

## CHAPTER TWENTY

**Hal Steele finally saw daylight.**

He hadn't left his proprietary business, Hal's General Store, in two days. The last cargo ship that had come in carried a crate of goods he'd ordered months before. Two days of unloading.

Stocking shelves.

Punching price tags.

Now, barely 10 a.m. on a Saturday at the same time three Princess cruise ships docked, he gets the call. Another crate that had been lost – then found.

“Bet you didn't expect this,” said Bill Chambers, seaport Captain.

“Can't say what I expect anymore. Damn Chinese controllin' everythin'.”

“Awwww Hal, you always were a cynical old coot.”

“Give me a reason not to be.”

“Life is good, sun's out,” Captain Chambers, really more of the equally old fart in charge of the radio tower for seaplane traffic, helped him load the truck. “Just think how much money you'll make.” **1**

“Had to buy all this fluff. You get that?”

“What I get is you're about fifty years and a few decades short a personality.”

“And I never asked for no help.”

“Sure, so you can load a few hundred pounds of wood crates alone.”

“Piece by piece, line by line.”

Hal nearly lost a glove as he plopped the last crate of women's boots into the old blue beater. He pointed across the parking lot to the backside row of local shops. “My store's right yonder. Don't need no help.”

“Ok, Hal, ok.”

Annoyed when the man stopped loading, Hal crossed his arms and turned his gaze to the choppy water lapping the dock. He cursed a round of old geezer words that made him feel that much older.

The captain scanned the dock too.

“Lots of planes will be headin' out, Hal. Tourists want to see the icebergs,” he said, smoothing a bald head.

“Less people to spend money in my store.”

“So now you gripe again.”

Two Princess ships on the left trailed people off a plank like ants. **2** Tourists ready to blow their huge wads of cash on his merchandise that he was currently not in the store to sell.

“Got another one coming in,” said Captain Chambers.

Hal pushed back a crate to make room for the last three. Already he heard the hum of a bush plane come in before turning for a peek. “Guess you oughtta be in the tower.”

“I’m goin’, I’m goin’.”

The man helped him with the final crate as the little plane descended. Hal nodded, slamming closed the back of the truck, latching it on each side. He caught a glance at the plane as the engines went silent when it skipped down over the choppy water.

The spray sent a surge slapping against the dock. **3**

“Guess you’d best hurry back,” said the captain. “One of your customers.”

Hal ignored the hint of southern accent in the old captain’s voice as the man wandered off. **4** The truth was that they’d known each other a good fifty years. Went to grade school together in that same exact tiny town of Ketchikan where they now made their living serving nosy outsiders.

The soul and food of their town.

“Terrific!” grumped Hal.

He knew the plane well. The young and abrasive Mr. Jake Blake flew in his bird like clockwork on the first Saturday of every month. Spent a good thousand dollars or more each pop. **5**

Tools.

Food.

Men’s clothing.

Cookware.

Propane.

Alaskan wilderness gear that every man needs to survive.

Then the odd things.

Shell casings.

Military issued rope, sunglasses, special weapons. Yet he was Hal’s best customer. Each month, Mr. Blake picked up one order, dropping off a list for the next one.

Always paid in advance.

Cash.

With tip for the effort. **6**

They were in Ketchikan, after all. A popular cruise stop facing the inside passage along Alaska’s Southeastern coast. Famous for its Indian totem poles and salmon, it bordered a strip of ocean that separated the town from where a good chunk of anti-social hermit locals made their home.

In the bush.

The jungle.

The Alaskan outback only accessible by airplane.

Home to black bears and crested eagles, the town bordered the Tongass National forest, separating them from British Columbia. The largest national forest in the United States at 17 million acres of quintessential ‘wild

Alaska'. Dangerous mountainous terrain that could kill a man depending on the time of year and his level of preparedness.

Dangers lurked every where. **7**

Wild beasts.

Killer blizzards that buried houses.

Frozen lakes making it impossible to land a bush plane.

Only the toughest survived.

It was home to a chunk of people depending on the land for survival who choose to escape the wiles of society or are just downright sick of human beings. Snow, ice, rock, wetlands, lakes, rivers, landslides.

You name it.

Their forest had it.

Small as it was, so did the town and old Hal loved it. **8** He leaned into the trunk to catch his breath. The captain was right. He was too old to be loading and unloading trucks. Yet Mr. Blake, now there was a man who could help him unload. Surely the young sprite, or solider was more like it, would be heading to the store. The man was in rock-solid shape.

So Hal waited.

Breathed.

Kept his eye on the town as the plane pootered up to the dock, slowing turning sideways. Hal kept an eye on the town strip that bordered the water. The ants were flooding it now. Yet their town had everything a tourist could want.

