorrow,” he promised. “I can do that easier than you.”

“How long do I have with you tonight?” she rolled over to snuggle closer to him.

“I should have left twenty minutes ago.”

“Don’t tell me that. I miss you already.”

“From now on, let’s go undercover as a couple, okay?”

“Sounds like a plan,” she smiled, kissing him on his chest. “Come back to me when you can.”

She watched him dress. There were few men as beautiful as he was. Maybe it was shallow, but she appreciated his six-pack. She was also glad for their time in the jungle because now she didn’t feel quite so insecure next to him.

“I’m never going to get out of here if you don’t stop looking at me like that,” he grinned despite his words and she knew he was pleased by her reaction to him. Whatever he said now, he had doubted her love—if for even a moment—and it had hurt him deeply.

She could tell and she could identify with the feeling. Adrianna had brought her that kind of doubt and it was excruciating. Veronica held her arms open in invitation, and he willingly scooped her up into his. She snuggled against him, enjoying the sensation of his jeans against her bare skin.

“I love you,” she brushed a kiss on his neck.

“I love you, too,” he closed his eyes and held her to him. She enjoyed the peace of the moment, the smell and the feel of him all around her. He reluctantly pulled back, kissing the scar on her shoulder gently before placing her back on the bed.

Then he was gone, leaving a great big hole in her bed. She pulled his pillow to her, curling up with it and inhaling deeply. Her iPod and his memory finally lulled her back to sleep. This time the dreams of him were not playful ones.

Chapter Fifteen

The day that followed was one of the most boring of her life. Being under surveillance and afraid she'd do something stupid without Rick there as her guide, Veronica intentionally stayed close to the hotel.

She did venture to the beach for some sun—she liked the honeyed tone her skin had taken while on their honeymoon and wanted to keep it. She wandered through the street markets on her way back to the hotel. Since she didn't know when Rick would send for her, she opted to get ready sooner rather than later.

A dozen red roses stood waiting for her in the room. For the first time in her life, she had to read the card to see who they were from.

“Miss you already. Marko,” the note was scrawled out in handwriting that was undoubtedly male. So he'd gone to the trouble to sign it himself. Nice.

“Figures,” Veronica sighed and tucked the card back in its stand. Rick wouldn't be happy when he saw those, assuming he hadn't already. It was weird being watched like a monkey in a cage.

Ronnie pulled the curtains tight and dressed in all black. She shoved a black ski

mask in her waistband alongside her Makarov. She'd no sooner pulled her hair back when there was a knock at the door.

"Housekeeping."

Veronica opened the door and stood to the side for the woman to enter with the large linen cart.

"I have the towels you requested," the woman opened the laundry hamper and walked away to place a stack of towels next to a perfectly good stack of towels already on the counter. Ronnie assumed she was supposed to climb in the hamper, but would feel really stupid if not.

The woman paused and gave her a look that asked what the holdup was. Veronica climbed in—a little dismayed to realize there were dirty towels already in it. She curled herself into a ball and pretended it was only water on the towels, and clean water at that.

Ronnie tried to hold her breath on the way back to the laundry room. When that didn't work, she tried taking short breaths into her sleeves to avoid inhaling deeply enough to actually identify any of the smells in the basket with her.

When the lid finally lifted, she popped out and gulped in the fresh air. Rick was there, trying not to laugh as he helped her out of the hamper.

"Being a spy isn't as glamorous as it's cracked up to be," she was absurdly happy to see him.

"Ah, love, you smell awful."

She made a face at him, which he missed because he'd turned to thank the housekeeper again before ushering Veronica into a boxy black SUV. Even with the tinted windows, she felt compelled to sink back in her seat.

"You know they can't see you, right?"

Veronica refused to respond.

"We have a little time to kill—you want some dinner?"

"Are you suggesting we go on a date before raiding the sex slave sale?"

"Yes?"

"Is that a good idea?"

"I came prepared," he pulled into a parking space overlooking the water and reached into the back seat to produce a picnic basket.

“What’s this?”

“Just a little local fare. Oh, instead of bubbly I brought you coffee. I didn’t want to get you snockerred before the job.”

“Good thinking.”

It felt oddly normal, sitting there in that SUV overlooking the Black Sea and eating a picnic of kufte and sirenka while waiting for the time to come to go make a dent in human trafficking. They laughed and joked and acted silly. She liked how easily he smiled, how easily he made her giggle.

“I checked on your brother today. He and Courtney are both fine. Although they seem to be spending a lot of time together. Supposedly in the name of plotting ways to send Adrianna on wild goose chases, but I have my suspicions.”

“Poor Courtney. She’s succumbing to his charm. I had such great hope for her, too.”

“You never know. Maybe it’s the other way around. Maybe she’s actually settling him down.”

“Men don’t change.”

“I did.”

“Temporarily, and you apparently hated our nice, sedate life.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he frowned. “I was a touch restless, perhaps.”

“Last night, you said next time we did this we’d pose as a couple,” she broached the subject that had been on her mind most of the day.

“I’m not going through this hell again; I’ll tell you that.”

“But, there will be a next time?”

“To be honest, I thought you’d wash out in the jungle.”

“But I didn’t.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Come on, you have to admit I’m pretty good at this spy stuff.”

“You’ve had a few lucky moments.”

“Does it hurt your manhood a little?”

“We’ll see how tough you’re talking after tonight. You know the drill?”

“Do you?” she tossed back saucily. They’d gone over it repeatedly, but a part of her was still nervous. She’d be happy when this was behind her.

“Hey, Ron...”

“Yeah babe?” she looked up at him. He hesitated a moment and then leaned in to kiss her.

“Promise me you’ll be careful,” he still held her head in his hands.

“Promise me you won’t do anything stupid trying to protect me.”

“Of course I’m going to protect you.”

“At some point you have to trust me to protect myself.”

“Can we just agree to have each other’s back?”

“Deal,” she kissed him on the cheek. “Now let’s go break into my boyfriend’s house.”

“Was that really necessary?”

Veronica laughed in response and situated the ski mask on her head, wearing it like a hat until she absolutely had to pull it over her face. Their banter did wonders for her nerves. She got the impression he knew as much, and the pair good-naturedly picked at each other until they reached their destination.

He parked about a mile from Marko’s and they jogged the rest of the way, sticking to the trees and out of site. Rick hopped the stone fence lining Marko’s property with relative ease and turned back to offer Veronica a hand. She ignored his offer and scaled the wall with little effort. She planted a quick kiss on his cheek before sliding the mask the rest of the way down her face.

With a chuckle, he pulled his own mask down and then dropped to the grass. The pair stayed close to the wall until they reached the nearest camera, where he scaled the wall with his tools in his mouth. Her heart pounded in her ears as she waited for him to bypass the security system.

He signaled he was done and they were soon off again. A pair of Dobermans headed their way curiously. Rick unsheathed a knife, but Veronica stilled his hand. Instead she knelt as she had the night before and pulled her mask back. The larger of the two began to wriggle like a puppy when he recognized his new friend. She gave him kisses and scratched his sides.

“Can we go now?” Rick asked, his perplexed look matching that of the other dog.

“So you saw the kiss but not me making friends with the guard dog? That’s awfully

selective of you.”

“I guess I kind of blacked everything else out after I saw that kiss,” he hissed.

She rolled her eyes and repositioned her mask. The pair moved forward, only to be joined by Veronica’s friend.

“Babe, he can’t follow us.”

Veronica did the first thing that came to mind—she grabbed a stick and tossed it for the dog. He retrieved it and was back before they could cover half the distance to the house. She tossed again, further this time only to have both dogs dart after it. They returned it with a bit of growling and roughhousing that felt much louder than it actually was.

“Nice.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

He grabbed the stick and tossed it over the fence they’d initially come across. Both dogs tore in that direction, barking madly at the wall.

“Much better,” she shoved at him as he swore under his breath.

Two men appeared at the back door, looking to see what the dogs were barking at. Veronica and Rick pressed themselves against the wall, waiting for the men to turn away again when everything seemed in order. Rick and Veronica moved as one, each immobilizing a guard without a sound.

They closed the door behind them on their way into the house so as not to have a repeat performance with the dogs. Together, they made their way through two more sets of guards, much the same as the first.

They descended the stairs to the room that held the sale, and Veronica’s stomach tightened once again. She tried not to think about the fact that they were effectively trapping themselves in a dungeon. With only one way out, a single mistake would mean they didn’t reemerge.

It was comforting having Rick so close. As if maybe he had some superhuman power that would keep them both safe no matter what. Ronnie didn’t really know what to expect. Her knowledge of human sales was limited to a Hollywood depiction or two. She wondered if they really researched those, or did they count on the audience to not know any better?

At first, no one noticed their presence. Maybe a dozen men sat around the room, watching as bound women were led in one by one. When they took out the guards at the door, the two at the far end of the room were quick to act. Veronica tucked her body and rolled away as the first bullets flew. She came up returning fire. Terrified businessmen scurried to get out of the basement; the girls huddled together, frightened and naked in the center of the room. A haze of smoke obscured her view and scorched her nostrils.

She could hear Marko swearing. Petrov was barking orders. Still, Veronica's aim was true. She surprised herself at how well she was able to block out the chaos of their surroundings to hone in on a particular target.

Marko had pulled his gun and was taking aim; Veronica swung her gun towards him and froze. A voice in her head screamed to pull the trigger. But her finger did not move.

Rick had no such qualms and took two quick strides towards Marko. Without a word or preamble, he hauled off and punched him in the face. Petrov raised his own gun and Veronica fired a round, knocking the gun from his hand. It was too early in their plan to kill him or Marko—not if the intent was to dismantle the operation.

Rick raised his weapon, holding the brothers at bay while Veronica rounded up the women and ushered them out the door. The path back was strewn with bodyguards. Wordlessly, Ronnie kept the girls moving. She dared not set their fears at ease yet. All that mattered in this moment was getting them out the door and into the van that would be waiting for them.

Once the girls were loaded, Veronica closed the door and melted into the woods. In the distance, she could hear the rumble of the van as it moved away. She knew Vance would pass the girls off to the next trusted link in the chain before returning to his post as if he'd been there all the while. She'd never know how he always managed to pull it off, but she had no doubt in his ability to do so.

Although she wanted to wait for Rick, she had promised to get herself back to the SUV. That was their meeting point, and she had no reason to believe he wouldn't be there as promised. The partner in her knew she had to stick to that plan. The wife in her wanted to rush back and make sure he'd been able to extract himself. Regardless, if she expected him to treat her as a partner, she had to do the same. So she obediently began her jog back to the SUV.

Veronica nearly screamed when she jumped in the car; he was there already, waiting in the driver's seat.

"Ha. That was brilliant," Rick was all smiles, pulling back her mask to give her a loud kiss. "Oh, well, except for the part where you didn't want to shoot your boyfriend. That was kind of suckish."

"I can't believe Devon has you saying 'suckish.' And he's not my boyfriend, and I didn't hesitate."

"Oh, so your reaction's that slow all the time, is it? I might want to rethink partnering with you," he pulled out of the parking lot and headed back to her hotel.

"Maybe I hesitated a little, but it's only because I know him. He's human now."

"You didn't hesitate to blow Petrov's hand off and you know him."

"I blew it off?" she wrinkled her nose. "Anyway, that was different. He was going to shoot you."

"So I rank somewhere between Marko and Petrov. Good to know."

"You are such a child."

"You didn't blow his hand off; don't worry. But we do need to get you home. I think Marko might pay you a visit."

"Excuse me?"

"I might have overheard him say something about a double-crossing bitch."

"Speaking of things that are good to know," she took a steadying breath.

"I can drive the other way if you want me to," something in his voice said he hoped she would ask him to do just that. "But you said you were in this thing to the end. If we're going to finish this, then you need to convince him you had nothing to do with it. Preferably without sleeping with him."

"Only preferably?"

"More than preferably."

Veronica nodded, amused despite the circumstances. Rick took the corner into the hotel on two wheels, skidding to a stop by the back door.

"Aren't you worried about my guard's suspicion being aroused by your driving?"

"It'll be Vance's shift by now. Just in case there's someone on the inside... your chariot awaits," he motioned to a food cart that stood waiting by the back door. "I'll be

watching. If you get into any trouble, I'll be right there.”

“I know you will,” she stroked his cheek and then folded herself into the bottom of the cart. Rick wheeled her inside before handing her off to a well-paid waiter who would take her the rest of the way to the room.

Although she was glad for the years of yoga that allowed her to contort her body into impossible poses, she was also very glad when the waiter finally let her out of the cart in her room. The second he was gone, she stripped out of her clothes, shoving them under the bed as she ran a steaming hot bubble bath.

She poured herself a stiff drink and slammed it down before pouring another for looks. She set it on the edge of the tub along with a copy of the *Scarlett Letter*, pausing only long enough to scatter a few towels on the floor before sinking into the mountain of bubbles.

She opened the book and tried to concentrate on the words dancing before her eyes while she waited for the pounding at the door. Instead of pounding or even yelling, the next sound to shatter the silence was the turning of a key.

Chapter Sixteen

“Marko,” she could barely breathe his name; fear clutched her throat. She looked into black eyes burning with hatred.

“Elizabeth,” he said the name with an eerie calm.

“What are you doing here?” she watched as he moved quietly into the bathroom, the door to the room clicking shut behind him.

“You remember my little get together tonight? Someone crashed it, and I thought, maybe, you might know something about that.”

“Why would someone crash a poker game?”

“A poker game?”

“Isn’t that what you boys were doing? Daddy always played poker when he had the boys over. I just assumed...”

“What are you reading?” he changed tactics.

“*Scarlet Letter*. It seemed like the enlightened thing to do. I have to say I’m kind of struggling to get into it,” she lied. “I guess I don’t understand a man who doesn’t have the spine to just own up to loving a woman.”

“He’s conflicted. The social mores of the time...”

“Did you really break into my room to discuss literature?”

“Are you nervous?”

“That a strange man is standing in my bathroom while I’m in the tub? Yeah, a little. You know, this isn’t the best way to get a second date.”

“Right,” he shook his head as if to clear a fog. “Right. Sorry.”

He handed her a towel even as he began backing out of the room. “I’ll just wait out here for you.”

Veronica dunked herself under the water, washing away the last vestiges of sweat and grime from her evening before reemerging to step from the tub. She dried herself off and wrapped in a black satin robe. While she wished dearly for her favorite terry cloth, she knew this one would hold more appeal.

“So, do you want to tell me what you thought I’d done? And why do you look like you’ve been in a bar fight?” She poured herself another Scotch and offered him the same.

“Thanks,” he took the drink and winced as she poked at his face. “Knock that off.”

“Don’t be a baby,” she admonished, nonetheless setting her drink aside to put some ice in a washcloth for him. “Here, let me fix that for you.”

Gently, tenderly, she dabbed at his face with a warm washcloth before replacing it with the one full of ice. He caught her hand, his eyes now warm and soft and inviting. It was as if two people existed within the one shell. She was as drawn to the one as she was repulsed by the other.

But neither was her husband, she reminded herself and pulled her hand free.

“Ah now, you didn’t think it would be as easy as all that to get back in my good graces.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he was the picture of innocence.

“You really are used to dating dumb women, aren’t you? We both know you came here tonight with fury in your eyes. Maybe you won’t ever tell me why, but you can’t

expect me to swoon in your arms just because you've flashed a charming smile or two since then."

"You think my smile is charming?"

"I think you'll survive your injuries," she rolled her eyes and pulled her hand free. "Now go. You can pick me up at noon tomorrow and spend the day convincing me to give you another chance."

"Sounds intriguing," he stood, his incredibly large presence filling both her room and mind. He had a way of looking at her that made her think he would unwrap her like a present—one decadent layer at a time.

"Go," she pointed to the door. His grin deepened, but he obeyed. Once he was gone, she sank into the nearest chair. Only then did her hands begin to tremble.

Once he'd seen her relaxing in the tub, oblivious to his plight, he'd been surprisingly quick to believe her innocence. She wasn't sure what he'd expected to find when he'd let himself into her room. She had gambled that it wouldn't be her naked in a tub.

Veronica wondered how closely Rick was watching and whether he was relieved or livid. She was personally still in a daze—and unwilling to think about what Marko would have done had she not been able to set his mind at ease.

Now that his suspicion had turned from Veronica, he would begin looking within his own organization for a mole. Eventually, he would stumble across some carefully planted clues that all pointed to Adrianna.

Between her family and the friends she'd made throughout the years, Veronica had no problems finding employees of the U.S. government who were willing to leak the word that Adrianna had been a great asset to them. An email here or there, a "little slip" to someone brought in for questioning.

It had all been set in motion before ever leaving for Ecuador, and now that Veronica had been cut off from the rest of the world, Rick was pushing the right buttons at the right time.

She knew this and had nothing left to do but be patient and wait for it to take effect. Rick wouldn't risk coming to her again tonight, so she was alone with nothing but her jangled nerves and a bottle of scotch to keep her company.

So maybe downing an entire bottle of liquor after every raid wasn't the best habit to

get into, but it seemed an okay way to celebrate surviving her first real mission. And, it served the necessary purpose of knocking her flat of her behind for the night.

Given the pounding headache she woke up with the next morning, maybe her approach hadn't been a brilliant one. As she popped several aspirin and tried to rehydrate her brain cells, she decided next time she'd try a different relaxation technique.

She'd slept most of the morning away, so there wasn't much time to prepare for her outing with Marko. She took another shower, hoping to regain some color in the process. Then she dressed in a black two piece swimsuit that should hold Marko's interest without coming across as cheap.

She firmly believed part of the appeal she held for him was the challenge she presented. He was used to women coming easily. The longer she could draw out the chase, the more she had his attention.

She slid into a gauzy white wrap dress, half hoping she wouldn't have to take it off again. She had no desire to explain the scar from a bullet hole in her shoulder, and there was no swimsuit on earth that would cover it.

She mussed up her hair and called it ready. She'd always had a neat and tidy hair style as Veronica. She was beginning to really appreciate Elizabeth's just-rolled-out-of-bed look.

The driver that came to retrieve her was the same one from the night before. He was just as stoic in the daylight as he had been the last time she'd seen him. He was the kind of man whose face never seemed to crack a smile. Somehow it wasn't as endearing on him as Vance.

The warm greeting she gave him was met with a cool stare, so she gave up. In fact, the ride was uncomfortable enough to make her once again grateful for Marko's presence. He was all smiles at the marina as he welcomed her onto his yacht. Any trace of accusation was gone from his eyes.

Petrov didn't seem entirely sold on her presence and was even more aloof than before, if possible. Veronica was actually a little relieved to see that she could count all five fingers sticking out from underneath the bandage on his right hand. She might have felt a twinge of guilt otherwise.

