

## Chapter 1

The drink tastes... off. Strange.

Sarah looks at her date, eyes raised. "This doesn't taste like a Bloody Mary."

The tall, dark, and charming stranger from the bar doesn't miss a beat. "I used Clamato instead of tomato juice. Added a dash of Tabasco for some kick."

"Why would you do that?"

"That's how we make them in Canada."

She gives a skeptical smile but takes another sip. They fall back into small talk—New York weather, favorite Broadway plays. The usual dance. Then, a shift.

He leans in, places a hand on hers, and whispers, "So... how many men have you slept with?"

Sarah blinks. The question lands like a slap.

She stands to leave—but the room tilts. Her thoughts go thick and slow.

*This isn't the alcohol. I haven't had enough.*

The taste. The burn. Her stomach clenches. *I've been drugged.*

Her vision blurs as he reaches for her—grabbing her chest, yanking at her clothes. She tries to push him away, but her limbs are heavy, useless.

He slaps her. Hard.

Darkness.

When she comes to, she's naked. He's standing over her—naked, erect.

Panic spikes. Now or never.

She drives her knee up—hard—straight into his groin. The sound he makes is inhuman.

She scrambles free, disoriented, crashing into furniture as she stumbles toward the door. She bursts through it—onto the balcony. Cold air slams into her like a wall.

She grabs the railing, trying to steady herself.

He's behind her. Charging.

He seizes her wrists, trying to rip them from the metal.

They struggle. She twists, shoves back with everything she has.

The force sends her over the edge.

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It's a cold, rainy morning at West Point. Bridget Montana could skip her run—no one would notice. But that's unthinkable.

She's part of the first class of female cadets admitted to the nation's most prestigious military academy. Every step she takes has to prove they made the right call.

Two miles in, the skies open. Rain pours in sheets. No one is watching, but Bridget keeps going. Drenched and slowed by the downpour, she completes her four-mile run in just over 33 minutes.

After a quick shower and a bite to eat, she takes her usual seat in the front row of calculus class.

Calculus. The word intimidates most people. But to Bridget, it's beautiful—an elegant study of how things change. Velocity. Growth. Markets. Economies. All of it captured in equations. Predictable. Rational.

But suddenly—none of it matters.

The classroom door creaks open.

Her friend Patricia steps in, scanning the room until her eyes find Bridget. She walks straight to her and leans in, voice low and shaking.

"It's Sarah," she says. "Something's happened."

Bridget freezes. Her breath catches. Patricia delivers the rest.

"They said it was an accident. She'd been drinking and... fell off a balcony."

Bridget's throat tightens. "Anything else?"

Patricia hesitates. "She was... naked."

Bridget flinches.

"Don't share that with anyone. Please."

"Of course not."

"What are you thinking?"

Bridget wipes at her eyes, voice controlled now. “It doesn’t add up. But that’s for another day. Right now... I need to get back to the city.”

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Benny Franks, general manager at the Riviera Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, sweeps into the sportsbook with the quiet grace of a man who built the business from scratch. He’s the one who took sports betting off the streets and turned it into a polished, legitimate operation. The house takes a 10% vig on losing bets and, with balanced action, locks in a clean 5% edge on the handle. Predictable juice, polished books, and a steady flow of profits—just the way Benny built it.

Today, though, somebody messes up.

A line on the Lakers–Celtics game gets posted wrong. Before anyone catches it, ten grand hits on the Lakers. If L.A. covers, the house bleeds. Not on Benny’s watch.

He stubs out his cigarette, eyes narrowing, and strides to the counter. The kid behind it looks like he counts cards for a living—or at least runs numbers by day and plays for lunch.

Benny leans in, voice low and smooth as silk over velvet.

The kid stammers about a typo, hands shaking.

Benny smiles—never a good sign.

“Kid, that wasn’t a typo. That was a donation. You just made some guy’s weekend in Palm Springs.”

The kid swallows hard. “It was just—”

Benny holds up a finger.

“Save it. This isn’t kindergarten. It’s the Riviera. That screw-up cost ten dimes. Now tell me why I shouldn’t cost you your job.”

He turns and adjusts the line to draw in Celtics money. Every move is crisp, measured—like a surgeon cauterizing a wound.

Without breaking stride, he delivers the final line—calm, clipped, and cold:

“Balance the book. And kid—find me someone who can read a line without costing ten grand.”

No raised voice, no threats. Just that old-school Vegas chill that says everything without saying too much.

The kid doesn’t need a translation. He’s done. Next stop—back to the street.

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The police theory didn't sit right with Bridget. Building codes were designed to prevent people from accidentally falling over balconies. Before catching the bus back to the city, she stopped at the local library to review New York building regulations.

The ride back gave her time to think—and to question.

According to the code, balcony railings must be at least 42 inches high. Sarah stood 5 foot 8, which meant her center of gravity would've been around 38 inches—far too low to simply trip and topple over.

Impossible.

Someone else had to be there. An intruder? A date gone wrong? Bridget couldn't say for sure—yet. But she'd bring this detail to the police. Whatever happened that night, she would make sure the truth came to light. No matter what it took.