For the locals?

It did the job.

They had the essentials. A hospital, dining, entertainment, a hatchery, tours and helicopter rides out to the glaciers. The town did provide jobs. Somebody had to entertain the richies.

But the competition. **9**

A Wal-Mart supercenter just outside of town a few skipping stones away. The only one in the state of Alaska. Since its uprising, Hal's livelihood was down. Sure, he carried the essentials for locals. Seasonal clothes, hardware, food, stamps, postcards, even pots and pans. Yet Wal-Mart?

Not much to compete with. **10**

Hal straightened, walking around some cars in the lot that bordered the sea dock. He never understood why Mr. Blake bought so much from him. Surely the supplies he special ordered could be found at the Wal-Mart and save him hundreds of dollars. Yet it wasn't the easiest drive out there half of the year.

Hence Hal's.

The store that bled the family name since his grandfather's era.

**11** The young man stepped out of the plane all warmed up in leather, glove and cargo pants. Turned around instantly, leaning into his plane. He knew the man must be ex-military considering he could fly his own and purchased the most expensive aviator glasses on the planet.

Yet the man never answered questions.

Rude.

To the point.

Anti-social. Just like all the others who chose their outback haven to live off the grid. Hal raised his arm to wave at the man, coming around a car. "Hey Son, I have your..." he stopped, mouth clamping shut.

A woman.

Was it?

It was.

Had to be.

Her figure was tiny and slender, graceful even, as Mr. Blake helped her out. From the back, he knew she was too small to be a man unless it was a Chinese man the size of a peanut. Her hair was tucked up invisible under a wide khaki rain hat.

Yet a cream tinted shawl **12** flapped in the breeze, tight around her shoulders.

"Well I'll be son of a..."

So he didn't live alone. That was news.

The surprise hits kept on coming when he next saw Mr. Blake pull a child out of the plane. A large child that crabbed around his body as they now headed his way.

"Well you don't say," he **13** muttered under his breath.

Hal showed himself, coming out from his shadow between two cars as they crossed the divider separating the dock and the parking lot. "Howdy Son," he waved. "Great timin'."

The younger man froze.

Held out his arm to block the woman. He turned his back on Hal to block her view, pushing the child into her arms. Took his time turning back around.

What was that all about?

"Mr. Blake, I have your order here in my truck, some of it."

The man turned around, again blocking the view of the small woman and child. Like a train, they headed right toward him which Hal knew was because Mr. Blake's truck was kept in long-term parking just behind him.

"Hal..." said the man sternly.

"Fancy seein' you here, Son."

The woman emerged around Mr. Blake's frame with the child in her arms. She was talking to the little girl, scooting past unusually fast toward the car without a word.

"Howdy, Ma'am," Hal said, face bunching for a better look.

She said nothing.

Like he wasn't even there as she flashed by, leaving him alone with Mr. Blake.

"Hal..." said the younger man, stepping in front of his path again. "How are you?"

Now Hal was a man who didn't like people.

Yet he could read them.

How was he? The younger man never asked him a thing the two years he'd been coming into the store.

Straight, business-like and to the point was all he got. No time for questions. **14**

"This your family?" he asked.

Mr. Blake, or Jake, Jake Blake, nodded, pulling out his truck keys. "It is."

"Don't recall you having a child. How old?"

"She's just having a little toothache right now is all. Had to get her in."

Hal thought it odd that the answer had nothing to do with the question.

"That your wife?" he asked. "Awfully tiny little thing."

"She is, and shy too. Otherwise I'd introduce you."

"Two years, you never mentioned a family. I don't recall you buying children's clothes."

Mr. Blake pointed to the outskirts of town. "Wal-Mart, Hal. Sorry."

That blasted place again.

"You know I carry all this in the store," he defended.

"I only hit it up every few months. Get the things I need for the kids, let you do the rest. Wouldn't want to put you out of business, Hal."

"Kids?"

Mr. Blake diverted his eyes to the truck. "You have my order?"

"You mean the fireworks? I have them. Not sure why you'd buy fireworks in these parts. Could burn down our whole forest." **15**

"I disassemble them."

"Not building weapons I hope."

He knew it was none of his business. There was something sketchy and scary about the man after all. Huge, looming, built like a soldier with a wall of muscle, he wasn't one to reckon with.

"I'll meet you at the store in an hour," said Jake.

Hal squinted to get a look at the woman hovering next to the passenger side of the truck. Her back was turned, still talking to the girl who seemed to be crying.

"Everything ok here?" he asked.

Jake smiled, not the usual sight. "Just fine, Sir. See you in a bit."

The impressive man let his family **16** the truck, leaving him standing like the village idiot on his own. Then hopped in and powered it up after a few slugs of the starter.