She was very relieved to see that Vance was also accompanying them on their trip.

That gave her some reassurance Marko wasn't taking her out to dump her body in the sea. Admittedly, she had spent some time over the past day wondering if the Black Sea contained any man-eating sharks.

Marko offered her a drink from the bar, which she passed on for a bottle of water. The last thing she needed at this point was more alcohol. Vance smirked, and she knew that he and Rick had probably shared a laugh over her morning hangover. She inwardly fumed over the fact that they found so much amusement in her.

Outwardly, she smiled at Marko and pretended to care about the tour he was giving her. The sunshine and the fresh sea air were infectious, and she soon found that her smile was genuine.

"Can I take your wrap?" Marko shrugged out of his shirt and turned to Veronica expectantly.

"Sure," she agreed after a beat.

"That's not something you see every day," he skimmed his fingertips along her shoulder.

"Crazy ex-boyfriend. He didn't take the breakup well."

Anger flashed in Marko's eyes and his jaw line twitched. He took a steadying breath before answering.

"I hope someone has already killed the bastard. If not, I'm happy to be of service."

"That won't be necessary, but thank you," she was surprisingly touched by the offer. "Right now I just want to soak up some sun and forget about the monsters of the world."

He brushed a kiss against the wound on the back of her shoulder, leaving goose bumps in his wake. She turned her head towards him and noticed for the first time that he bore scars of his own.

Instinctively, she reached out to touch the ghost of two bullet holes on his waist—ones she knew had come from her gun. He sucked in his breath, wrapping his fingers around hers as he smiled.

"Do that again and I can't promise you'll have any time left to soak up the sun."

"You assume you're even close to forgiven," she drummed her fingers playfully along the two scars before moving to claim a lounge chair on the sun deck.

Marko conceded with a grin, handing her wrap to the nearest servant before

stretching out on the lounge next to hers. He seemed content to enjoy a moment of silence, and Veronica took full use of the time to process.

Those scars removed any doubt; it had been Marko using Anuli as a human shield in Italy. It had been Marko who'd given her the wound he'd just promised to avenge. Two neat holes in his side served as a reminder of who he was—and why she was on that boat.

Because of that, she was especially alert. Every look exchanged between the half-brothers, every whispered conversation, was cataloged away in her mind. She was determined to accurately relay them to Rick later. Some conversations were savored.

"Your intel is wrong," Petrov's typically disdainful expression had turned to more of a sneer. "It wasn't her."

"And you are being led by something other than your brain. I'd like to speak to her myself before I make a decision," Marko effectively ended the conversation.

Veronica had a guess who they were discussing. Even if Adrianna was able to prove her innocence, it would gall her to be questioned. Smug cow.

Her afternoon on the boat gave her a great tan and a wealth of information to file away for later. She was feeling like quite the successful spy by the time they docked again. When Marko had attempted to kiss her goodbye, she flitted out of his grasp.

"It'll take more than a boat ride to make up for breaking and entering," she teasingly admonished.

"You're killing me, princess."

"It's good for you," she laughed impishly as she sank into the seat of the car he had waiting for her.

"I have some work to do tomorrow night," he knelt beside the open car door.

"I'm sure I can find a way to amuse myself for an evening," she assured him.

"No good. I want to see you. Maybe we can squeeze in dinner?"

"I should tell you no. I'm being entirely too easy a catch," she pursed her lips as if in thought.

"You really are trying to kill me."

"Fine, dinner it is. You'll send the car?"

"Eight sharp."

Veronica allowed him to kiss her forehead before closing the door. The driver's

disapproving eyes met hers in the rearview mirror. She sighed and settled back in the seat for the ride home, not entirely caring why Marko's driver chose to dislike her.

Having already been well fed on the boat, Veronica didn't see much need for dinner. She put on her most comfortable pajamas and curled up in front of her laptop to type up her notes from the day. When she was done, she locked it up and hid it in the false bottom of her suitcase—just in case Marko decided to let himself in her room again.

She wished Rick would let himself in her room, but there was no word from him. In fact, there was no word from him for the rest of the week. She did, however, see Marko each day. Their odd little relationship grew, as did the bickering between Marko and Petrov.

Those conversations grew continually more heated. From what Veronica was able to piece together, Adrianna was only one source of strife between them.

And every morning, Veronica strolled along the streets, soaking up the vibrant atmosphere and admiring the handiwork of the various street vendors. She had yet to tire of the place and always found something new.

"Elizabeth!" A woman waved from a vendor across the street.

Veronica vaguely recalled her from one of Marko's dinner parties. She plastered a smile on her face and crossed the street to say hello.

"Hi it's me, Isabelle. I'm surprised to see you here. How are you?" the words seemed to tumble out of her mouth. Veronica had to think for a moment to process what had been said.

"I'm good... why are you surprised to see me?"

"It's nothing," the woman seemed to regret her words.

"Are you and Tom coming tomorrow night?"

"We can't; we're busy," Isabelle looked away. Veronica knew the woman was lying. The couple was distancing themselves.

"You heard about the other night," Ronnie turned her own focus to a particularly beautiful scarf. She fingered the sangria colored material absentmindedly as she fished for more information.

"Tom was there—at that party. It scared the life out of him. He thought for sure Marko would have you under lockdown. He's so protective of you."

“I have babysitters following me,” Veronica admitted. “I’m not supposed to know they’re there.”

“We don’t want to cause any ripples or anything. We adore Marko, we really do. But I think we just need a little... time off.”

“I understand,” Veronica feigned sympathy. Inwardly, she was thinking maybe Tom deserved to have the life scared out of him for being there in the first place. “Look, I’d better run. Marko’s sending a car for me in an hour. You take care; it was good seeing you.”

The women hugged and went their separate ways, but not before Veronica bought herself the pretty red scarf.

Two days later, her lunch was interrupted by another from Marko’s social circle.

“Elizabeth, good to see you,” he joined her table without waiting for an invitation.

“Hey Peter. You look well.”

“Still a little shaken up from the other night. That was nuts.”

“Absolutely. You’re lucky you survived,” she agreed, wide-eyed.

“I hear the brothers are at each other’s throats over it.”

“I really couldn’t say...” the rest of the lunch went about the same. He tried to dig for information, she deflected. Still, the conversation confirmed that Marko’s inner circle was alight with conversations about how the last invitation-only sale had gone horribly awry.

She was eventually able to extract herself from the lunch, although it seemed to be happening more and more that she ran into people she knew around town. She realized she’d settled in. There were even moments when she forgot it was a cover. They never lasted long, but all in all, she was at ease in this new skin. And she understood how a man like Rick could end up in bed with a woman like Adrianna.

If she was this cozy after weeks, how much a part of this life had Rick become after a year? How had Vance walked both sides of that line for so long?

Her waking hours might have been filled with Marko, but Rick commanded her nights. At least, his memory did. Each night, she would curl up with her pillow and wallow in missing him. Sometimes she would miss her dogs, her friends and her family. But it was Rick who permeated her thoughts.

As devoted as she was to her husband, she couldn't deny the chemistry she shared with Marko. It was palpable when they were in the room together. No matter how firmly she set her mind to the contrary, no matter how much her brain detested the person she knew Marko to be, the time they were spending together only sharpened the growing bond between them.

She'd managed to stay out of his bed and even keep the amount of stolen kisses to a minimum. As long as she kept him confident of her attraction, he seemed to enjoy drawing out the anticipation. He was a man used to getting what he wanted when he wanted it. She made waiting a game; it was a new twist on life.

On this particular night, she was also making him dinner.

"You're doing well."

Veronica looked up from the vegetables she was chopping to give Vance a small nod of acknowledgement. His voice had been so low she wondered if he'd truly spoken. He shifted so as not to be picked up by a camera and she knew he was speaking to her—she hadn't imagined it.

"I have a bad feeling."

Veronica slowly pushed the vegetables to the side and reached for the steaks, waiting for Vance to continue. Any movement of her mouth would be picked up by the cameras.

"If my cover is blown, then you get yourself out of here. I don't know what I'll be able to do if yours is."

Veronica bumped the cutting board with her hip, causing the vegetables to clatter to the ground. She knelt to clean her mess and looked up at Vance as she did.

"If my cover is blown, you will let me handle it. Don't throw yours away, too," she whispered from the safety of the floor before standing to toss a handful of greens in the trash.

"I don't know if I can do that. I can't just stand by...."

"And let me do my job?" she was kneeling once again. "You can and you will. I'd do the same to you."

"No you wouldn't."

"Maybe not—but that's why you're better at this than I am."

"Better at what?"

She could hear the smile in Marko's voice even before she peeked over the counter to see him.

"Better at cooking. He's not as clumsy as me."

"Can't say I'm sorry to see the vegetables hit the floor," Marko admitted, blinking in astonishment when a red pepper hit him smack between the eyes. "Did you just throw food at me?"

"Possibly," she pegged him in the chest with a piece of broccoli.

He closed the distance between them and snagged her by the waist. Vance stepped back with an eye roll, but Veronica had already wiggled from Marko's grasp.

"Behave—I'm busy."

"You behave, princess," he bumped her hip with his causing her to giggle. He was so tall he had to lean at an odd angle to do it, and the entire process was a bit comical.

"You act like a teenage boy in love these days," Vance offered an unusual commentary.

"Maybe I am. Well, not a teenager anyway," he winked. "Who wants a glass of wine?"

Without waiting for a reply, he poured them each a glass of red wine. Veronica took a gulp of hers, trying to pretend she hadn't just heard that.

It was to this cozy little scene that Petrov walked in with Adrianna on his arm.

Chapter Seventeen

"You," Adrianna narrowed her eyes and hissed.

"Crap," Veronica sighed before springing into action. She grabbed the glass bowl closest to her and hurled it Frisbee-fashion at Petrov's head. Without pause, she grabbed its sister and did the same to Adrianna. Both hit the floor. Before Vance could shake his surprised stupor, she grabbed the cutting board and hit him square in the face with it. Though she doubted she'd truly knocked him cold, he hit the floor as well.

Marko shook off the fog of confusion and reached for his gun. She placed one hand

on his to still it, placing the other hand on his waist.

“Twice now, I haven’t killed you when I could have. You owe me one,” she stood on tiptoe to brush a kiss across his lips before darting out the back door.

Petrov had regained his footing and stumbled through the yard after her. She hopped up on the stone fence and turned to offer him a half wave before dropping to the ground on the other side.

By the time Marko’s men were after her in full force, she had already melted into the woods. She emerged down the road, letting herself into a nondescript little car that had been left parked for just such a night as this. She used the phone in the glove box to call Rick.

“Are you okay?” Rick knew from the number on his caller ID that her cover had been blown.

“Peachy. Care to grab my bag and meet me in the parking lot?”

“I’ll be right down.”

Veronica hung up the phone, hoping he would be there quickly. She had no idea how long she had before Marko’s goons showed up at her hotel.

She’d barely pulled into the parking lot before Rick was there, tossing her suitcase in the back seat along with his. She crawled over to the passenger seat to let him drive; her nerves were already shot. The last thing she needed to deal with was crazy Bulgarian drivers.

“You want to tell me what happened?” Rick reached out to cup her face, reassuring himself that she was, in fact, okay.

“Adrianna showed up. She recognized me right away.”

“I bet she was pissed to find you right under Marko’s nose.”

“Don’t know. I threw a bowl at her head before she could really say.”

Rick made a face that was somewhere between disbelief and a laugh.

“How did you get packed so quickly?”

“Vance hit the panic button a few minutes before you called.”

“He must have done that before I clocked him with the cutting board.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing this one.”

Veronica nodded. She wondered if she could even explain it all; everything had

happened so quickly. The only thing she really wanted to do at the moment was touch Rick. She glared at the gearshift in between them. For such a small car, it felt like a great chasm. Since she couldn't curl up in his lap, she settled for resting her hand on his shoulder as she began to recount the details of the evening.

"Rick, he told Vance he was in love with me," she circled back to what bothered her most about the whole thing as he pulled into the train station.

"Are you expecting me to shed a tear for him?" he asked as he pulled their bags from the car.

"No, but some modicum of sympathy might be in order."

"What if I told you that Adrianna loved me?"

Veronica narrowed her eyes but was not deterred. "She doesn't though. She said as much—she just wants to prove she wasn't duped."

"But if she did, would you show her pity?"

"Maybe."

"Liar."

"It's like *Phantom of the Opera*," Veronica decided as Rick ordered their tickets.

"Really? How so?"

"He's my Phantom."

"You think?"

Veronica nodded in satisfaction. He seemed to understand that. He'd always felt compassion for Phantom's loneliness.

"I have just one problem with that," he ushered her towards their train.

"Where are we going?" she wondered as he led her back to their cabin.

"Greece. It was the next train leaving."

"I've always wanted to see Greece," she sank onto the bed in their sleeper cabin as he set the bags down and locked the door.

"Don't you want to know my problem with your theory?" he licked his lips then slightly pursed them in a way he often did when trying to decide whether to be amused or irritated with her.

"What's your problem with it?"

"You always said things would have turned out differently for Phantom if you were

Christine.”

“Oh. Right. That was a bad analogy.”

“In fact, you used to say that if Phantom had been just a little less crazy, he would have won Christine.”

“It was actually a really horrible reference. Nothing like this situation.”

“Wasn’t Phantom the interesting one?” he took a step towards her and she instinctively scooted away from him.

“That was really one of the dumber things I’ve said in life.”

He stood in front of her, their legs touching. She looked up at him, her throat suddenly dry.

“And I’ve said some really dumb things in my life.”

“Ron.”

“Yes?”

“Shut up.”

Ronnie nodded, licking her lips out of nervousness. She had no idea what he wanted to do to her. In one quick motion, he’d gathered her hands in one of his own, holding them above her head as he pinned her to the bed.

After being deprived of his touch for so long, to have him lying on top of her now sent shockwaves of desire ricocheting through her. And because she didn’t know what his intentions were, that made her furious.

“What? Are you going to piss on me now to claim me?”

“Good Lord you’re crass, woman. You kiss your mother with that mouth?”

“What are you going to do to me?” she jutted her chin defiantly.

“I intend to kiss you, if I can get you to shut up long enough.”

“Stop telling me to shut up.”

“Ron,” the name was more of a groan. She stilled, really looking in his eyes for the first time. In them, she saw amusement. She saw desire. She saw love. She stayed quiet long enough for him to kiss her.

Her entire body instinctively arched into him. He used his free hand to greedily roam her every curve. She pulled her hands loose to sink them into his hair.

If there was something a little decadent in flirting with Marko because he was so

wrong, being with Rick was exhilarating because everything about him was so incredibly right.

“I don’t care who he is, he can’t have you,” Rick whispered against her chest later as they lay in a satiated heap while the train rocked and swayed them across the border into Greece.

“No, he can’t have me,” she agreed. “Because I’m yours.”

She dozed off, glad her cover was blown if it meant she could sleep wrapped in Rick’s arms.

When she reawakened, she laid still and simply enjoyed the motion of the train and the feel of his embrace.

“You talk in your sleep.”

“Anything interesting?” she stretched and then snuggled deeper in his arms.

“Actually, yes, and that’s all that kept me sane for the past few weeks. You know we tapped your room?”

She nodded.

“Sometimes at night I would listen to you dream.”

“Those were some good dreams,” she recalled with a small smile.

“It helped—hearing you call my name,” he admitted.

“They helped me get by, too,” she stroked his cheek. “What are the odds we can just hide out in Greece for a spell?”

“Pretty good. I want to lay low for a while, let a few things fall into place before we make our next move.”

“Are those the only reasons you want to stay in Greece for awhile?”

“You’re the reason I’m not going to do much sightseeing,” he playfully nibbled at her neck. “Is that what you wanted to hear?”

Veronica smiled. It was close enough.

Chapter Eighteen

The house Rick found for them was one of many white houses tucked away on the white cliffs overlooking the sea. Veronica felt like she was in a postcard. She tried not to look too much like a tourist but couldn't help wanting to take everything in. There was a charm to this little village.

Other than brief contact to assure Vance they were both safe, Rick and Veronica hid from the world for an entire week. They left their house only to eat, and even that was sporadic. For the most part, they took in the view around them and remained completely absorbed in each other.

"Do we know where we're going next?" Veronica wondered one evening, sitting curled up in Rick's arms and watching the sky change colors as the sun made its exit.

"Nope. Vance will be by in a few days. We'll figure it out then. I'm rather enjoying my current pastime."

Veronica smiled, knowing she was the pastime. She was rather enjoying that, too.

"I'm glad you're blond again," Rick tugged playfully at her ponytail.

"You didn't like the sassy red cut?"

"I prefer this."

"Me too, actually. But it was fun being Elizabeth Gorman," she straddled his lap and rested her arms on his shoulders. "I have a new appreciation for how difficult it must have been for you to walk away from Richard Sampson... to go back to being Rick Sinclair."

"I'll take you over Sampson any day, love."

Veronica smiled and leaned over to kiss him. She hovered over his mouth, a thought freezing her in place. "Sampson."

"Yes?" Rick furrowed his brow in confusion.

"Sampson. Like Sampson and Delilah."

"Are you trying to tell me you sold me out?"

"No, after that. At the end of the story... he brought the house down around the Philistines. You know how?" her eyes were dancing with excitement.

"I'm sure you'll tell me."

"The pillars. He knocked out the pillars."

"Didn't he die in the end?" Rick reached into the recesses of his mind.

“Don’t get distracted. We need to go after Marko’s pillars.”

“You mean his distribution channels?”

“Exactly,” she smiled triumphantly.

“Okay, now that we’re all speaking English... that would be New York, Atlanta, Chicago and San Francisco.”

“Marko will be expecting us to come after him again.”

“Or hide like sane people.”

“Right, or that. But we won’t do either. If we take out his major distribution channels, it’ll topple him.”

“You’re just looking for a way out of having to shoot your boyfriend.”

“Would you stop calling him that?” In truth, she’d be glad for a bit of distance between herself and Marko until she could regain proper perspective.

“We’ll be lucky if we can hit one, maybe two, before he figures it out. Then he’ll have guards all over the others. They’ll be impossible to touch.”

“But if it’s a coordinated attack, and we hit a couple at once...”

“It could work,” he considered her proposal.

“Say we take out San Francisco and make it known we’re headed to Chicago next. He’ll divert his resources there, opening the other two up for attack.”

“So we say Chicago and hit Atlanta?”

“No, we’ll actually go after Chicago.”

“You’re a terrible strategist,” Rick informed her.

“Daddy and Jeff will take out Atlanta while we’re in Chicago. Then all four of us will take down New York.”