The memories crept in, filling the quiet of the bus. She and Sarah had met on the first day of junior high—science class. Instant connection. From that moment on, they were inseparable. A lifetime of small adventures followed. She remembered the time they ditched class to buy a pack of cigarettes, only to end up coughing their lungs out and laughing until they cried.

Another memory surfaces—missing a crucial putt at the state golf championship. She'd been gutted. But Sarah was the first to wrap an arm around her, whisper that it was okay. They were a team. One heartbeat. Win or lose, they did it together. The memory hits hard. Tears well—and don't stop.

As the bus approaches the George Washington Bridge, twilight merges with low-hanging clouds, muting the city lights and casting Manhattan in a shadowy silhouette. Bridget stares out the window, the skyline rising like a myth out of the mist.

New York, she thinks. The real Gotham.

Too bad it didn't have any heroes when Sarah needed one.

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With the sportsbook mess behind him, Benny headed back to his office to tackle the rest of the operation. He moved like a man half his age—broad shoulders, slick gray hair, and dark brown eyes that missed nothing. The kind of guy who still wore tailored suits and Italian loafers, even if he never left the casino floor. Old-school sharp. Vegas smooth.

Back in New York, things were simpler. He ran an illegal joint—three gaming tables and twenty-five slots hidden behind a speakeasy near Union Square. His only real worry was

scraping together the weekly protection money for the wise guys. The rest? Easy. Benny knew the odds on everything that mattered.

These days, the stakes were higher, but the game hadn't changed much. He wasn't a made guy, but the mob associates who installed him at the Riviera expected their slice—skimmed clean off the top, long before the official count. On top of that, he had to stay one step ahead of crooked dealers, sharp card counters, and every kind of cheat looking to hustle the house.

Benny's job? Keep the place humming, the action flowing, and the thieves out. It took a sharp eye—and his was razor sharp

He reviewed the blackjack take, curious to see if his new initiative paid off. His hunch? That hiring female dealers would boost business—most of the blackjack players were men, after all.

He flipped through the numbers. Profits were up 13%.

He allowed himself a grin.

He was onto something.

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Bridget stepped into the 17th Precinct on East 51st, the fluorescent lights casting a sterile glow over scuffed linoleum and worn chairs. After a forty-five-minute wait, a detective finally emerged.

"Detective Alvarez," he said, extending a hand. "I'm sorry for your loss. I understand you were close to the deceased. How can I help you?"

Bridget took his hand, her grip steady. "I appreciate that. I'm here because I don't believe my friend's death was an accident."

Alvarez's expression tightened. "I know this is hard, but we've reviewed the scene. Everything points to a tragic fall. Nothing more."

Bridget didn't blink. "I've reviewed the building code. The railing height. Her center of gravity. It doesn't add up. Someone else was on that balcony."

He let out a slow breath, already retreating behind layers of bureaucracy and fatigue. "Look, I get it. But theories don't build cases. We need evidence. Something concrete. Last year, we had over eighteen hundred homicides in this city—most with witnesses, leads, physical proof—and we still can't close half of them. I can't justify reopening a case without something to work with."

Bridget leaned in, voice low and unwavering. "Then tell me what you need. Because I'm not walking away."

A pause. Alvarez glanced down at his notes, then back at her. "I'm sorry. We've been through it. There's nothing more we can do."

Bridget stared him down. “If you think I’m letting this go cold, you’re not paying attention.”

He opened his mouth, closed it again, then offered the only thing he had left.

“I’m sorry.”

Bridget stood, calm and deliberate. “So am I. And when the truth comes out, I hope your conscience keeps you up at night.”

Then she turned and walked out—leaving Alvarez in a silence thick with everything he didn’t do.

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Bridget left the precinct and caught the No. 7 train to Queens. Evening had fallen, and the subway windows reflected the city lights like scattered stars, flickering over her face as the train clattered through tunnels and soared above quiet streets. Somewhere between Grand Central and Jackson Heights, the decision crystallized—she was dropping out of West Point.

Six months shy of graduating with honors, she was walking away from it all.

She arrived at her parents’ house with a knot in her stomach. She already knew how this would go.

Her father didn’t waste time.

“Bridget, I forbid this,” he snapped, standing in the doorway like a judge ready to deliver sentence. “Do you have any idea how hard your mother and I worked to get you into West Point? And you’re just going to throw it away? You’re six months from graduating with honors. You’ll regret this for the rest of your life.”

Bridget didn’t flinch. “No, Dad. What I’ll regret is living a lie. I don’t even know what I’d do with a math degree. But I do know this—I want to serve. I want to be out there, making a difference. Law enforcement feels right. It feels like purpose.”

Her mother stepped in, voice soft but firm. “Bridget, this is grief talking. You’re reacting to Sarah’s death. You need time. Perspective.”

Bridget’s eyes didn’t waver. “No, Mom. This isn’t grief. This is clarity. What happened to Sarah opened my eyes—but this choice? This is mine.”

She took a breath and said it aloud, grounding herself in the words:

“This isn’t a phase. It’s my calling. My destiny.”

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