Hal scratched his old shag of white hair.

What was all that about? **17**

## CHAPTER

“You can’t do this to me,” she whispered, hating life. **18**

“Try to keep you safe you mean? Out of prison even?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m sorry. You think I like this?”

“It’s always this way. Always.”

Putting the truck into park directly in front of the dentist office dead-smack in town, he reached for her hand. “He’s already seen you. I’m sorry, I wasn’t expecting that. Old bastard never leaves his store.”

“So he knows you have a family. What’s the big deal? I shouldn’t be some big dirty secret you keep in your closet and have to explain away **19** once the cat’s out of the bag.”

He clamped his lips closed in an obvious way. Flipped the heat down a notch.

“That’s not fair and you know it,” he defended. “By the look on his face, he’s going to ask around now. He’s a nosy old bastard and this is a small town.”

“I wouldn’t know since the last two years you haven’t let me see it. **20**”

“You saw it when we first got here.”

“I saw a ferry boat, Daniel. And the seaport at night. Carting me in like your illegal cargo.”

He punched the button on his seatbelt to release it. “We’re here for our daughter. Let’s not fight.”

“Too late.”

“I won’t engage then.”

“Right, so brush off my feelings like you’ve done the last six months.”

“Another untrue statement.”

“I shouldn’t have to stay in the truck. For what, an hour? More?”

“I didn’t want you coming at all but little miss in the back insisted.”

Lavie moaned, reaching for Yelena’s arm from the back seat. “I want my mommmmmmm.”

“You know it’s not safe, pumpkin,” said Daniel, looking at her over the seat. “You ready for this?”

“It hurtsssssss.”

Yelena looked back at the same time he did. “Is the ice helping?”

“Uh uh.”

The eight-year-old shook her head with her face still planted into an ice pack she held there. **21** For two days she’d been crying over a toothache. Medical issues, Daniel could handle as a trained medic from the military. Dental – not so much. Much to his better judgement, he finally agreed to bring her into town.

“She’s my daughter too, Danny,” snappish and hurt, Yelena pointed. “I have a right to go in.”

“Likely old **22** Hal will have already called the dentist before we even step inside. I don’t want them getting that close of a look at you.”

She pulled down the sun visor to get a look **23** in the mirror. “Nobody will recognize me. I already have these stupid contacts in hurting my eyes. Why do I have to wear these?”

“You have alien eyes. The entire world who knows you, knows those eyes.”

“Nobody caresssssss.”

Daniel powered off the engine and pointed to the street. “The ships are in. You see these crowds?”

“I’m tired of you trying to teach me things.”

Together they observed downtown Ketchikan flooded with people up and down each side of the main drag. On their side, a mile of local businesses and colorful houses patched up a slope with magical sets of stairs leading straight up. **24**. Along the water side across the street, hundreds of tourist shops.

And Hal’s.

Blabbermouth Hal.

“Nobody in Alaska will recognize me,” she said.

“Yet the majority of these rich tourists are from California, the East Coast even. Your face is known around the world. You have seventeen albums, four movies, something like fifty magazines that featured you on their cover, years of Broadway, Phantom of the Opera and a famous family who—”

“Enough!” she snapped, hitting the dash. “*Stop bullying me.*”

“Then there’s the fact that we’re supposed to be *dead.*”

Lavie whined, “Daddy it hurtsssss.”

“We’re going in.”

Yelena teared up, reminded that this was their life now. Living under the radar like internationally wanted felons **25** making it where she couldn’t take her child into a doctor’s appointment without risk of the world finding out she faked her death.

“Of course you are.”

Like reading her thoughts, Daniel said, “It’s not the public we need to worry about.”

She knew he was right.

Always, he was right. Always. So annoyingly annoying.

The Mob – what he meant to say. Russians wanting her dead for more reasons than she could count on her unmanicured fingernails. The minute the world found out she wasn’t dead, they’d be targets again.

“Two years we’ve had stability,” he said, taking off his gloves. “Let’s keep it that way.”

“Does happiness count for nothing?”

“Does living? **26** You have five daughters, think about them.”

“That’s *all I do* is think about them. That’s my entire life, dammit!”

He stretched out his arm across the seat. Caressed her neck at the back in that sensual way that made her crazy every single time. “We staged our death, that’s a felony. The Russians aren’t our only concern. I won’t let my wife go to prison for that or anything else from her past.”

Wife.

There was a joke.

Married once, divorced once. Tried to get married again on New Year’s Eve two years prior before it was stolen from them when she was kidnapped in her wedding dress along with her favorite uncle by a murdering arsonist psychopath who later turned out to be the twin brother of the Russian Mob heiress trying to kill her. **27**

Her cousin.