“You want me to ask your dad and brother for help?”

“I can ask them if you prefer.”

“I’m not okay with asking them.”

“Think of it as asking them to help you with a home improvement project. I’m sure you’ll repay the favor someday. It’s what family does.”

“So you think they’ll have an organized crime syndicate they need help taking out someday?”

“Could happen,” she shrugged. “Or they’ll need help moving or building a deck or

something. It all evens out in the end.”

“Your logic scares me.”

“With its brilliance,” she finished for him. “I’ll call them later and just see what they have to say. Deal?”

“Why not?” he laughed at her ability to convince him to do things despite his better judgment.

She waited until it was a decent hour in D.C. then called her father’s cell.

“Veronica?” her mother’s worried voice greeted her. Ronnie swore softly and then forced a smile in her voice.

“Hey, mom. How are you?”

“Worried about my daughter, that’s how I am. Where are you two?”

“Vacationing.”

“You just got back from vacation.”

“Well, we tire quickly.”

Rick made a face at her and she shrugged helplessly. With a chuckle, he returned his attention back to his computer.

“You need to come home right away,” her mother instructed.

“Is something wrong?”

“I was able to get you an appointment with a fertility specialist. You wouldn’t believe the strings I had to pull—he comes very highly recommended.”

“Mom, look—the truth about the kid thing…”

Rick’s head snapped up; he was suddenly interested in the conversation again.

“Yes?”

Veronica’s resolve waived.

“Well?” her mother prompted.

“It’s Rick. He’s sterile.”

“You should have told me sooner. I’ve wasted all this time getting you into doctors.”

“I know Mom, sorry.”

“Keep the appointment. Maybe he can still help you. There are other ways, you know.”

“Mom. Stop. I’m not having someone else’s baby. Can I talk to Dad? It’s pretty

important.”

Veronica purposefully avoided Rick’s gaze. She peeked at him out of the corner of her eye. The look on his face was actually quite priceless.

“Ronnie? What’s wrong?” her father was now the worried voice on the other line.

“Nothing’s wrong, Daddy. We’re fine.”

“I’m not sure I believe you. I don’t like you guys disappearing with no word or the rumors I’m hearing around the office. Things were at least quieter with Seth.”

“Seth was a first class jerk, Daddy. Leave him out of this. I’m actually really happy with Rick. But Daddy, I’m sorry. I really am sorry for this whole mess; I know it’s been hard on you.”

“I just wish you’d let me help you,” his voice softened incrementally. “I’m still your father, you know.”

“Absolutely. That’s why I’m calling. Rick and I talked about it, and there is something you could do to help us. If you’re willing, he’ll send an encrypted file to your office. Take a look at it and let us know. We thought maybe Jeff could help, too.”

“Sure, sure,” his entire demeanor changed. He was needed now, so all the world was right again.

Within twenty-four hours, Sean was in touch with them again, having reviewed the file and hammered out all the details with Jeff. While he wasn’t calling Rick son, his attitude was noticeably warmer; Sean had at least stopped trying to talk Veronica into an annulment.

“So Daddy, about this whole baby thing...,” she seized the window of opportunity.

“You’re on your own with your mother,” he informed her, dashing all hopes he would run interference for her on that front.

“You don’t have to sound so amused by the whole thing,” Veronica made a face at the phone. This was the longest conversation she’d had with her father since the wedding.

As they found their way back to the easy relationship she’d once enjoyed, Veronica stood on the balcony, watching the first stars of the evening dance merrily over the dark water. The sun had yet to relinquish its claim to the sky; it was that magical time when the light of day intertwined with the mystery of night, and both offered up their best fare. The breeze rolled up off the sea, toying with her hair.

“From where I’m standing, it’s hard not to laugh,” he brought her back to the conversation.

“Oh, well, thanks...” Veronica noticed her husband headed towards her. “Rick is motioning at me to wrap this up. I guess we have to get going. One of us will be in touch in a few days, alright? Love you,” Veronica barely got the words out before he was snatching the cell phone out of her hand to hang it up.

She frowned at him and he responded by handing her his phone. There was a text from Vance that simply read, “Go.”

Her entire demeanor changed as she understood. They’d been found.

The filmy dress she wore wasn’t intended to hide a handgun, so she tossed it in the bag she put over her shoulder. As always, her suitcase stood packed and ready to go. Since the first time they’d had to run on their honeymoon, she’d learned the value of luggage that was ready to go at a moment’s notice.

There was an eerie quiet between them as she and Rick loaded their things in the small rental car that had sat unused outside the little abode. Veronica made one more pass through the house, checking for belongings before they left.

She reemerged and instinctively knew all was not well. There was no shuffle of Rick loading bags, and he was nowhere in sight. Everything seemed still, as if waiting for something. The breeze curled around her again, this time bringing with it the distinct scent of cinnamon and sandalwood. She knew that smell, and it sent fear coursing through her veins.

“Marko,” she called his name softly.

“Polo,” he responded, his voice playful as he moved in to grab Veronica. He pulled her back to him, one arm wrapping firmly about her waist as the other hand spanned her throat in a way that was half caress, half stranglehold.

A gargled cry from below told her Rick could see them but was powerless to come to her aid.

“My brother got to say ‘I told you so’ because of you,” he bent his head so his lips brushed her temple as he spoke.

“Sorry,” she genuinely meant it, oddly enough. “I’m sure he wasn’t gracious about it. Don’t let him forget how much trouble Adrianna caused chasing after Rick.”

“Believe me, I won’t.”

“Good.”

“You do know I’m here to kill you and your husband, right? I’m mean, as nice as it is to catch up, I want to be sure we’re all on the same page.”

“Absolutely. I assumed that’s why you came. Of course, you do know I have no intention of letting you kill me or my husband, right?”

“I think I’d be disappointed if you did.”

“How did you find us?”

“You aren’t going to get a villain’s monologue out of me, but that was a nice try,” he smiled against her skin. His grip had not loosened, but she could feel the tension leaving his body. He was enjoying their conversation.

“It was worth a shot.”

“You know, I was furious at you. I spent the past week dreaming about how I’d kill you. It was always with my own two hands—that seemed to bring the most pleasure—but then I saw you standing there just now. The breeze was playing with your hair and it made me want to lose myself in that tangled mass of sunshine.”

“That would be a little weird if I were dead,” she reminded him.

He laughed, but it wasn’t the easy laugh she’d become accustomed to. There was an edge to it, as if the two creatures existing within him were now in conflict. “Maybe I am undecided about your fate—you do amuse me. But your husband has been a pain in my ass for a while now. I hope you won’t hold it against me when I kill him.”

Without changing his grip, he tugged her down the stairs towards the car. Now she could see Rick and the two men who held him. A third held a gun to his forehead.

Despite the shadow of evening, she could see the cold fury burning in Rick’s eyes. Blood and dirt marred his face. His clothes were torn. He hadn’t gone down easy, and now he was every bit a dangerous, coiled animal, waiting for his chance to strike.

Marko brought them to a stop directly in front of Rick, ensuring he had full view as Marko flexed his hands on Veronica’s body, reminding them both of the grip he had on her. He placed a kiss on her temple, his eyes never leaving Rick’s.

Rick met his gaze with a look that promised retribution for that and any other time Marko’s lips had touched his wife. With the man she loved more than life itself on his

knees before her, Veronica arched into Marko as she brought her arms up over her head, rolling her body against his so she could reach back to sink her fingers into his dark hair. The seductive curve of her body through the gossamer dress, the silent promise in her offering, was enough for him to give pause.

Before he could snap out of it, Veronica's grip hardened. She braced herself against him as she swung her legs up, catching the gunman by the head with her feet. In one deft motion, she snapped his neck and continued her trajectory up and around.

She now faced Marko, her eyes captured by his for a frozen moment. She vaulted off the ground into a spinning wheel kick that caught a goon square in the chin. The man stumbled back, giving Rick the edge he needed to break free.

He exploded into action, parrying a punch from one guard and meeting it with a swing of his own. Veronica dodged the hulk she'd caught in the chin, coming up under him to jab at his windpipe with her knuckles. She finished him with a quick succession of well-placed kicks.

"Bastard," Rick spat blood out of his mouth. He turned in a circle, looking for some sign of Marko. His muscles quivered with the need to kill Marko Kulenović with his bare hands.

"He took off shortly after the first guy hit the ground," Veronica placed a calming touch on his shoulder. "These three won't cause any more problems tonight. Let's go before Marko regroups and comes back."

Rick focused on Veronica, willing quiet the storms within him. He nodded, moving on autopilot to open the car door for her. She didn't push him, knowing he needed to just get them to safety before he could process what had happened.

"I think we're too easy to spot when we're together," he finally broke the silence.

"Do you want to split up?"

"I don't want to, but it might make more sense. I want you to get yourself to San Francisco. Zigzag a little bit. Make sure you lose anyone trying to follow you."

"I can do that—if you promise me something."

"What's that?"

"Don't go after him by yourself."

"That's not fair," he protested. "You didn't see the look in his eyes when he had his

hands on you.”

“It’ll ruin everything we’ve worked for. Please, don’t play right into his trap. Promise me you’ll meet me in San Francisco.”

“Isn’t that a song?”

“You really have trouble focusing sometimes, you know that?” Veronica sighed. “And I’m not agreeing to step one foot out of Greece until you promise me you’ll stick to our original plan.”

“Fine. I promise,” the words sounded as if they’d been ripped out without his permission. “Until I know how he found us, don’t use your cell phone or laptop. Unless you need to put out the bat signal.”

“Okay. Remember my friend Kate? She’ll be our contact.”

“That’s the one that gave us the wine basket, right?”

“Right. Here’s her card,” Veronica fished a business card out of her purse. “Find her when you get there.”

One short car ride later, Veronica found herself standing on a dock, in Rick’s arms for one last embrace before the two parted.

“Ron, I’m sorry...”

“Stop it,” she cut him off. “We’re not having this conversation. You have nothing to apologize for. It wasn’t your fault and we’re both okay.”

“Because of you. We’re both okay because of you.”

“That just means I’m finally pulling my weight,” she assured him, leaning up to kiss him goodbye. “I had a very good teacher.”

Chapter Nineteen

Just as Rick instructed, Veronica zigzagged her way back to the States, and then across them to the California coast. She changed her look after each stop, walking into the restroom a brunette and out with silver hair, or a scarf or baseball cap.... By the time she stood watching the fog roll over the Golden Gate Bridge, she had taken all manner of

planes, trains and automobiles to get there.

She checked into a mid-priced motel and collapsed onto the bed. She'd track down her old friend after she was rested. That night, she slept so deeply she couldn't remember dreaming.

When morning dawned, she set about getting ready. If her perpetual motion stopped, it would settle in how much she missed Rick. Or worse, she'd start obsessing over the tortured look in his eyes when Marko's hands had been on her.

Here, in the harsh light of reality, she wondered how Marko had any pull over her whatsoever. Here, it was easier to remember who he was and on which side of the line he stood. How had she been under his spell, even a little? It was a dark side of her she wasn't entirely sure how to reckon with.

So instead of reckoning, she shoved it aside and applied her lipstick. She was wearing jeans, a gray tank top and a battered pair of white canvas sneakers. Everything else in her bag was either intended for night raids or for looking pretty and feminine on the Mediterranean coast—completely out of place in the San Francisco financial district. She planned on swinging by a thrift shop to grab a sweater on her way; the bay area summer was surprisingly chilly.

After sweeping her hair into a messy bun, she grabbed her bag and headed out the door. Hopefully Kate would be at work today and not put out by a surprise visit from an old friend.

Veronica ducked into a thrift shop that held promise. She fell in love with the racks of clothes that were more fun than anything in her closet and wound up buying several outfits, along with the sweater.

She backtracked to the room to drop off her treasures before heading back towards the financial district. By the time she arrived at the old brick building in SOMA, it was nearly lunch.

"May I help you?" the woman at the front desk looked at Veronica as if she were lost.

"I'm looking for a friend of mine. Kate..."

"Veronica Talbot. I mean Sinclair. What are you doing here?" a pretty redhead interrupted.

“I can’t drop in on an old friend for lunch?” Ronnie beamed at Kate.

“I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“You look amazing,” Ronnie told her truthfully. Kate had definitely come out of her cocoon since their heyday.

“So do you.”

“Don’t lie,” Veronica couldn’t help laughing. She looked like she’d traveled halfway around the world in the past few days. “Is this a bad time? I can come back later.”

“Don’t you dare. Let me grab my purse, we’ll go to lunch.”

“Wow, you really do look amazing,” Veronica couldn’t help musing again as they waited for their salads to be delivered.

“If you saw the women I work with, you’d know it’s only out of self defense. They are ridiculously beautiful. And stylish. And sweet, so it’s impossible to hate them.”

“You just described yourself.”

“Ha! So what are you up to these days?”

Veronica thought about that for a second; it hadn’t occurred to her that she’d have to answer that question at some point. It should have, but it hadn’t.

“Rick and I went into business for ourselves. We’re doing some consulting work for the government. Fairly boring stuff, but we get to travel.”

“How’s married life?”

“Amazing,” Veronica’s eyes shone. “Crazy. Not at all what I expected, but amazing.”

“I heard you aren’t having children,” Kate snickered.

“What? How did you hear that?”

“Your mother called to see if I could recommend a good specialist. It seems she’s exhausted her resources on the east coast.”

“How humiliating. Rick and I are perfectly capable of having children, we’ve just chosen not to,” Veronica assured Kate.

“Don’t apologize. I got a follow up call from Jeff, promising me you were fine. It was pretty funny, actually.”

“Well that’s comforting.”

Lunch was fun, and blessedly normal. They talked about Kate’s journey to San

Francisco after her mother's death. They talked about men and Kate's job and fashion. They did not talk about human trafficking, crime bosses or near death experiences.

"Oh my gosh, Jack's going to kill me if I don't get back to the office," Kate frowned at her watch. "I have a meeting in 15 minutes. Please tell me you'll go out with me and the girls tonight."

"Absolutely," Veronica smiled, glad she didn't have to fish for a reason to hang around Kate until Rick could make contact with her.

"Wonderful! Should I call your cell?"

"My schedule's a little nuts the rest of the day. Why don't I call you around 7?"

"Perfect," Kate leaned over and gave Veronica a quick kiss on the cheek before disappearing out the door.

Veronica knew her excuse sounded weak, but she still couldn't turn her cell phone on, and that left her with few alternatives. After lunch, she picked up a pay-as-you-go phone and put a call in to Jeff's work line. If Marko had tapped the federal phones, he deserved to find her.

"Hey big brother," she grinned like a fool when she finally had him on the phone. She missed him like crazy.

"Ron! It's good to hear your voice. How are you?"

"Really good, actually," Veronica realized it was true. She felt incredibly alive these days. "How are you? How's Courtney? How are the dogs?"

"It's good to know you miss us, too," there was a smile in Jeff's voice.

Veronica curled up on a nearby bench to watch people while she caught up with her brother on the phone. She'd taken a cable car to Fisherman's Warf. It seemed the tourist thing to do, and this was her first trip to the city by the bay.

"I hear you and Courtney are quite the item these days."

"I have to keep an eye on my sister's dogs, right? And someone has to be sure the bad guys don't carry her off to get to you."

"I think that particular threat has passed, but we don't have to tell her," Veronica offered.

"Ron..." Jeff wasn't about to let her comment go. "Why has that threat passed?"

"I think Marko is planning on taking a more direct approach now. He's a little riled

up.”

“What did you do to him?”

“Broke his heart. It wasn’t on purpose, though.”

“How do you accidentally break someone’s heart? Come on, sis. Even I wouldn’t try that excuse.”

“Bull. You have tried that one.”

“I can’t imagine it worked for me.”

“It didn’t,” Veronica admitted. “I feel bad. I didn’t mean for him to fall in love with me. I certainly didn’t intend to hurt Rick.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“I don’t want to say it out loud.”

“Now you have to. You can’t throw something like that out there and just walk away from it.”

“I didn’t expect to be drawn to Marko. He’s... I don’t know. He’s just not what I expected.”

“You should have gotten being a slut out of the way before marriage, like I did.”

“I’m not being a slut.”

“Yeah... anyway....”

“Hey, if you’re finished insulting me for the time being, could you send me a few files? I don’t know how long it’ll be until Rick gets here.”

“I’m sure he plans on you waiting for him patiently in your room.”

“Probably.”

“So of course you’re not going to do that.”

“Of course not. I was hoping you could help me find the San Francisco location so I could maybe go scope things out.”

“Gonna see if there are any more hot bad guys? Got a taste for rebels now?”

“Shut up.”

“That’s not nice. I’ll send a file your way in a bit. I’m sure we have something to at least point you in the right direction.”

“Thanks.”

“You know, if you had Marko’s love child, it would get Mom off your back. I mean,

I heard your husband is the reason you can't have kids and all....”

Veronica hung up on him. There was no retort for that one.

She tossed the phone in the trash and headed back to her room to wait for the file from Jeff. The man might be a mouthy brat, but he came through for her in every pinch. This one was no different.

Veronica flopped down on the circa 1970s bed with her laptop to sort through the files from Jeff. The room was dark and outdated, but it set the mood well for the work she was doing.

He'd also sent a picture of Brutus and Sissy lounging on his couch. It made her miss her home—even if they hadn't finished unpacking all of the boxes.

Jeff included a mixture of FBI files with information on arrests most likely related to human trafficking. He'd also attached SFPD files pertaining to any prostitutes of Eastern European descent picked up over the last two years.

She marked each incident, each arrest, on a map and then overlaid that with intelligence from Vance. Her own notes came in handier than expected. It was surprising how much she'd learned just by being there to soak up the hushed conversations and rumors that circulated at parties.

At first she couldn't find the connection; then it struck her that she'd forgotten one important element—the antiques. When she started pulling in data about high-end Roman artifact sales and the occasional black market piece recovered by the police, the pattern became apparent. Most of the activity radiated around one central point between the Tenderloin and SOMA. Since she still had a couple of hours before she was supposed to call Kate, it made sense to check it out.

Rick had the majority of the cool spy gear and didn't seem too inclined to share, so she made do with a pair of kid binoculars she picked up at the Walgreens on the corner. They worked well enough, even if they did have Dora the Explorer on them.

With her hair tucked under a 49ers cap, also from Walgreens, she was good to go. It wasn't a perfect disguise, but it was better than flat-out announcing her presence.

She took a cable car to Market and wandered until she found a little diner within view of the Golden Gate Theater. She had a cup of coffee while she watched the street for anything that smacked of smuggling people.

The first thing to catch her eye was a late model sedan with tinted windows. It looked like the car Marko always sent for her. That seemed as good a lead as any, so she tossed some money on the table and started walking in the direction the sedan was headed. She found herself on Stevenson, a narrow street lined with multicolored buildings.

There was a large, dirty, beige building standing next to a brick building on her left. On the right, a gold and gray building stood next to a blue one and then a red. The colors seemed to rotate on down the street. Peeling posters clung to the building sides in spots.

Most interesting was the overhead that connected the blue building to the beige one. It looked like two train cars stacked on top of each other. She couldn't make out the writing on the green, topmost car, but the yellow one underneath had the words "Department Store" across it in block letters. A fire escape worked its way down from the green train car to a bright red door on the beige building.

It was a fascinating street, but the iron gates on the doors and the narrowness of it were a little unsettling. She knew the sedan had come this far, but it was nowhere to be seen now. Every nerve in her body tingled. This had to be it.

She began looking for a building with discreet roof access and finally found it in one of the gray ones down the block a ways. She lay down on her stomach as close to the neighboring building as possible. It occurred to her that she would feel completely and totally ridiculous if someone were to stumble across her, peeping at the surrounding buildings through a pair of pink binoculars.

Looking back down the street, she could now see that the beige building had the word "HEART" written across it in yellow and brown block letters. Veronica wondered why the "A" had been written upside down. Perhaps there was an artistic reason to it her practical brain couldn't wrap itself around.

With a firm reminder that admiring the street wasn't her true purpose, she went back to scoping out the occupants of the buildings. There was a sporting goods store, a Foto Depo and an adult superstore. It was the building labeled Polo Industrial Enterprises that piqued her interest, though.

With startling clarity, she could remember the word "polo" rolling off Marko's tongue as his hand had closed over her throat that night in Greece. It would fit his quirky

sense of humor perfectly to name a dummy company something as asinine as that.

She kept her focus on that building for the next thirty minutes, hoping for some giveaway as to what was going on inside it. The fact that the view inside every window was restricted only heightened her suspicions. She finally gave up, knowing she'd be late to meet Kate if she didn't head back.

When she was back at the hotel, she did a quick Google search of the company Polo Industrial Enterprises before scurrying to get dressed. The complete lack of Internet presence for a company with a building that size furthered her conviction they weren't legitimate.

She forced herself to break the spell of the Internet, setting aside the laptop to get ready for girls' night out. She knew it was un-spy-like, but she was genuinely looking forward to a night on the town. Maybe there would be dancing involved.

Chapter Twenty

The driving punk beat flowed through her. Veronica's hips moved of their own accord. They had danced until her skin was damp and yet she still itched to get back on the floor. Maybe it was being in the company of Kate's younger and hipper coworkers—it made Ronnie feel younger and hipper as well. Whatever the reason, she was finding the evening to be very cathartic.

When the band began playing a Social D cover, Veronica couldn't take it anymore. She grabbed Kate and dragged her back on the dance floor. The crowd pulsed around her and she was completely absorbed by the beat.

He appeared as if out of nowhere. In a dreamlike moment, the crowd parted and the couple gravitated towards each other.

Kate recognized Rick and melted into the crowd as seamlessly as he had appeared from it. Rick's arms wrapped around Veronica's waist and he began to move with her and the song.

"I made Kate promise not to tell you I was here when I texted her earlier," his voice

was low against her ear, his breath sending a thrill down her spine as he answered the questioning look on her face.

Joy swirled around her. There was something about being somewhere so utterly normal with him, simply having fun. For the rest of the evening, they laughed, they visited with friends, they danced and they drank.

Their happy buzz grew and Veronica soon found herself saying her goodbyes to the group. She refused to touch him in the taxi, knowing she couldn't be trusted in her current state. He seemed to also realize that inhibitions were low and was almost formal with her in the car. They spoke little and nothing of importance was said.

Ronnie stayed focused on her mission to get in the hotel room. She fumbled with the door; he was standing so close to her now she couldn't think straight.

"Ron."

"Yeah?" she turned to face him, abandoning the keycard in the door.

The last vestiges of restraint snapped as he lowered his head to kiss her. Effortlessly, Rick reached around to manage the lock that had eluded her, and the two stumbled back into the room.

Her head still hadn't cleared from the beer or the dancing. He was fueled by the days spent brooding over their last moments together. The combination proved to be a potent one.

It wasn't until the next day that Veronica regained the presence of mind to even think about their reason for being in San Francisco.

"I think I've found Marko's San Francisco operation," she informed him as they wandered down Market Street on their way to meet Kate for a farewell breakfast.

"How long have you been here?"

"A day."

"And you've found it already?"

"I think so."

She could tell Rick was skeptical, and that irked her.

"It's not far from here. Maybe we could check it out after breakfast," she persisted.

"What are you basing this on?"

"Do I ask you to show your work every time you pick a target, or do I trust that you

have a brain in your head?”

“I wasn’t implying anything. I just asked why you think this particular spot is the San Francisco hub.”

“Because, Dick, I used FBI and local police files and a map to figure out a most likely spot. Then I went to that spot and looked with my eyes. Once there, I found a building with a bogus name that links back to something Marko once said to me. Their blinds are drawn tight when no one else on the street even has blinds. The company has no Internet presence. Every warning bell in my head is going off. As my partner, you should be willing to at least go look at this damn building with me.”

“Fine, we’ll go look at the building,” he shrugged.

She narrowed her eyes, certain it was a ploy to get her to stop talking. That sucked some of the joy out of the victory.

“So tell me again how you and Kate are friends,” he caught her hand in his and held tight when she would have jerked it away.

“You’re trying to change the subject.”

“Absolutely. I don’t want to spend the next hour avoiding your glare. Let’s talk about something else. Please.”

“After college, I spent a year at the Santa Fe office of the U.S. Department of Rural Development. I hired Kate to coordinate an event for me—she was working out of Albuquerque at the time.”

“That’s right. I’d forgotten you lived out west for a bit.”

“I guess I’ve always had a little adventurer in me,” she smiled sweetly as she held the door open for him.

“Lucky for me.”

Veronica couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or not. For the sake of unity, she was telling herself not. Kate was already at the restaurant and had grabbed them a table. Rick was instantly charming; his ability to turn off—or at least hide—his emotions was enviable.

It took a bit more work for Veronica, but she managed to make it through the entire breakfast without raising Kate’s suspicions. She did her best to enjoy these last few moments with an old friend she probably wouldn’t see again anytime soon.

Just as quickly as he'd turned charming, Veronica's dear husband found his scowl when breakfast was over and she was steering him in the direction of Polo Industrial Enterprises. Although, the look on his face turned nothing short of comical when she offered him the Dora binoculars.

"I'm sure you didn't attract any attention with those."

"I had to improvise."

"And tell me again why you feel so strongly about this spot."

"No, you tell me why you don't like this spot."

"That's mature."

"Whatever, Dick."

"My point exactly."

"Fine, you don't think there is anything to this place? Then you won't mind if I go in and say hi," she marched over to the front door.

"Have fun," he stood his ground on the sidewalk, jamming his hands in the front pockets of his faded blue jeans.

Veronica made a face at him and tugged at the door.

"What's wrong love? Didn't expect me to call your bluff?"

"It wasn't a bluff. The door is locked," she frowned at the stubborn obstacle.

"Damn. Guess we should go back to the hotel, then."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, actually, I would."

"You are the laziest spy I've ever met."

He took the criticism with a nod and refrained from asking how many spies she knew. She began walking around the building, looking for an alternate way in.

"Ron, what are you doing?" he hurried to catch up with her.

"Finding a plan B."

"I don't think that's a very good idea."

"The door shouldn't be locked this time of day. Not for a legitimate business this size. And this makes two business days in a row with no activity. I find that odd."

"But not unheard of. Come on, let's go ask their neighbors if they've noticed anything off about the place."

“Don’t patronize me. You’re convinced this isn’t it. If you aren’t going to trust me as a partner, then this seems like a perfectly reasonable next step to me.”

Veronica stopped to test a side door in the alleyway.

“They aren’t just going to leave a door unlocked.”

“You might want to tell them that,” she shoved the heavy door open and disappeared inside.

“Get back here. Ron,” he hissed, following her inside when she didn’t respond.

“This place is deserted,” she looked around what looked like an abandoned office space.

“Maybe it is. There are vacant buildings in the city.”

“Why isn’t it for lease? And why did they leave the furniture?”

“I don’t know, why don’t you ask the police when they show up? You probably triggered the alarm by now.”

“Do you hear that?” Veronica ignored him, cocking her head to the side.

“Is it sirens?”

“No. More of a scuffling sound. Come on.”

“Do you have no sense of self preservation?”

Again, she chose not to answer. Her ears strained to make out which direction the sound was coming from. With the shades pulled tight, very little sun found its way into the dim building. Veronica made her way towards the stairs, following her ears to the second floor.

“You have no idea what is up there,” Rick warned, reaching for her hand.

“And we never will if we don’t go check it out,” she argued, pulling free and peeking her head around the corner. “It looks like there’s something in the middle of the room... hanging from the ceiling.”

She reached in her pocket to fish out her cell phone, flipping it open and holding it forward for the light.

“Resourceful.”

“I can’t help it you’re stingy with the gadgets.”

“They didn’t have a cartoon flashlight to match your binoculars?”

“Hey, I think that’s a person.”

Rick and Veronica inched closer to the object in the middle of the room. They quickly realized it was, in fact, a man—one who'd been hung from the ceiling by his arms with only his tip toes touching the ground.

"It's Vance," Rick was the first to recognize the bloody mass. He pulled a knife out even as he spoke, reaching up to cut his friend down.

Chapter Twenty-One

The next hour was a blur. They'd made sure Vance was still alive, with Veronica enlisting Jeff's help to get an ambulance since she'd hoped for a minimum of questions from local authorities. Once Vance was in the safe hands of San Francisco General, the true bickering began.

"They probably saw you poking around with your pink binoculars and Vance tried to cover for you," Rick winced as he took a drink of a hot beverage that was supposed to be coffee.

"You know what I love about you, Dick? How quick you are to assume it was my fault. Vance's wounds were more than a day old. He was probably hanging from that ceiling yesterday when I was there. Or he was in the black sedan I followed. "

"How do you know that?"

"Did you see that redness around the cuts on his face? His wounds are getting infected. Scabbing happens pretty quickly, but infections take a couple of days. Don't they teach you people anything in spy school?"

"I never went to spy school," his steel eyes snapped with frustration.

"Then you should have, Dick. Maybe you'd have known that."

"Fine. I'm sorry for saying it's your fault. You're like a damn terrier with a bone."

"Really? You want to stand here and shred any hope for our marriage to pieces? That sounds like the best course of action to you?"

He took a steadying breath. She could see in his face that there were many retorts that came to mind, and all he thought better of. When he finally spoke his voice was

calm, his emotion betrayed only by the hint of an accent.

“How about we go find the bastards who did this to him?”

“That sounds like a fine plan to me. Do you have any idea how to find them?”

“Normally I’d rely on Batman for intel,” Rick frowned.

“I’d imagine it would take a truck or two to move that entire operation...” Veronica thought aloud.

“So we’re looking for a truck. That narrows it down.”

“Well, Dick, I bet if we talk to the rest of the neighborhood, someone will have seen something. Then we’ll know what we’re looking for. You’re the one that wanted to talk to neighbors yesterday—let’s go do it.”

Rick nodded, contemplating her words.

“Sometimes simple is the best way to go.”

“You’re right. Let’s go ask around,” he finally spoke. “I should call his girlfriend first.”

“Okay,” Veronica nodded. “I’ll go see if there’s an update on his condition.”

They stared at each other for a full sixty seconds, both with something to say and neither having the will nor the courage. With a curt nod, Veronica broke the spell between them and went to see if she could glean some information.

Unable to find out anything beyond the fact that Vance was still in surgery, Veronica rejoined Rick just as he was hanging up the phone.

“Harmony will be on the next flight from St. Louis. She should be here in about five hours.”

“Maybe I should wait here while you go ask around,” Veronica frowned. She didn’t feel comfortable leaving him alone while he was so defenseless.

Rick hesitated briefly. “You’re probably right.”

“What’s going through that head of yours?”

Rick shook his head as if to say he wasn’t sure himself.

“Are we going to be okay?” she took a step towards him.

“We’ll be fine,” he quickly assured her.

“No, I don’t mean like that. I mean—you and me—our marriage. Are we going to be okay?”

“I bloody well hope so.”

“You have to start trusting me. I hate that you don’t trust me.”

“I’m working on it,” he admitted uncomfortably. “But you need to remember I’ve been doing this alone for a long time.”

“I’ll work on it,” she promised.

“I’ll be back soon,” he leaned over and brushed a kiss on her forehead. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Veronica realized she hadn’t said that in a while. It disturbed her—their marriage was awfully young for them to be taking each other for granted already. For the next hour, she had plenty of time to reflect on all the ways she was bungling things. She sat in the waiting room, feeling like the only person on the planet and mulling over the state of her marriage.

Part of her wanted to crawl into a cave and lick her wounds. Another piece wanted to crush Rick beneath her heel before he had a chance to hurt her. She wished they handed out brochures with engagement rings—ones that outlined all the many pitfalls of young marriages. So maybe the average newlywed didn’t have to deal with crime bosses hunting them, but some of their issues had to be fairly universal.

“Are you the family of Vance Davis?” Veronica was startled to realize a man in scrubs was standing in front of her.

“I’m his sister,” she stood without hesitation. “How is he?”

“He was beaten pretty badly. He had a subacute splenic hematoma and some damage to his left tibia that required internal fixation. Three of his ribs were cracked. He also appears to have a temporal lobe contusion—it looks like he was kicked in the head pretty hard. Some of the wounds needed debridement, but should begin to heal now. In all, he’s lucky you found him when you did.”

“And all of that means...”

“He’s going to be okay, but it will take time to fully recover from his injuries. He’ll be here for at least a week, maybe two. I’d like to see him in rehab for that leg. About six weeks before he can begin to resume a normal life.”

“Thank you,” Veronica felt herself breathe for the first time since the doctor’s speech began. “When can I see him?”

“He’s in recovery now. Someone will come for you shortly.”

“Thank you,” Veronica repeated, nodding. She shook his hand and sank back into her seat, staring vacantly at the doctor’s retreating back.

She wondered how Vance had been discovered. The man was part chameleon. It didn’t seem possible. Somewhere in the back of her brain was the nagging fear that maybe Rick was right; maybe she had done something to reveal his identity.

Without a phone, she couldn’t call anyone to share the news that Vance was going to be okay. She felt very alone. In fact, she wished she could sit down with another woman and purge all of the emotions swirling around inside her. She missed Courtney.

“Ma’am?”

Veronica looked up at the kind-faced nurse who’d come to retrieve her.

“If you want to follow me, we’ve got him in a room now. He’s still fairly disoriented, but at least you can see with your own eyes that he’s okay.”

Veronica nodded, obediently following the nurse.

“My name is Miranda. I’m his nurse until eleven. Cassie is the nurse’s aide on the floor tonight,” the woman pushed a big wooden door and motioned for Veronica to go through. “I’ll write our numbers on the board, if you need anything at all just give us a call. If you can’t reach us, there’s always that button there that buzzes the nurses’ desk.”

Veronica tried to absorb everything being rattled off, but she couldn’t take her eyes off of Vance. Tears sprang to her eyes. He looked so broken and vulnerable in that bed. It was jarring to see the invincible brought down.

“I know honey,” the woman patted Ronnie’s arm. “Whoever did this to him was pure evil. We’ll get him patched up for you.”

“Thank you,” the gratitude in Veronica’s eyes expressed what words could not. “He’s one of the good guys. Definitely worth patching.”

“Harmony,” Vance muttered, his eyelashes flickering open for a brief second.

“Sorry sweetie. It’s just me—Ronnie. Harmony will be here soon,” Veronica moved to his side, gingerly taking his hand. There was no part of him unblemished and she was afraid any touch would hurt.

“I’ll leave you two be,” Miranda excused herself.

Veronica eased into the chair beside the bed without releasing Vance’s hand. Miranda’s words reverberated through her mind—whoever had done this to him was pure

evil. Ronnie knew if Marko hadn't done this with his own hands, he'd played a part.

Whatever demons drove Marko to the life he now lived, they did not excuse the choices he made. She tentatively reached out to stroke Vance's temple, soothing away the unrest that brought a groan to his lips.

"He will pay for this," she promised, her voice low.

Vance licked his lips as if he wanted to say something, but the process of formulating words made his head hurt.

"We can talk later," she shushed him. "There will be plenty of time to talk. Rest now, my friend."

He sighed, succumbing to the claws of darkness. Silence descended; he rested, and she stewed in her anger. Little red dots danced across her vision as she sat focused on his battered face. She was so focused, she was a little surprised when Rick appeared in the doorway.

"You're going to have to break that habit, you know."

"What?" she looked up, a tired smile on her face.

"Focusing on something so hard a herd of elephants could sneak up on you."

"You're hardly a herd of elephants. What's behind your back?"

"These are for you. To say I'm sorry for being an ass," he produced a bouquet of gerbera daisies. They were a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors.

"You didn't have to do that. I was being a brat."

"Look—I don't want him to be your Phantom."

"I told you that was a stupid analogy..."

"Don't interrupt. I've rehearsed this."

She nodded, watching him curiously.

"I don't like that some piece of you responds to him. I don't want there to be some guy out there that tugs at your soul. I want you to love me body, mind and soul, because that's how I love you."

Ronnie blinked twice, allowing his words to soak in. She gently extracted her hand from Vance's and quietly padded over to where Rick stood rooted to his spot in the door. He seemed so nervous, so vulnerable. It shamed Veronica.

"I'm so sorry I gave you even a moment's pause," she took the flowers and set them

aside so she could take his hands in her own. "You are my best friend, the love of my life, and the air I breathe. Don't ever doubt it."

"So our marriage is no longer tentative?"

"No, definitely not tentative," she smiled, having forgotten that there was a time she'd declared the right to consider it such. She locked her arms around his neck, burrowing as close to him as she could. "I love my flowers. Thank you."

"They reminded me of you. Brilliant and beautiful."

"Wow. That one might have been over the top," she teased.

"I mean it," he chuckled and then grew serious again. "How's Vance?"

"He'll be okay. The short version is that those bastards beat him nearly to death. He had internal bleeding. Head injury. Broken legs, broken ribs. It's a long list. But, the doctor said he will be fine."

"They probably expected him to bleed to death before we found them."

"I'm going to kill them. I was going to have them arrested. That's no longer on the table," Veronica informed him.

"You don't want to become like they are," he warned.

"I won't be cruel and twisted about it. Does that help?"

"That's comforting. Ah, my little killing machine."

"You don't think it's my fault, do you?" she rested her head against his chest, unwilling to look him in the eye as she asked the question she feared most.

"No, I don't think it was your fault," Rick stroked her hair. "And I never should have said it was. I'm sorry, love. In fact, if you hadn't been so stubborn about checking out that building, Vance would have died. If anything, you saved his life."

"My fault," Vance croaked. Rick and Veronica both turned their attention to him. "Petrov saw me text you. I was stupid."

"You saved our lives," she left Rick and returned to Vance's side. He nodded, as if the knowledge somehow helped.

"Can we get you anything?" Rick came to stand beside Veronica.

"Harmony..."

"Is on her way," Rick assured him.

"I don't want her to see me like this."

“Too late for that,” a stunningly beautiful brunette stood in the doorway. Veronica was taken aback by how very young the woman was.

She was long and lithe with a delicate face and hair the color of a coffee bean. Her bright green eyes had a wisdom to them that belied her obvious youth. She wore a pair of faded jeans and a t-shirt with the words “Wash U” scrawled across it. She looked like a college kid on her way to class.

Despite his claim he didn’t want her to see him in such a state, his face broke into a smile at the sight of the girl. His entire demeanor softened.

“I’m Veronica; this is my husband Rick. Or have the two of you met?” Ronnie smiled warmly at the woman.

“Once... it’s nice to meet you, Veronica,” Harmony replied, her eyes never leaving Vance. “How is he?”

“The doctor says he’ll be okay.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll come home now,” she knelt at his side, running her fingertips across his skin to assure herself that he was real and in front of her.

“There’s so much work to be done,” he caught her fingers, bringing them to his lips.

“Actually, I agree with Harmony. You should go home—at least until you’re fully healed,” Rick said.

“I do, too... but this isn’t our conversation,” Veronica interjected, tugging at Rick’s arm. “Can we get you anything at all before we leave you two alone?”

“No, thank you,” Harmony barely glanced back at the two of them.

“We’ll be back with some dinner for you in a while,” she promised before leaning over to kiss Vance on top of the head. “You take it easy. And if anyone asks, I’m your sister.”

“You’re lying now, too. We’ve completely corrupted you,” Rick shook his head.

“That was all you,” Vance told him.

“Whatever. Glad to see you still in one piece.”

Veronica scooped up her flowers as they left the young couple alone. He laced his fingers through hers.

“I rented a car,” he explained as he led her to the parking lot.

“I was having fun walking everywhere. And cable cars—they don’t have those in

D.C.”

“True, but we’re going on a road trip.”

“You found them?”

“I think so. Jeff sent me some coordinates to check out. You ready?”

“Do we have time to get there and still bring Harmony dinner?”

“We’ll grab take out on the way back.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Veronica was amazed at how the climate changed once they were out of the San Francisco pocket. Just a little further south and there was a much more Mediterranean feel to the air.

“Do we know who’s here?” Veronica asked.

“Your BFFs Adrianna and Petrov. I think there’s some dissention going on between them and Marko.”

“I really don’t like those two. You know, sometimes I think I understand how you ended up with her... but then I come right back to being astounded.”

Rick made a face that plainly said Veronica had overlooked the obvious attributes Adrianna did hold. Ronnie narrowed her eyes and Rick sighed.

“I really hate that woman,” Veronica said.

“Oh look, it’s our exit.”

“So, is there a plan?”

“Don’t get shot.”

“Good plan,” she nodded. “I can get on board with that.”

Later, it would occur to Veronica that she hadn’t been nervous as they boldly pulled into the front drive. Later, she would muse over how much she’d changed in so short a time. Now, each step was propelled by raw fury as she strode towards the door of the sprawling mansion tucked up in the hills.

Rick’s eyes were dark, his jaw hardened. She knew that look did not bode well for

the inhabitants of this house.

“Petrov Kulenović, please,” Rick asked the butler politely when the door was opened.

“May I tell him who’s calling?”

“I’m sure that’s not necessary,” Rick’s jaw twitched ever-so-slightly.

“Right,” the other man acknowledged before being cracked over the head with the butt of a gun.

“Was that really necessary?” Adrianna purred, appearing on the stairs.

Veronica answered by pulling her own gun and leveling it on Adrianna. Just as she prepared to pull the trigger, she caught a movement out of the corner of her eye and redirected her shot to one of the henchman who’d materialized. He went down with one shot, but there were others to take his place.

Adrianna took the opportunity to retreat back up the stairs. Veronica swore softly but let her go. She didn’t want to leave Rick alone to the swarm. The foyer they stood in offered them a certain amount of protection, allowing them to pick off their attackers one by one. Soon, there were alone in the room.

“She’ll be gone by now,” Rick noticed Veronica’s gaze flicker towards the stairs.

“We need to find the women.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t have killed all of them.”

“Maybe not. Hey—he’s not dead,” Rick pointed down at the butler.

“Worth a try,” she shrugged.

Rick hoisted the man like a sack of potatoes and they headed to the kitchen. He dropped him on the floor while she grabbed the sprayer hose on the sink and turned a stream of cold water on him.

After a moment, the man sputtered. She turned the water off but kept the nozzle aimed at him.

“When Petrov showed up, he had a bunch of women with him. Where are they?” Rick asked.

“Go to hell,” the man glowered at them.

Veronica turned the water back on.

“Bitch.”

“Watch your mouth. There’s a lady present,” Rick admonished. “Now where are the girls?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“Because if you don’t I’ll ask the lady to leave so she doesn’t have to watch me pry the information out of you,” he pulled a knife from his boot.

“Don’t let me stop you. I still have to pick up dinner—let’s not waste time. Scalp the fool if you have to.”

“Okay,” Rick shrugged and grabbed the man by the back of the head.

“The barn,” he sputtered, giving Veronica an incredulous look.

“Wise choice,” Rick patted him on the cheek.

“Go to hell.”

They ignored him, already on their way to the barn. Rick tossed the phone to Veronica as he peered through the window.

“Call your brother.”

Veronica nodded, dialing Jeff’s cell. “Do you think you could send a few guys our way?”

“This isn’t a temp agency. You can’t just order backup whenever it suits you.”

“Please? I really need to get back to the hospital, but we’ve got some girls who’ll need to be processed.”

“Fine. I’ll put in a call—but you have to start planning ahead.”

“Thanks! Love you.”

“You’d better.”

Veronica tossed Rick’s phone back to him.

“I don’t see anyone. There must be a hidden room,” Rick peeked through a window.

“It’s too quiet now. Surely we didn’t get all the bad guys already.”

“No. If I had to guess, they’ve split into two groups. One is getting Petrov and Adrianna out of here and the other is protecting the merchandise.”

“So much for the captain going down with the ship.”

Rick chuckled. “That’s not so much their style. They tend to prefer self preservation.”

“I think I see movement.”

“They’re probably in there watching us on the security cameras and wondering when we’re going to attack.”

“I was kind of wondering the same thing.”

Rick made the face that told Ronnie he was once again warring with irritation and amusement. She leaned over and brushed her lips against the corner of his mouth. He caught her and gave her a real kiss.

“Okay, now I’m ready,” his eyes flicked across Veronica in a way that made her wish they were back at the room.

“Right. Lead the way, fearless one,” she took a deep breath, clearing her head of all but the task at hand.

They burst through the door under a blaze of gunfire. Shots volleyed from each side. Maybe it wasn’t their usual style, but it sure felt good. Almost as good as reaching the hidden room and her fist connecting with the face of the first guard she came upon.

Even if it wasn’t Petrov himself, the exertion of hand-to-hand combat was refreshing. It diffused some of the roiling emotion. She threw herself into it so thoroughly that it startled her when Rick placed a hand on her shoulder. She whirled, ready.

“Whoa,” he jumped back. “Sorry—you’re out of opponents.”

Veronica’s chest heaved. She offered a small, embarrassed smile. Sweat beaded on her forehead. She couldn’t help noticing it did on his as well. His t-shirt clung to him, the muscles in his abdomen peeking through the fabric.

“I’ll lead them up,” she redirected her thoughts. “Hopefully the Feds will be here soon.”

Veronica wondered what mischievous thought flitted through Rick’s mind before he nodded and went to work coaxing frightened women out of the shadows. Together, they emptied the dingy room, leading the girls to safety.

Veronica impatiently checked her watch when the driveway was still empty.

“It’s hard to find good help, isn’t it?” Rick observed.

“I’m just worried about getting back before visiting hours end.”

“After everything you just did, you’d let a little thing like visiting hours stop you?”

“But those are the rules,” Veronica furrowed her brow.

“I think there’s a rule about not shooting people, too.”

“That’s different.”

“Oh,” his lip twitched slightly. “So... what were you thinking about just now? Down in that room?”

“Getting these women to safety?” Veronica was confused.

“No, I mean when the fight first ended. The look on your face... what were you thinking?”

“You noticed that?” Veronica couldn’t be sure, but thought she might be blushing.

“Aye, I did. So, my love, what was going through your wonderful mind at that moment?”

“That you have a beautiful body,” she admitted, lowering her voice. “I was feeling very...lucky.”

Rick grinned like it did his soul good to hear those words. Acting purely on impulse, he grabbed Veronica and kissed her. She felt her body melt against his for just a moment before she remembered her surroundings and shoved him away.

“I don’t think we should be standing in the driveway making out when the FBI shows up.”

“True.”

“I’m going to see if any of the women need anything.”

“Probably a better idea than what I wanted to do.”

Only through willpower and a sense of compassion for the frightened women did Veronica find the motivation to stick to her plan instead of checking out his ideas. So when the agents from the San Francisco field office showed up, they found Rick and Veronica ministering to the needs of roughly twenty young slaves.

Sisters and daughters who’d been stolen or sold, dehumanized and forgotten. Now free with a chance at a new life.

Rick took care of the details with the agent in charge and then they were in their car, on the way to get takeout.

“What will happen to those girls? Doesn’t Vance usually make arrangements for them?”

“Usually,” Rick’s gaze flickered to Veronica and then back to the road.

“Is that something we can do? Did he leave notes or something?”

“I’ll arrange for a local group to follow up,” he promised. “We won’t let them slip through the cracks. But now we have to keep moving. We’ll want to strike Chicago before they can get their bearings.”

“And Atlanta,” she reminded him. “You should call Daddy after we leave the hospital. Wait, we are going to go pick up our bags, right?”

“They’re in our trunk,” he grinned at her. “Don’t worry; your shopping trip wasn’t in vain.”

“Don’t laugh at me,” she smacked his arm, unable to keep the laughter from her own voice.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Standing in the hospital room, staring down at Vance and realizing just how young he truly was, the laughter was gone from Veronica’s mood. She wondered why, at an age when most men were most concerned about next Saturday night’s conquest, he chose to roam the world freeing slaves. Especially when he had a beautiful and devoted girlfriend who clearly preferred he be home with her.

“Thank you for dinner, this is amazing,” Harmony paused between mouthfuls of salad.

“I’m glad you like it.”

Given the young woman’s complete absence of fat, Veronica had gone out on a limb and chosen a healthy meal. More than svelte, Harmony was fit. Her figure spoke of someone who never missed a workout. Veronica resisted the urge to check out her own body in the mirror on the back of the bathroom door.

“We knocked out San Francisco,” Rick told Vance. “Petrov got away, but we got the girls. They’re safe.”

“Would you like me to arrange for their aftercare?” Harmony offered, taking a long plug off the fruit smoothie they’d brought her.

“That would be helpful,” Rick admitted.

“You don’t have to,” Veronica scowled at Rick. “We can take care of it.”

“No, it would be good for me to have something to do.”

Veronica conceded, understanding the need to stay busy. Few things were as brutal as idle waiting.

“Do you know how long you’re in for?” Rick asked Vance.

“A week,” Vance scowled.

“Do you need us to make any arrangements for you?” Veronica offered.

“No, but thanks. I’ll go back to St. Louis with Harmony after I get out.”

Rick nodded. “Do you know how much data was compromised?”

“None. The files were encrypted when I sent them and destroyed after. I can’t think of anything other than the last few phone texts.”

“Then how did they know we were headed for San Francisco?”

“And how did they find us in Greece?” Veronica added.

“They never said,” Vance frowned. “If I were you, I’d get rid of anything you had with you in Bulgaria. There’s no telling what they’ve tagged.”

“I did a sweep of our bags, but tech develops as fast as we can get the counter-tech out there.”

“Even my scarf?” Veronica looked at Rick.

He shrugged apologetically.

“At least the clothes I bought in San Francisco are safe.”

“Will you guys be okay if we push off tonight?” Rick looked from Harmony to Vance.

Harmony nodded.

“Move while they’re still reeling,” Vance agreed. “Don’t give them time to regroup.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

They talked for a while longer before Veronica and Rick departed with a round of hugs. It felt strange leaving Vance behind. Like going to a movie without getting popcorn. Sure it can be done, but it feels incomplete.

“We should probably dump your things before we head out,” Rick suggested. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of it sooner. You’re messing with my head.”

“Sure. I’m messing with your head. It’s always my fault, huh? Maybe you just have

early onset senility.”

“Nice.”

“Instead of wasting all of those clothes, we should give them away.”

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea. If he is tracking something, maybe he’ll think you’re still in San Francisco.”

Veronica dismantled her phone, throwing the pieces in various trashcans all over the city. Her wardrobe was dispersed amongst the homeless. She kept the laptop but gave away her suitcase. Anything Marko might have had contact with was dispersed.

It was a little distressing—she really did love that sangria colored scarf—but it was also kind of fun. And the hunched-over, gray-haired woman pushing the rickety shopping cart acted like she’d been given the world when she ran her wrinkled fingers over the luxurious fabric. Of course, she also enjoyed the money Rick slid her when he thought Veronica wasn’t looking.

Even though scattering her belongings across the city took more time than dumping them would have, they were still on their way within a couple of hours. After one last stop to empty bladders and refill coffees, they hit the road.

Veronica always liked driving overnight. There is a different kind of mood to it that both soothed and promised adventure. When she was a child, her family always traveled overnight on vacations to maximize time at the beach.

Long after Jeff and even her mother had dozed off, Veronica would lie awake, staring at the stars beyond her reflection and listening to her Daddy sing along to a Statler Brothers cassette tape. It’s the only time he would sing—when he thought there was no one awake to hear.

Now Veronica leaned back in her seat, listening to the steady hum of wheels on pavement and watching the streetlights zip by. The lights became farther and farther in between as they left the city behind them. Once again, she watched the stars beyond her reflection. This time it was she who sang a Statler Brothers tune under her breath.

“I know that one,” Rick reached out and stroked her cheek before joining her in the chorus of “Elizabeth.”

“Are you okay if I take a quick nap?” she asked after the song faded away.

“I’ll wake you if I get sleepy,” he promised.

She doubted he would, but the lure of rest was too great, so she pretended to believe him. It had been a long, strange day—even by her new standard. It didn't take long for her heavy eyes to close. As she drifted off, a smile tugged the corner of her mouth. Rick was humming "Flowers on the Wall."

She might have felt guilty about sleeping the entire night if she hadn't felt so rested the next day. Rick looked perfectly haggard, so after pancakes at IHOP, she took the keys and declared it her turn.

She pointed the car east and allowed her mind to wander as miles of blacktop carried them to the nation's Midwest. She stopped for gas in Salt Lake City. Rick didn't rouse until somewhere in Wyoming. They checked in to a Super 8 Hotel in Cheyenne.

By the time they made it to their room, Veronica's legs felt like Jello. She and Rick both collapsed onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

"I don't remember a bed ever feeling this good."

"I bet James Bond never had to put up with this crap," Veronica grumbled.

"Yeah, because someone yells 'cut' until the next scene can be rolled in."

"My butt hurts."

"Lovely."

"No really. It's numb."

"Hey—the desk clerk said they have waffles as part of the complimentary breakfast. I think I want waffles for breakfast."

"I think I want a Diet Coke now," she foisted herself off the bed. "And a pizza. Do you want anything?"

"You're going out for pizza?"

"No, I'm going to the vending machine for a soda. You're going to call and order us a pizza."

"Ah; figures. Yeah. Grab me a Coke."

Veronica padded barefoot down the hallway, not in the mood to bother with shoes and rather enjoying the feel of the cheap carpet beneath her tired toes. The hotel felt very desolate. She wouldn't be surprised if they were its only occupants at the moment.

The farther she walked, the more her imagination toyed with her. She saw Marko around each corner. Or worse yet, Petrov. A chill ran down her spine at the thought of his

beady brown eyes staring at her, full of loathing.

It felt like everything was in slow motion; each act was amplified. Even the sound of the quarters falling in the vending machine seemed to echo in her ears. She peeked out of the vending alcove before heading back to their room. Her pace quickened; the hallway seemed longer on the return trip.

She struggled to control her breathing as she let herself in the room. Rick looked up at her, concern etched on his face.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. I don’t know what got into me; I was seeing the boogey man in every shadow.”

“You know, that actually kind of relieves me. I was starting to worry that you were the tougher one of the couple. I’m not entirely sure I’m secure enough in my masculinity for that.”

Veronica felt the need to dispute that, if not for herself but for womankind everywhere. But she was tired and her brain hurt, so taking up the mantle of women’s equality would have to wait for another day.

She would have picked up the cause first thing in the morning, but Rick was pretty insistent they make a beeline for the waffles. She reassured him there wouldn’t be a run on the continental breakfast, but he was a man on a mission.

Being a good wife, she agreed to settle the bill while he loaded the car. As she stood at the front counter, her head bent over the credit slip, someone brushed past her. The lobby was virtually empty; the near contact made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She looked up only to catch a glance of the person’s retreating back. Cinnamon and sandalwood hung in the air. And Italian bergamot.

She shook her head and chided herself for seeing ghosts again. The odds of Marko being in Cheyenne, Wyoming were fairly slim and there was most likely at least one tall man in the world besides him. It was entirely possible her mind was conjuring those familiar scents, too. Still, there was something in the stranger’s bearing that made her pause.

The man disappeared from sight, undoubtedly to his car by now. She set aside the notion of following him and finished signing the piece of paper in front of her.

“All finished?” Rick appeared in the doorway, rubbing his hands together in anticipation of breakfast.

Veronica nodded, waiting until they were alone to ask him if he’d seen anyone outside.

“No, should I have?”

“Not really. I just saw someone that seemed... a little off. That’s all.”

“When this is over, we’re taking a vacation.”

“Can it be a vacation in our own home? I miss the dogs.”

“And your mother, no doubt.”

“Be nice.”

Veronica had to admit, for all her teasing Rick, she was getting pretty excited about the waffles, too. The smell was reaching out from the hot iron and winding its way around her senses. It was divine.

Halfway through hers, she remembered why she rarely ate breakfast; it always made her feel queasy. Rick was happy to finish off her plate before going back for more. She sipped at her orange juice and waited patiently for him to be full.

This day seemed slightly less arduous. They put in a good nine hours on the road and stopped in Des Moines, Iowa for the night. Just for giggles, they stayed in a Super 8 again. That night, before collapsing into bed with their pizza, they coordinated timing with Sean and Jeff.

She’d applied the same theories used in San Francisco to pinpoint the most likely targets in Chicago and Atlanta. The next day, each team would scope out their coordinates and report back. An attack would be coordinated for nighttime.

Veronica was ready for action again. If all went as planned, in less than 48 hours, they would have taken down two more pillars of the Kulenović organization. They’d be so much closer to the end of this labyrinth.

And she needed to come to the end of this particular adventure. It was starting to affect her; she was getting antsy. Twice the next day, she was sure she’d seen Marko only to look again and find no one there. By the time they’d checked into the Super 8 in Chicago, she was getting downright surly.

“Have I done something stupid?” Rick finally gave in and asked.

“No,” she assured him apologetically. “I’m just tired of wearing the same pair of jeans and t-shirt. Since we have a little time, I think I’ll go shopping.”

“Sure,” Rick stretched reluctantly. “Maybe we could grab a burger and a beer afterwards, though.”

“You don’t have to go. I wouldn’t mind having some time to myself.”

“Sick of me already? Sorry, love. I’m not letting you out of my sight until both Kulenović brothers are taken care of. Petrov is a twisted freak—I don’t even want to think about what he’d do to you. And Marko, he’d just love the chance to whisk you away to some remote corner of the world, never to be heard from again.”

“We don’t have to go. It would make more sense to go check out the coordinates anyway.”

“Am I that bad of a shopping buddy?” his eyes danced with amusement. “Come on. There’s nothing saying we can’t do both.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Before shopping, they swung by the neighborhood pinpointed as a potential hub for the Kulenović operation. Veronica wondered why she’d stopped thinking of it as Marko’s group. Was that in response to infighting within the organization, or some sort of Freudian thing?

In contrast to San Francisco’s industrial front, Chicago operations were a little more scattered. The antiques and girls were being sold in broad daylight on the main strip. After studying satellite images courtesy of Rick’s contacts in the government, they decided it would be easier to snatch the girls from the battered old apartment complex where they were housed.

Now that they stood in front of the targeted building, the cameras positioned at every entrance and exit gave away the true purpose of the structure. This wasn’t exactly a security camera kind of neighborhood.

“I’m surprised they haven’t moved already.” Veronica commented as she peered

through her pink binoculars from the passenger seat of their rented Buick.

“So you drove that whole way expecting them to be gone?”

“Still in Chicago, but maybe in a new neighborhood. Do you think they’re setting us up?”

“Maybe. I think they’re getting sluggish because they’re spread so thin. It’s hard to hide an entire operation. Especially with their resources and attention divided.”

“I don’t see any sign of the brothers.”

“They’re probably hiding under a rock somewhere. This is where they keep the girls, though.”

“Do you have a plan? Are we actually going to arrange for someone to take the girls before we get there this time? Because I don’t think Jeff will be happy if I call him for backup again.”

“Yes I have a plan, and if you stop running your mouth, I might even share it with you.” Rick turned the car back on and eased back onto the street. “Now come on, let’s get you out of those clothes.”

“That’s your answer for everything.”

“It usually works, too,” he pointed out. “But in this instance, I was referring to buying you new clothes.”

“Which has also been known to put me in a better mood.”

“I don’t want to know what order you’d rank those two.”

“Yeah, probably not.”

Veronica might have originally craved some time alone, but found herself enjoying Rick’s company. Shocked that she’d never been to Chicago, he’d taken her to the Magnificent Mile. She’d been content with her findings after the first few shops and they were now in search of a pub where he could get the decent burger and beer he’d requested.

He was downright jovial for being on a shopping expedition. She was fairly certain his antics were intended to lift her mood. Intentional or not, they worked.

“I still can’t believe you’ve never been here,” Rick held the door open for her to step into the corner bar & grill they’d settled on.

“I didn’t make it here pre-Seth, and after, I just sort of deemed this his territory.”

“What are the odds you’d run into him in a city with millions of people?”

“With my luck? Pretty good.”

Rick let the subject drop. He was more interested in getting a Newcastle on tap than discussing Veronica’s ex-husband. That suited her just fine; the mere mention of Seth’s name sent her careening towards neurosis again.

She knew she shouldn’t eat like a stall-fed mule—she hadn’t exactly been working out lately—but the food smelled so good and she was craving red meat.

“So, what is this grand master plan?” she asked after they’d settled in.

“If you’re going to mock me, then I’m not going to answer.”

“Pretty please?”

“You really think I’m putty in your hands, huh?”

She looked at him expectantly. He sighed, but started talking.

“I don’t think they have physical guards on these girls. Not on-site anyway. They use cameras and mind games to keep them in line. Someone should be dropping them back off at the building between two and three in the morning. We’ll be waiting there when they do. Once the guards drive off, you go in and convince the girls it’s safe to leave—you’ll have to promise them their families are safe. I’ll go after the guards.”

“How do we know their families are safe?”

“Well, we don’t. I assume they are with Marko so distracted, but I can’t guarantee he won’t make a phone call in retaliation.”

“So, we could be killing their families by freeing them?”

“That’s why they stay.”

“How do you stop that kind of evil?”

“As long as there’s money to be made, you don’t. Supply and demand at its ugliest.”

“It feels so futile,” Veronica set her sandwich back down; her appetite was gone.

“That certainly made it easier to walk away from.”

“Why do you do it? I mean, why did you start fighting this battle in the first place?”

“I’d love to tell you I was motivated by my moral code, but it was for the paycheck. I was offered a lot of money to work on the task force.”

“Was Vance making a lot of money?”

“Who knows where that man’s money came from,” Rick shook his head. “But no,

Vance was there because he felt like he had to atone for the years he was on the wrong side of the line.”

“Vance was...”

“...hired muscle for a pimp in St. Louis,” Rick finished her sentence.

“Oh,” she chewed on that thought, not quite sure how it made her feel. Rick held up his glass, indicating to the waitress that he wanted another.

“Are you giving up on me already?” he sensed her hesitation.

“No. But I don’t think I could live with myself if I got some woman’s family killed.”

“Yeah, it’s different with these girls. We knew the ones in Italy had been sold by their families. But these girls, they were most likely lured here by the promise of a waitressing job. Once here, they would have been told they owed tens of thousands of dollars to pay for their way over. Then the real hell begins.”

Veronica frowned. She thought of Anuli, the woman she’d met in Italy. She couldn’t fathom being sold by her family. Was that better or worse than these women, suffering daily torture rather than inflict harm on a family half-way around the world?

“Do we have a transition house for them yet?” Veronica tried to regain her focus.

“I’ve been in contact with an attorney who handles these sorts of things. She’ll make arrangements for the girls once we have them safely away.”

Veronica nodded, reaching for Rick’s Newcastle. Suddenly her Diet Coke didn’t seem quite strong enough.

“Yeah, I didn’t want the whole thing anyway,” he swallowed the last and only gulp of his ale before getting his wallet out.

As they wandered out onto the street, he tossed an arm over her shoulder and pulled her to his side.

“It does make a difference,” he brushed a kiss on her temple. “Every act of kindness, that is. They add up.”

Veronica nodded.

“Don’t let the enormity of it all catch you like a deer in headlights.”

“Good analogy,” she smiled, enjoying the solid comfort offered by being wrapped up in him. She looked up at him, and then her gaze darted in a different direction. It embarrassed her to think of how starry-eyed she must have looked just then.

Rick chuckled. "I am so completely enamored with you."

"Aw hell," Veronica muttered, her entire demeanor changing as she fought the urge to climb straight up Rick's side.

"Is that a problem?" he stopped, confused.

"It's Seth," she nodded in the direction of her ex-husband who was crossing the street in their direction. "Hurry. Maybe he hasn't seen us."

"So, you'll stare down the head of an organized syndicate—you'll look death in the eye and laugh—but you see a blond in a tweed coat, and you run for cover?"

"I don't like seeing him."

"You don't still have feelings for him, do you?"

"No, but..."

"Then it shouldn't be a problem that he's waving."

"Damn it, Dick. You waved first."

"I did no such thing."

"I'm standing right here. I saw you do it."

"But you don't have feelings for him, so it's not a problem."

Veronica sighed and plastered a smile on her face.

"Seth, what a surprise," her voice was polite if not warm. She wished she were wearing one of her new outfits instead of carrying them in a bag. She looked like a scrub in faded jeans and a t-shirt that declared Reno the "Biggest little city in the world."

"Veronica, you look amazing."

Pathological liar, she called him in her mind.

"So do you," her words were true, as much as she hated to admit it. Though she might not care for his disheveled professor style, it was hard to deny his charm. With blond messy hair and bright blue eyes that danced, she remembered all-too-well how she'd succumbed to his wiles.

"I'm Rick."

"Yes, sorry... this is my husband, Rick. Rick, this is Seth," Veronica shook off her fog as the two men shook hands.

"So you're married now."

Veronica wondered what that was behind Seth's eyes. Regret, maybe? Or was that

what she wanted to see? Did she even care?

“Yes, I’m married now,” Veronica beamed up at Rick. Rather than being a wreck around her ex, she was realizing just how much Rick had helped her heal. How far she’d come on her own, for that matter. “How about you? How is life treating you?”

“Oh, well enough I suppose.”

Veronica knew he was lying. And not just because he was breathing. She could just see it in his eyes—that certain sadness one gets when they realize they chose the wrong path. She felt very selfish in that moment, because she was glad for his mistakes. Glad, because they’d set her on the path to Rick.

“We should get going,” Veronica offered Seth a small smile of forgiveness. “It was good seeing you.”

“You too.”

“Nice meeting you,” Rick nodded as they walked away.

“Well that was some interesting closure,” Veronica took a deep breath, feeling as if a weight had been lifted from her.

“You really married that guy? He’s very... academic.”

“Are you saying I should have stuck with the dumb guys like you?”

“That’s not what I meant at all.”

Veronica giggled. Her mood was much improved. Granted, she was still aching for a shower and clean clothes, but she felt almost lighthearted as they made their way back to the hotel.

Rick followed her up the stairs to their room, making the occasional grab for her despite her protests that he was going to make her trip. She darted from his grasp playfully when she reached the top of the stairs. He laughed and chased her, leaning down to kiss the back of her neck as she unlocked the door.

“What is it?” his voice was low; he’d sensed her fear as the door swung open.

“The scarf on the bed. I gave it away in San Francisco.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Rick drew his gun, his entire demeanor transforming. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end; a chill ran the length of her spine. He’d been there. Marko had been

there; she was certain of it. Was he still in the room, waiting for them? Or was he lurking in the hall, ready to attack from behind?

Veronica pulled her own gun from her waistband and stood back to back with Rick. He moved further into the room while she watched the hallway for signs of a pending ambush.

“Well he’s gone now,” Rick proclaimed after what seemed to be an eternity.

“Did he leave anything besides the scarf? Did he take anything?”

“It looks like everything is untouched. Watch what you say until I do a sweep for bugs, though.”

“I will castrate him for what he did to Vance.”

“Where did that come from?” Rick made a pained face.

“Just in case the room is bugged,” she shrugged. “I’m going to get a shower and change clothes.”

More than a desire to freshen up, Veronica needed some time to gather her wits. She didn’t want Rick to see how unsettled she was by the thought that Marko had followed them all the way from San Francisco. He’d been with them the entire journey; she was sure of that now.

Rick was probably going to be angry that she hadn’t told him of the sightings. Would he understand how she’d convinced herself it wasn’t real? There was no telling what Marko’s game was. Perhaps he was toying with her before going in for the kill. Or maybe he wanted them to lead him to something.

Petrov might be the freak of the family, but Marko was the one who chilled her to the bone. Maybe it was because he tugged at the darkness within her own soul; that, and she knew one day the tug of war between the two sides of his personality would one day end. She had a bad feeling the pleasant Marko wouldn’t win that war.

“Well, nothing was taken and the place isn’t bugged. Why did they break in to give back your scarf?”

“I bought it in Bulgaria—at the street market. It was Marko; I thought I saw him a few times on the road and convinced myself I was seeing ghosts. I think he followed us here.”

“Probably a safe bet.”

“Do you think he hurt the woman we gave that to?”

“Try not to think about it. There’s nothing we can do now.”

Veronica blinked a few times, willing away the tears that sprang to her eyes. She had felt good about helping someone. Instead she’d brought pain and suffering to an innocent human being.

“I really suck at this, don’t I?”

“You don’t suck at this,” he reached out to pull her to him. “Don’t let him get to you that way.”

Veronica wondered if James Bond ever needed his paramours to reassure him he was a good spy. The Sean Connery James Bond certainly hadn’t. She couldn’t be so sure about his successors.

His phone chirped and she grudgingly pulled out of the comfort of Rick’s arms so he could answer it. He took one look at the caller ID and handed the phone to her.

“Hey, Jeff.”

“Hey, little sister. We’re good to go here. How are things on your end?”

“I think we’re all set.”

“You think? That’s comforting.”

“We’re ready,” she made a face at the phone. “Marko is in Chicago. Any word on the other two?”

“Not a peep. Things are pretty quiet here. The girls are being kept in a hole under a strip club. We checked the place out this afternoon. Word of advice—never take our father to a strip club. I thought he was going to have a coronary with all those breasts in his face. I think he buys mom’s ESP claims.”

“You did tell him she isn’t really psychic? That was just a line she tried to keep us under control.”

“I tried. He didn’t seem entirely convinced.”

“Tell him I said thanks for risking our mother’s wrath.”

“I don’t get a thank you?”

“Thank you, Jeff. Hey, how are the dogs?”

“Good. I’m getting kind of used to having them around. And Courtney’s doing well, too.”

“I was going to ask that next. I can’t catch a break with you today, can I?”

“I think she’s the one,” he blurted out.

“Who’s the one what?”

“Courtney. I think she’s the one. For me. When we get back, I’m going to propose.”

“Propose what?” Veronica’s mind struggled to wrap around what he was telling her.

“Marriage? How long have I been gone?”

“Yes, marriage. You’re supposed to be happy for me.”

“I am; I am. I’m just... confused. Let it sink in and then I’ll be thrilled.”

“There’s no sign of the Kulenovićs here. Did I mention that?” He abruptly changed topics. “What about in the windy city?”

“I think Marko’s here,” she let it slide that they’d been over this. She’d never seen her brother in such a state. “I think he’s been following us.”

“That can’t be good. Should we abort?”

“No. We’re too close to finishing this thing. I’ll be careful.”

“Is Rick there?”

“Are you going to talk about me like I’m a child now?” she demanded.

“No, I need to talk to him about tonight. Paranoid much?”

Veronica sighed and handed the phone back to Rick. She went to the bed and ran her fingers across the fabric of the scarf. It really did feel exquisite. With one last wistful look at the garment, she wadded it up and tossed it in the trash. Even if he hadn’t bugged it, she didn’t want to keep anything that reminded her of the time she’d spent with him in Bulgaria.

It felt too much like a relationship souvenir. She considered lighting the scarf on fire, but decided against it. Knowing her, she’d burn the place down.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Veronica hated waiting. It never failed that once she was in place for a mission, she realized she had to pee. Apparently something about sitting in an unmarked van in a

seedy alleyway triggered her bladder. Her heavy eyes were propped open by adrenaline alone. She was bored, too. Her mind flitted from one random topic to the next, although it always came back around to her bladder and Jeff's announcement.

"I can't believe he's getting married. What if she doesn't say yes?"

"Maybe they'll start having a litter of kids and get your mother off our back."

"That would probably blow my mind. I'm still trying to picture Jeff married, let alone with kids."

"I think that's them," Rick nodded at an SUV that pulled up in front of the building. "Yep. It's like a clown car—look at all the girls piling out."

"You be careful, okay?"

"You, too. Remember, get them loaded and get them to the house in Downers Grove. The attorney will take it from there. I'll meet you back at the hotel, okay?"

"Got it."

Rick planted a kiss on her temple and slid out the back of the van. She watched him get in their rented Buick and pull away, following the SUV at a safe distance. With one last deep breath for courage, she pulled her gun and stepped out of the van.

Even if they were fairly certain there were no other guards, she felt better with her Makarov in hand. It had become a trusted friend.

Veronica slinked along the edge of the building, holstering her gun long enough to pull a pair of pliers when she came to the first security camera. She monkeyed her way up a nearby tree and hung down by her legs to reach it.

As she reached for the wires, a voice broke through the stillness. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Why, would it put a crimp in your budget to lose more girls?" she glared at Marko as he materialized from the shadows.

"No, because the building is rigged to explode if a security camera is compromised. I'd rather lose the merchandise than go back to prison. There's always more where these came from. You can thank Rick for that measure—we implemented it after he had me arrested the last time."

"They aren't merchandise. They're people," she hopped down from the tree and stood to face him.

“I didn’t come to debate ethics with you.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because, my dear, I didn’t want to watch you get yourself killed. Your husband should have known we would have more security than a camera or two. And don’t worry—I’ve saved you the embarrassment of a second divorce.”

“What have you done?” her blood ran cold. The corner of his lip twitched in cruel amusement and she knew Rick was headed into a trap. The fire of fury replaced the ice of fear in her.

“It’s really more a question of what you’ve done. If you hadn’t logged on the Internet with your laptop in San Francisco, I wouldn’t have been able to get there before you left. I’d been waiting very patiently for your IP address to make an appearance.”

“So I did lead you to us,” she absorbed that information.

“Don’t worry. We found you in Greece the old fashioned way—so it wasn’t all you.”

He seemed to be almost enjoying himself. All she could think about was Rick. He was in danger, and it was her fault. Anger and fear boiled inside of her until she exploded off the ground into a spinning kick that caught Marko square in the jaw. He cursed and stumbled backwards. She advanced without mercy.

“Where is he?” There were many questions she could ask, many answers that Marko held, but that was the one burning on her brain.

“You stupid...,” Marko sputtered and swung a powerful fist towards her face. Pain reverberated through her jaw when it made contact. She stumbled back, dodging his second punch and returning with three lightning fast strikes of her own. The rage behind them gave them power, but he still brushed her off like a gnat, his hand snaking out to grab her by the throat when she advanced on him again.

Their eyes locked. She’d almost come to expect this moment in every battle. He seemed to search for that piece of her that would heed his call to step over the line between them. She silently begged him to cross over in her direction, to listen to that sliver of good in his soul. Neither budged.

“You know what? I’ve wasted enough time on you. Thanks for the tip about the cameras,” she kicked the inside of his knee, knocking him off balance enough to free herself, then she took him down with a spinning wheel kick to the head.

She knew in her brain that she should pull her gun out and remove him from the equation permanently, but she couldn't bring herself to shoot another human being in cold blood. It was one thing when they were shooting at you. Another when they were a broken heap on the ground.

Having the cameras functional just meant she'd need to move more quickly. It wasn't a deal breaker. Besides, according to Marko, any potential threat was aimed at Rick.

It only took a moment to unlock the front door and she soon found herself face to face with a very surprised teenage girl brushing her teeth and wearing nothing but a t-shirt and panties.

"Go get your clothes on and get the other girls. I'm here to help you."

"Who are you?" a young woman emerged from the bedroom, her face guarded.

"My name is Veronica Sinclair. My husband and I are here to free you."

"Where is your husband?"

"Getting rid of the guards. I have a van outside that will take you to a woman who will take care of you. Your families are safe; but we must move quickly," Veronica's frustration mounted. How did these women not understand? Why did they not move?

"How do you know their families are safe?" Marko appeared at the door, his clothes torn and blood dripping from his face. The girls knew him and shrank back. "They aren't going anywhere tonight, princess, and we both know it."

Veronica growled in frustration, hauling off to punch him only for him to catch her fist in a crippling grip. She wanted to whimper. Pain radiated from her hand and shot down her arm. She gritted her teeth and did the first thing that came to mind. Maybe because it was the first self-defense move her daddy taught her.

When her foot connected with his groin, it was with a velocity powered by rage, pain and frustration, and it was enough to bring him to his knees. As he sank, she brought her knee up to catch him under the chin. He fell back and she put a booted foot on his neck to hold him in place.

"There is a black van in the alleyway by this building," she turned to the girls. "Go now."

The women scurried to do as they were told. Veronica assumed that whatever culture

they came from, they could recognize the hint of insanity that now lurked in her eyes. She'd been pushed just a little too far this night.

When she and Marko were the only two left in the building, she looked down into his rage-filled eyes. "Leave. Walk away from this. Please. I don't want to have to kill you. Don't ask me why not, but I don't."

He didn't follow her as she walked away from the building. She didn't stop to see if he'd found his way out before she clipped the wire on the security camera.

The world seemed to rotate in slow motion as she strode towards the van while the crumbled old apartment building exploded behind her. Maybe it was wrong, but she didn't care if it took out the crack house next to it. Something in her was hardening and she wasn't sure there would be any going back from that.

Veronica slid behind the wheel of the van, turning only long enough to offer a brief word of reassurance to the girls. "You'll be okay now. I'm taking you somewhere safe."

Gripping the steering wheel so tight her knuckles were white, she tried not to think about why no muscle had shown up to stop her. It was part of the plan—Rick would have taken care of them. But Marko had planted the seeds of doubt.

What if Rick had been heading into a trap? She wasn't sure she was strong enough to handle him turning up like Vance. Or worse.

The 19 miles from downtown Chicago to Downers Grove was the longest trip of her life. When at last she pulled down the drive of the white dollhouse belonging to the attorney, her nerves were completely frayed. The silence emanating from the terrified girls was deafening. The picture of Marko's eyes glaring up at her was seared into her brain, and the image of Rick broken and bloody replayed in her head.

Veronica wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. She had to transition the girls; then she could go find Rick.

"You must be Taylor," she greeted the woman who'd come to meet them in the driveway.

"And you must be Veronica," the willowy attorney extended a small-boned hand. It wasn't the kind of savior she'd envisioned delivering these girls to. "Um... do you need help from me getting them settled?"

"Nope," the woman smiled as if she knew Veronica's thoughts. "Unfortunately, I'm well

practiced in this. We'll be okay."

"I feel like I should be going after the bastards who patronized that club," Veronica gave the frightened creatures in the van one last look.

"The files your husband sent over will go a long way towards exposing them—that entire operation, actually. We'll get most of them. Especially without Kulenović money funding an endless supply of attorneys to fight me. You keep them busy and I can fight the middle men here."

Veronica nodded and handed Taylor the keys. "Good luck."

"I'll be praying for you," the woman accepted the key ring.

"You too," Veronica responded. She had to admit she wouldn't actually be praying for the woman, but those words were the first to tumble out of her mouth.

"My assistant, Ellen, will drive you back to town," Taylor gestured to a young woman who emerged from the house on cue. She had short, spiky brown hair and an elfish face. She wore a pair of faded jeans and a worn out t-shirt with a broken peace sign on it. Another unlikely hero, Veronica mused.

"I think it's great what you and your husband do," Ellen commended Veronica as they made their way back to the city.

"I just kind of fell into it," Veronica admitted. "At first it was about getting my own life back. Then I realized I couldn't just walk away from those women. No one else seemed inclined to help them."

Even as Veronica answered, her mind was focused on Rick. She hoped he was okay and wondered if maybe she should have told Taylor to focus those prayers in his direction. A part of her wanted to run away with Rick where they could live out their days on a little island in the middle of nowhere—just them and their dogs.

She remembered their honeymoon. They'd toyed with the idea of sending for the dogs and staying in paradise, but she'd been lured back to civilization by shoes and coffee. Now she'd trade it all to live with him in a hut in Zimbabwe. Anywhere in this great big, wide world, just as long as he was there.

The image of Anuli's warm brown eyes floated through her mind. Those eyes had seen more horror than Veronica could really comprehend. She imagined telling Anuli that her problems were just too much, that helping her would require too much effort.

“I just don’t understand how people can ignore this crap,” Ellen fumed, interrupting her reverie.

“Sometimes we don’t realize how bad the problem is,” Veronica shrugged.

“Sometimes we tell ourselves the problem’s too big, and we’re too small. Or maybe it’s a concern for someone else to solve. I spent a lot of years writing about crime, and it never once occurred to me to do something to stop it.”

“It just makes me so angry. People should care more.”

“Complacency is a dangerous thing,” Veronica agreed. “But not everyone can go undercover to break up human trafficking rings. Or dedicate their lives to human rights law.”

“But doing something is better than nothing,” the frustration seethed in Ellen’s voice; she couldn’t fathom how such a simple statement wasn’t obvious to the rest of humanity.

Veronica merely nodded, looking out the window in hope of ending the conversation. She wasn’t in the mood to sit and pass judgment on other people for how they lived their lives. She certainly hadn’t thought twice about ignoring the world’s problems in her past life. It was an easy thing to do.

Her focus shifted to the reflection looking back at her from the window. Maybe the wide blue eyes and blonde curls were the same, but the resemblance to the bride who’d stared at her reflection just a few short months ago stopped there. The new Mrs. Sinclair had wondered then what she’d gotten herself into. She wondered if she could survive the pain of being lied to again.

This Mrs. Sinclair was only a little older but much wiser, and she wondered if she’d be able to take even one breath in a world that didn’t have Rick in it. She rested her head against the cool window and sent a wish heavenward that he would be in their hotel room when she returned. Maybe they couldn’t just walk away from the need, but surely they could take a break from it when this was finished.

“Thanks for the ride,” she wished Ellen well before getting out of the car. Veronica was certain she’d like Ellen better if she wasn’t in such a sour mood. The kid had passion and meant well. With time, she’d learn that the world came in more colors than black and white. Regardless, Veronica was really glad to be back at the hotel.

Her feet had a mind of their own as they carried her up the stairs to their room. Tired

or not, she took the steps in record time. She could see a light peeking out from under their door and her heart quickened. *He was okay.*

Ronnie was in such a state to see him she didn't pause to heed the warning bells that sounded in the back of her brain. And that turned out to be one of those moments she'd relive in her memory, wishing she could rewind time to undo.

Chapter Twenty-Six

She hated Adrianna. That thought came crashing back to her the moment she'd realized who was in her room. It was also the thought that kept her going through the next several days as she traveled across the country, bound and gagged.

Sometimes tears would cloud her eyes; sometimes memories of Rick would cloud her mind. She swept them away with a burning hatred for Adrianna. Petrov might be the one who'd grabbed her from behind that night in the hotel, but it was Adrianna's smug expression that was seared in Veronica's mind.

"You ruined my brother," Petrov's lip curled into a sneer. "He was the perfect face man and you went and screwed with his head."

She started it, Veronica thought, her eyes flitting from Petrov to Adrianna.

"I know, I know. This all started when Adrianna showed up at your wedding," he correctly read her expression. "But I think this little feud has gone on long enough. Don't you?"

I'm going to kill you with my own two hands. Slowly. Veronica seethed inwardly, her body trembling with the urge to break her bonds.

"I'm almost tempted to take the gag out," Petrov chuckled. "I'm curious to know what words go along with that look you're giving me. I guess I can almost see why my brother is so gone over you. He always did like them feisty."

Veronica merely arched an eyebrow at that statement, but Adrianna's eyes narrowed.

"I told you you'd be in over your head little girl," she leaned in to taunt Ronnie, who responded by head-butting her.

As Veronica's world went black, the last sound to reach her ears was Adrianna spitting out the word, "Bitch."

When Veronica came to again, she found herself in a room that felt familiar. She tried to focus through bleary eyes, reaching back into the recesses of her memory to try to place why it felt like she'd been here before.

The stark whiteness of the room, the marble floors... in the distance she could hear Petrov and Adrianna bickering and it finally fell into place. She was in the New York auction house, Everdale Antiques.

Veronica tried to assess her situation and gather her thoughts. She was still bound and gagged, but otherwise she was largely unharmed. With the exception of a pounding headache from being knocked unconscious, that is. She briefly wondered why she hadn't been beaten and trussed up like Vance had.

Shoving speculations aside, she took in her surroundings. There was a window on the far side of the room, and she was pretty confident she could shimmy out it if she tried. Truth be told—she could also picture herself getting stuck.

Even with that image in mind, the window seemed a better route than the stairs. Neither would be viable in her current state, so she began working on the ropes around her wrists.

She was already sweaty and uncomfortable; it didn't take long for the friction from the rope to start cutting into her skin. Chances were good she was being used as bait and she'd never forgive herself if someone she loved died trying to save her. The best way to keep that from happening was to free herself first. So she persevered.

There was a commotion somewhere below. Petrov and Adrianna broke off their conversation and went to investigate. Sensing this was her chance, Veronica worked harder on the ropes, closing her eyes to the pain.

"Ah now, skin as perfect as yours shouldn't be cut up with ropes. Don't do that," Marko's voice cut through the silence of the room and Veronica instantly stilled. Her heart hammered in her chest and she thought of their last meeting. She supposed it was only fitting that she die at his hands.

Something very animalistic in her wanted to writhe and scream and make one last fight for survival. Instead, she slowly opened her eyes to meet his, bracing herself for the

hatred that would be afire within them.

She wasn't prepared for the sadness and longing she found in its place.

"Hold still," he instructed, kneeling behind her to untie her hands.

"I don't understand. Aren't you here to kill me?" she pulled the gag out of her mouth the instant her hands were free before leaning down to fumble with the knots on her ankles.

"No, I'm not here to kill you," he brushed her hands out of his way so he could cut the ropes that bound her feet. His demeanor was every bit the Marko she remembered from Bulgaria; she had to fight the urge to hug him in relief.

"But the last time I saw you, I stepped on your neck."

"Yes, I remember that. You also blew up my building and left me for dead. What can I say? I'm the bigger person here."

"Ouch."

"We really are hopelessly on different sides of the line. No matter how much I wish we weren't," he cupped her face in his hands. The look of tenderness on his face made her heart want to break. "I have absolutely no sense when it comes to you."

"For what it's worth... in another time and place... if things were different or I was...."

"I think I know what you're trying to spit out and it's okay. You don't have to love me. Let's just say I've done a lot of things in my life that I'll have to reckon with. I don't want to add your death as one of them."

"Too bad you didn't feel the same compassion for Vance."

"Vance? Oh, Bo. No, he's not as pretty as you," Marko winked. The small flirtation left her even more unsettled. "I didn't have anything to do with what happened to him. I actually liked the guy."

"That's good to know," Veronica meant it. "So, when you get me out of here... where does that leave us? Are we just going to part ways amicably?"

"What? You aren't going to run away with me? I'm kidding. Sort of. We can finish this conversation later. My brother and his girlfriend won't be distracted forever. They will eventually figure out it was only fireworks in the sink."

Veronica nodded, kind of wishing she could be a fly on the wall downstairs. The

shouts coming from below had her at least a little curious. Another layer of intensity seemed to be building; Marko and Veronica exchanged glances. A shot was fired and then all hell broke loose below them.

“Yeah, that’s not me,” Marko confirmed. “I guess I’m not the only knight in shining armor today. Come on; let’s get you out of here.”

He stood and reached down for her hand. She looked up and gave him a small smile, placing her hand in his. The single shot that rang out was followed by an eerie silence. Her world distorted as she tried to make sense of what was happening. The confusion on Marko’s face mirrored her own. He started to fall backwards and she instinctively pulled him forward into her arms.

“Nice catch,” he choked on the words.

Their eyes met one last time. She could see blood pooling in the corner of his mouth; she felt it warm and sticky in her hands at his back. Just like that, Marko Kulenović died in her arms.

She blinked. That seemed to be all she was able to do at first. Blink.

“Come on, Ron. It’s okay. I’m here,” Jeff was there, extracting Marko from her arms and gently lifting her to her feet. “Are you hurt?”

“What?” she tried to shift her focus. “No. I’m not hurt. I’m fine. The blood is his. He’s dead.”

“I should hope so,” Jeff grabbed the cloth that had been her gag and started wiping her hands off.

Veronica opened her mouth to say it was a horrible mistake; that Marko had been there to save her. Instead, all she said was, “Thank you.”

“No worries,” he flashed her a smile that was both charming and reassuring. “Now come on, let’s get out of here. We have some bad guys to catch and some slaves to free.”

“We do,” she nodded, her demeanor changing. With one last glance back at Marko’s body on the floor, she followed her brother out the door and down the staircase. They reached the main floor and ran into Adrianna as they rounded the corner, on her way to check the prisoner.

Jeff instinctively knocked the gun out of her hand. She retaliated with a right hook that he dodged.

“You go; I’ve got this,” Veronica promised her brother. It sounded like their father could use some backup and besides, she relished the thought of facing Adrianna in hand-to-hand combat right now.

“You sure about that, princess?” Adrianna practically purred.

“There are two people in this world who can get away with calling me princess, and you’re not one of them.”

Veronica felt immense satisfaction the moment her fist connected with Adrianna’s face. Her opponent spat out a tooth and the two women began to circle each other. Adrianna lashed out first, Veronica dodged and parried.

Adrianna was quick and fought dirty. Though far from slow, Veronica overcame the speed deficit by using the power of her legs, heightened by the fury that whipped around inside her. She launched herself into a spinning wheel kick that knocked Adrianna backwards.

The sleek brunette retaliated; pain clouded Veronica’s vision, but she’d dreamt about this moment for too long to let a little thing like a dislocated shoulder stop her now. She growled and advanced with a series of punches and kicks, each driving Adrianna further and further back.

Her opponent rallied, a fist connected with Veronica’s jaw. Ronnie’s body shook with exhaustion; these past days had pushed her squarely against her physical limit. Her chest heaved. Every part of her body wanted to be done with this. Memories of the past months slammed against the corners of her mind, one over the other. The wedding, Adrianna’s sultry sashay towards the unsuspecting couple, Marko’s haunted eyes, Vance broken and bloody, Adrianna’s lips curling in a sneer as she spat the word, “princess” at Veronica.

Rick. That bitch had once had her hands on him. Rick, who was still missing.

“Where’s my husband?” Veronica circled her prey; her words rumbled low in her throat.

“Why on earth would I tell you?” Adrianna arched an eyebrow. Even broken and bloody, the woman’s beauty couldn’t be diminished.

With a primal growl, Veronica advanced, using the last vestiges of will and the power of her legs to deliver blow after blow. Everything human in her disappeared. The

darkness Marko had sought so hard to touch broke free. The princess yearned to permanently wipe that smug, sultry look off the black widow's face.

Adrianna broke from the fight, making a dive for the gun that had been knocked from her hand. Veronica took a running dive for the weapon, reaching it a fraction of a second before Adrianna. The look of disbelief was the last one to cross her face.

Veronica stood and rolled her good shoulder, tucking her bad arm to her side. She was in pain and exhausted, but in one basic piece and fueled by raw emotion flowing freely through her veins. With one more deep breath, she jogged towards the melee in the main auction room.

Her father and brother were both there, backs pressed up against the remnants of ancient statues as they exchanged shots with a handful of men on the opposite side of the room. Veronica dove behind a statue that looked remarkably like the one that'd stood in her living room for a brief time. Her eyes swept the room but she could find no sign of Rick. Her heart constricted.

A bullet whistled past her ear, and she forced herself to focus on the current situation. She returned fire and ducked again as another bullet shot by.

"Ron—it's good to see you alive. Are you okay?" her father called out.

"I'm fine, Daddy. And you?"

"Never better."

"Well this is a touching family reunion," Petrov called from the other side of the room.

"It's over Petrov. You're the only one left," Jeff called out.

"Then it's not over yet."

Veronica glanced about the vaulted ceilings and dramatic archways of the room; tired of the current impasse. There had to be something she could use in the midst of these antiques, lush drapes and all of the other random odd and ends in the room. Somewhere in the back of her mind, the memory of that month in the jungle floated up.

It was just like stealing her lunch out from under Rick's nose. She'd used a combination of ground cover and vines to get close enough then. She'd do the same now.

Carefully, quietly, she snaked her way under tables and through artifacts until she'd reached the other side of the room. When she was nearly perpendicular to Petrov, she

steeled her mind to the pain and shimmied up a curtain pull while sincerely hoping it would hold her weight.

Jeff and Sean stopped firing when they saw her, and the change in their behavior was enough to make Petrov turn to see what had their attention. Veronica steadied herself as he swung his gun around.

Sean fired on Petrov, and Veronica was once again proud of his dead-on aim. The head of the Kulenović syndicate crumbled with anticlimactic ease. Ronnie shifted her aim to his minions, who were realizing they had a new threat in their midst. Their realization came too late; it was over in seconds.

"I told you that you belonged in the field," Sean came from behind the statue as Veronica dropped to the ground.

"Thanks, Daddy," she gave in to the impulse to hug him. She wanted to ask where Rick was but was afraid the answer might leave her unfit to finish the mission. So she refrained from the questions, but allowed herself a minute to be comforted by her daddy's strong and reassuring arms.

The bullet that hit Jeff in the side took all three of them by surprise. Veronica watched in horror as her brother stumbled. Sean reached out to catch him.

"You," Ronnie recognized Marko's driver, who now stood across the room with his gun leveled at her. "What is your problem?"

"I knew you were trouble. From the moment I saw you—I told Marko to walk away from you."

Veronica didn't care that his gun was aimed at her. She had no patience for games, and fired her own gun while diving for cover. A bullet nicked the table in front of her but missed her. She let off another shot in his general direction, and her father joined her. She didn't stop firing until her gun was empty.

The echoes of bullets died away and silence descended. Veronica peeked over the table she was hiding behind, relieved to see the driver slumped over a chair.

"Jeff," Ronnie turned her attention to her brother. Sean had ripped off his own shirt to staunch the flow of blood from the wound.

"It's a nick," he promised his daughter. "It looks worse than it is."

"Go see if you can help out downstairs," Jeff urged.

“Are the girls being kept here?”

“They’re being brought in with the antiques.”

“So when we were here before...”

“There were girls being smuggled in right under our noses,” Jeff finished for her.

Veronica nodded, thinking about how many things she’d failed to see just a few short months ago. “I’ll be right back.”

Jeff nodded.

“I’ll call in our location,” Sean waved her on.

“You didn’t arrange for backup before you busted in? What is it with you guys—always so ill-prepared,” Veronica chided.

“Don’t judge. We were just here to check things out when all hell broke loose in the kitchen. Sounded like someone turned a bull loose in a china closet. So we decided to go in.”

Veronica didn’t comment. That would have been Marko’s firecrackers. She felt like she should mourn his death, but it was hard to think of much besides Rick. She still didn’t know what had happened to him in Chicago, and she was afraid to ask. Instead, she jogged downstairs.

She entered the dimly lit basement and instinctively wrinkled her nose at the smell. Slave hygiene obviously hadn’t been a huge priority for the Kulenoviés. The girls needed to shower; their bedding desperately needed to be washed in hot water. There was one bathroom in the corner for more than thirty women to share.

The room was currently a scene of chaos. Several different languages flowed at once as girls from Bulgaria, Italy, Nigeria and beyond all converged on a central figure in the room, seeking reassurance that the gunshots above did not signal their end.

The man replied in French, Italian and then in Bulgarian. Her heart tripped a funny beat. Regardless the language being spoken, she recognized the accent behind it. She took a step forward to get a better look at him and had the wind momentarily knocked out of her.

He was there. He was okay. Rick glanced up and gave her a grin. She gulped in some stale air and looked away. She was in serious danger of falling into his arms as a sobbing, gelatinous mess.

“Il va bien. Nous sommes là pour vous aider. Rassemblez vos affaires et venir avec nous,” Veronica stepped forward to help out in the one language she could. The Nigerian woman turned to assess her and quickly decided Veronica was their best option. They moved to do as she said, gathering what little was theirs and lining up to follow her.

If Rick was confused by her refusal to acknowledge him, he didn't comment.

“Anche voi. Ти също,” he told the others to do the same in their respective languages.

Careful not to actually look at Rick, Veronica led the girls out of their dungeon with him at her side. Every time he'd call out reassurances to their charges, his voice would reach out and stroke her soul. She had to resist the urge to lean into it.

The world they emerged to was different than the one she'd left a few short minutes ago. Paramedics and federal agents were beginning to descend on the place.

“Who is here to advocate for the girls?” Veronica panicked for a moment before realizing it would be her. She took a deep breath and pointed to the paramedic nearest her. “You... come here.”

“Yes, ma'am?”

“You're not going to expect me to start answering like that, are you?” Rick leaned over to brush a kiss against her temple. She stiffened. She wasn't ready to feel his touch. Not yet. He straightened, his eyes trying to read her before finally giving up and striding off.

She closed hers briefly, trying to refocus her brain before turning her attention back to the paramedic. “Please see to these women. Do not let anyone take them anywhere without my permission. Even if it's a federal agent, do you understand?”

She didn't want the women shipped over to INS in the confusion. It would be a nightmare trying to keep them from being deported then. The last thing she wanted was for them to wind up in the hands of a new set of slave traders.

“Yes, ma'am,” the kid couldn't have been more than nineteen, but he agreed with a solemnity that assured Veronica he knew the seriousness of her request.

She went in search of Rick. If anyone had thought to arrange for the care of the women, it would have been him. She hadn't meant to chase him off.

Veronica came to the stairs and paused. Marko's body would still be up there. She

took a step up, only to be called back by her father.

“Ronnie, have you been looked at yet?”

“Not yet, Daddy. I’m fine.”

“Get over here and let this young woman take a look at you.”

No matter how old she got, there would never be a day when Veronica would defy him when his voice took that particular tone. She grudgingly walked back to Sean and the paramedic he’d recruited to look her over.

Maybe it wasn’t patiently, but Veronica did submit to the paramedic’s care and did answer the woman’s questions.

“Your shoulder needs to be set, and that’s a pretty nasty bump,” she poked at the back of Veronica’s head.

“It’s fine,” Ronnie winced.

“You probably have a concussion.”

“I’m fine.”

“Signs to watch for would be mood swings, confusion, slurred speech, nausea...”
“Got it. I’ll keep an eye out,” Veronica promised as she broke away. Two men were coming down the stairs with a body on a stretcher.

“Miss, we’re not done,” the paramedic called out.

Veronica waved her off, her attention focused on the stretcher coming down the stairs.

“Hey guys... can you give me a minute?” Veronica looked down, gingerly pulling the sheet back. Maybe it was wrong, but she couldn’t help the tears that trickled down her cheeks. She’d set out to bring down a monster; she hadn’t expected to come to know the man underneath. She remembered the dance they’d shared, the day on the boat, that last night in the kitchen.

“You were an unlikely knight. Thank you for coming back for me,” Veronica stroked his cheek, offering him one last smile before replacing the sheet. She turned abruptly and headed for the door, calling over her shoulder, “You can take him.”

Veronica sucked in the fresh air and leaned against the building. She was nearing the end of her endurance.

“So ah... do I want to know what that was?” Rick came to lean against the building

beside her.

“Marko was rescuing me. When Jeff shot him.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t plan to tell Jeff.”

“Should it make a difference? He was still one of the bad guys, Ron.”

“If he had walked away, he’d still be alive. He died because he came back to save me.”

“He died because he was a crime boss and they have notoriously short life spans.”

“You know, I got the impression from Petrov that he’d always been the true boss. He let Marko think he was in charge to serve his own purposes, but Petrov pulled the strings.”

“That’s rather incidental now, don’t you think?”

Veronica gave a slight nod of acknowledgement.

“You know you’ve barely said hello to me. Actually, you haven’t said hello. Or looked me in the eye.”

“Because I’m hanging on by a very thin thread. I’m trying to be a good spy, here.”

“Ah,” he seemed to truly understand. His lip twitched a little.

“I’d actually really like to go now.”

“Come on. The others can wrap up here. I need to get you to a hospital.”

“No, that’s okay. I can stay and see this through. I don’t want you cutting me slack because I’m a woman or a newbie. I can do this.”

“I’m cutting you slack because you were a captive. And because if I don’t get you alone soon, so I can see for myself that you really are okay, then I just might go a little crazy.”

“If you insist then,” she shoved herself off the wall and waited for him to lead the way.

Rick’s phone chirped and he paused to answer it. Veronica could tell that the conversation amused him by the look on his face.

“Looks like we have to go clear a few things up inside. Apparently some kid won’t let your dad come anywhere near the girls. He’s waiting for you to come back.”

“Shoot. I forgot him,” Veronica smacked her forehead. “What are we going to do

with the girls?”

“Actually your brother helped out with that one. I guess he had a fling with a journalist a while back. He gave her a call and she made the arrangements. For exclusive rights to the story, of course.”

“Rachel Cooper,” Veronica smiled, remembering the brief romance between her brother and the sassy reporter. “I liked her. I was so sad when Jeff screwed that one up. I remember being jealous of her because she was smarter, prettier, and always had interns at her disposal.”

“I doubt anyone could be smarter or prettier, but I can understand the intern jealousy.”

“Flatterer.”

Veronica was happy the awkwardness passed without circumstance. It was good to slide into their easy banter again. She found the paramedic and thanked him for guarding the girls, making a mental note of his name so she could follow up with his supervisor later. Rick extracted her from the chaos again before she could get sucked back in. He seemed to know she was at the end of her endurance. But then, he always seemed to know what was going through her brain.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

After several hours in the emergency room for her shoulder to be set and cracked ribs to be taped, Rick drove them to a white and maroon Super 8 in Long Island. It made her smile that even in the face of a crisis, he’d stuck to their newfound tradition.

“I splurged and got the Jacuzzi suite,” he told her as he opened the door to their room.

“Fancy,” she took in the tiny maroon square that was supposed to be the Jacuzzi.

“Nothing but the best, baby.”

“Hey, Rick?”

“Yes, love?”

She finally gave into the urge and launched herself at him. He caught her, stroking her hair and whispering words of comfort in his thick Scottish brogue. She finally got the good, cleansing sob she so desperately needed.

“I was so scared. In Chicago, Marko said you were heading into a trap. Then when I didn’t see you anywhere in New York, I was so afraid I’d lost you.”

“I’m the only one that speaks Bulgarian. I was sent to take care of the girls. Jeff went up to find you. I wanted to be the one. I haven’t slept since I got back to the hotel in Chicago to find you gone. I called Taylor and they said you’d been dropped off....”

“I don’t know why Marko forgave me after everything I did to him in Chicago. I stepped on his neck, Rick. I blew up a building with him in it. Why did he save me?”

“Are you ever going to be able to let him go?” a hint of sadness tinged his voice.

Veronica pulled back and looked up into his eyes a moment before nodding. “There will never be another in this marriage. It’s just you and me. You’re the one.”

He scooped her into his arms with a growl and kissed her.

“What do you say we try to wedge two people into that Jacuzzi?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” Veronica would have followed him anywhere at that particular moment. “Just be gentle with the shoulder.”

They didn’t actually make it as far as the Jacuzzi until quite a bit later. When they did, Veronica lay on his chest, listening to his heart beat out a reassuring rhythm. Rick absentmindedly stroked her back, singing softly to her.

“Let’s just stay here, like this, forever.”

“We might eventually prune.”

“Hopeless romantic,” she accused.

“And I’m actually kind of hungry.”

“Why do I even try?”

“You know your dad and brother are going to head this way soon, too.”

“Forget I said anything,” she sat back and scowled at him.

“Ah now, don’t get all fired up. I was only teasing.”

She settled back against him, her eyelids sinking closed.

“Except for the thing about your dad and brother. They really are probably on their way now that your brother’s been sprung from the hospital.”

“Fine,” she stood, only half pretending to pout.

“You have to let them see for themselves you’re okay,” he reasoned. “We were all worried.”

“You’re right,” she towed off. “But can we at least come up with a code word? That way if the visit stretches on too long, you can help me steer them out?”

“Aren’t I supposed to be the one trying to cut short the time with the in-laws?”

“Wombat.”

“What?”

“Wombat. That’s our code word,” she informed him.

“Okay, wombat it is.”

Veronica climbed into her pajamas while Rick ordered a pizza. His timing perfect as always, Jeff showed up just in time to help himself to the first slice.

“It looks like you two have succeeded in winning your lives back,” Sean commented. Veronica couldn’t be sure, but it looked like there might be a touch of pride in his expression as he regarded them.

She was stretched out on the bed, leaning against Rick, who was leaning against the wall. She looked up at her husband and smiled. “Yeah, I guess we have.”

“Are you going back to the Bureau then?”

“First order of business is doing nothing,” Rick answered. “We promised each other that a while back.”

“But after the nothing... have you decided what comes next?”

“There are still a lot of women out there who need someone to save them,” Veronica answered.

“It doesn’t have to be you,” Jeff reminded her.

“True,” she thought about his words for a moment. “But why not me? I don’t think I could forget them. I couldn’t go back to the way things were.”

“I get it,” Sean nodded. “That’s why I’m still in the field. I just can’t sit still knowing things are the way they are.”

“Why do I get the feeling the world of espionage will never be the same again?” Rick sighed.

“I’m going to tell myself you meant that in a good way,” Veronica told him before

changing the topic altogether. “Jeff—did Courtney say yes?”

“Yes to what?” Sean’s head whipped around to look at his son.

“I don’t think he told them,” Rick whispered loudly.

“No, I hadn’t,” Jeff made a face at Veronica. “But yes, she did.”

“Congrats, big brother! Please tell me you plan to have lots of babies.”

“It’s always about you, isn’t it?” Jeff’s good-natured tone of voice belied his words.

“Yes, sorry. I blame him,” she pointed to her father. “He spoiled me.”

The conversation bounced around the room a little longer. Veronica never got around to calling wombat; she fell asleep before she got the chance.

The next morning, she woke up in Rick’s arms with no mission looming large and no real place to be. It felt amazing.

They took their sweet time waking up. The thought of missing waffles in the lobby was what finally got them out of the bed.

“How is Vance doing?” Veronica asked as she watched Rick polish off her breakfast.

“Pretty good. He’s still a few weeks away from being healed, but he’s doing well enough. I was thinking about inviting them to D.C. for a bit. He’s already restless.”

“Is Harmony ever going to let him come out and play with us again? I figured she’d fight him coming back tooth and nail.”

“She’s only angry that he won’t let her come, too.”

“He won’t let her?” Veronica arched an eyebrow. “I’m sorry, what century is this?”

“Oh boy.”

“What? If she wants to go with him, she’s a grown woman; she should be allowed to make that decision for herself.”

“Wombat.”

“What?”

“Wombat,” he tried again.

“No, you don’t get to wombat me,” she threw her napkin at him.

“It was worth a shot,” he shrugged.

“Cute,” she rolled her eyes, but dropped it nonetheless. “Are we going home today? I miss our dogs.”

“Yes. I rented us a car. Jeff and Sean are already on their way.”

Veronica nodded. She was so ready to see their home again. She was looking forward to walking through the door and being greeted by two wagging tails. Thanks to Courtney, when she walked through her front door again about six hours later, she was greeted by two exuberantly wagging tails.

After many hugs and kisses, the dogs finally began to settle down enough for Veronica to greet her friend.

“So he finally wore you down, huh?” she admired the diamond on Courtney’s finger.

“Something like that,” her friend actually blushed.

“I’m really, really happy for you.”

“Welcome to the family. They’re all nuts,” Rick added.

“Thanks. And Veronica, I’d be ticked at you for telling his dad, but I figure you’re paying the down payment on the reception hall with your dog sitting fee, so I’ll cut you some slack.”

“Good to know. Aw, crap. Is that really my mother’s car pulling in the driveway?”

“You never did fess up on the baby thing, did you?” Courtney frowned. “Is that why you’re avoiding her?”

“Among other reasons—don’t judge me. She’s terrifying.”

“Yeah, she really kind of is,” Rick agreed.

“You’re both horrible. Grow up,” Courtney admonished.

Veronica and Rick exchanged glances, but let it drop.

“Mother. So good to see you,” Ronnie greeted her mom, half braced for the immediate onslaught.

“It’s good to see you, too,” Helen kissed her daughter on the cheek. “Good Lord you’ve gotten gaunt. Are you eating enough?”

“I am.”

“Are you going to invite me in?”

“Sure,” Veronica looked around a little helplessly. She had just walked through the door. She wanted nothing more than to simply exist in her own home with her husband and her dogs. Maybe they’d watch television. Maybe they’d dance to oldies. Maybe they’d do absolutely nothing. Whatever they decided on, she was pretty sure it wouldn’t involve entertaining her mother just yet.

“Don’t worry, I won’t stay long. I just wanted to tell you I’ve asked everyone I know and I think I’ve come across the solution to your problem.”

“Everyone you know?” Rick choked a little. “That’s great.”

“Abstinence. If you two could just abstain for a while, that might help Rick’s sperm count improve.”

“Wombat,” Rick spit the word out so quickly it took Veronica a second to register what he said.

“You can’t wombat my mom that fast,” she whispered, earning a scowl from her mother.

“If I can’t wombat this conversation, then it’s a bloody useless code word.”

“Mom, look. I’m an adult now. I need to tell you the truth,” Veronica straightened her shoulders. “We’re capable of having children. We just don’t want to.”

“What?” Helen grew a couple of inches and her face turned an odd color.

“We want a career together. And our dogs. And to dance naked in the living room whenever we feel like it. No kids, though.”

Helen looked close to exploding.

“But Jeff and Courtney are getting married, and I think she wants lots of kids,” Veronica blurted out with an apologetic glance at a startled Courtney. “I’m sorry, I panicked.”

“Jeff’s getting married?” Helen’s countenance lightened and the storm passed as quickly as it threatened.

“Next May,” Courtney smiled at Helen before cutting her eyes over at Veronica.

“That was a horrible thing to do to your friend,” Rick grabbed her by the waist and tugged her over to him. “But I appreciate you throwing her under the bus for me.”

“Anything for you, baby.”

Veronica leaned back against him, realizing just how true those words were. She really would do anything for him. Her best friend, her lover. Her partner. He made her laugh and held her when she cried. Life had taken some funny turns—she certainly hadn’t expected to find herself suddenly a spy—and it would undoubtedly take a few more twists along the way.

But there was one thing of which she could be certain: Richard Reid Sinclair was

now and would always be the one.

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Author's Note:

I had a lot of fun writing about Rick and Veronica, but their cause is one I believe strongly in. Every day around the world people from all walks of life are enslaved. Statistics show there are more people in slavery today than there were during the height of the transatlantic slave trade. Women and children are especially at risk.

The accounts from this book are pulled from real accounts of real women stolen from their homes or sold by their families into slavery. It's an atrocity on all our heads if we hold silent. While we can't all walk away from society to fight human trafficking, we can help.

Fair Trade is a good place to start. By ensuring the products you purchase weren't made by the hands of slaves, you speak with your consumer dollars. And that voice is loud. Learn more about Fair Trade at www.wfto.com.

I'm always encouraging my readers to use their talents to leave their mark on this world. That's why this book is free—it's my way of doing what I can to be a voice for voiceless. There are many excellent organizations out there who dedicate themselves to making a difference. One I trust and respect is World Vision. Please consider making a donation to their Hope for Sexually Exploited Girls fund. Every dollar helps. You can learn more about World Vision at www.worldvision.org, or by clicking one of the World Vision buttons on my website.

About the author:

Heather Huffman lives in Missouri with her husband and their three sons. In addition to

writing, she enjoys spending time with the family horse and their pack of rescued dogs. A firm believer that life is more than the act of taking up air, Heather is always on the lookout for an adventure that will become fodder for the next novel.

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