Now there was a mouthful to recap in her brain. She knew the stolen wedding night was a sore spot with Daniel. Said nothing.

“I love you,” he pulled her head close to his lips for a kiss. “I’m only trying to protect you.”

Sadly, she nodded. “I haven’t seen another person in two years. Lavie’s scared.”

“I’ll take care of her.”

“She needs me.”

“And you’ll be right here waiting when we come out.”

He was out of the truck before she could respond. Opened the back door and scooped up their child, coming around to Yelena’s side. She cranked down the window only an inch just to annoy him. His brow lifted, shifting Lavie in his arms. “Please, sweetheart, wait in the truck.”

“Like I have another choice?”

“Keep your face down when people walk past. Don’t make eye contact.”

“Oh, you mean with my *fake chocolate brown eyes*,” she mocked sarcastically.

“If you get cold, start the truck, only ten minutes at a time. Keep the doors locked.”

“Right, in case the Mob mysteriously knows we just arrived in town and comes to snatch me up.”

He pointed through the glass at the glove box. “Whatever you need from the general store, write it down. I’ll run in when we’re done here.”

“How generous you are.”

She wound the window up on him before he could respond. Turned away, more to hide a fresh haze of tears than to intentionally sulk. It was true and she knew it. He was just trying to protect her.

It’s what he did.

Shelter her, since she was fifteen. First as her bodyguard for thirteen years, then as her lover and eventual husband. Now, he was all three, adding father of her children and common law marriage to the list.

To make the time go by faster, she intentionally thought about things that made her heart flutter. Christmas, babies, presents, chocolate, music, Jesse, her dad, music, babies, and Daniel.

Always Daniel.

He was all hard muscle with rugged sex appeal that hadn't altered a day. Looking at him even before he walked away, her chest momentarily stopped breathing. Like clockwork. It always took her breath away how powerful and big he was. Forty-five years old, he was the most gorgeous man she'd ever known.

The lightly feathered red hair helped.

Silk on her bare breasts when he kissed down her navel. In her fingers when she kissed him. Against her back when he spooned her in bed at night.

Wham.

Just like that.

Thinking about him after a fight and her knees went gooey. How did he do that? Even when she hated him, she longed for him. Waiting bored and alone for the first time in two years, her mind slammed into the past. Her imagination tripped up thinking about the first time she saw him.

At night.

Next to the ocean.

At a Christmas party.

Was this why she loved Christmas so much? She'd been fifteen years old and recently informed by her protective cop uncle that she'd have a bodyguard from that day forward. A mild kidnaping attempt by the Russian Mob at a concert had been the catalyst for the decision.

She'd run away from that party.

Her fat sloppy oldest uncle, also Missy's father who with her help ran a subsidiary branch of the Russian Mob as drug distributor double-agent to the Italian syndicate, was all over her that night. He caught a feel of her in the hallway, touching her breasts with the free hand that didn't hold a beer bottle.

So she ran.

Followed by her new bodyguard who'd been in the shadows. **28** Since coming to work for her, she'd spent countless hours daydreaming about him romantic fantasies that never came to pass until she'd already been married to another man – his best friend.

A man who beat her.

Fathered Cossette, her third child. A spy. Missy's secret lover.

A bastard.

As time went on even when married to Terry, blistering erotic daydreams about Daniel confused the heck out of her. She'd been a virgin, only to be smashed into a wall in a bathroom stall at her wedding reception. Terry, her new husband, took what he wanted with the delicacy of a buffalo stampede.

The first red flag of beatings to come.

Hands shaking just thinking about Terry, she forced her thoughts back to the man she loved. Imagined him how he looked that morning lounging bare-chested against a door frame with a lazy shoulder, arm dangling loose at his side with a smile of amusement at her conundrum putting in contacts.

That gorgeous bare manly chest taunted her every day. Her pulse shot into hyper drive thinking about it. When he then pulled her into him, she flushed with embarrassment all the way to her hairline. Her gaze kept hooked on his mouth as he talked to her in a voice like warm mist.

Soothing her.

Always.

The father of her children was kind, considerate, and helpful. His kisses – the best part. The man practically walked right off the pages of a romance novel like a knight-in-shining armor with big muscles, a dashing smile and the ability to use any weapon like a nuclear bomb.

To kill.

Hands, guns, ropes, grenades, knives.

Yet when he touched her, she melted like a snowman on a sunny day in those hands. The man could have been one of King Arthur's knights of the round table. His strength and support of the mess she made in her life tended to provide **29** a safety she'd never known from any other man.

Patience.

His best attribute.

As a group of Japanese tourists cruised on foot by the truck, she rolled her head to the side and closed her eyes. Thoughts drifted to her own guilt. Since the twins were born, she'd pushed him away sexually. Over a year now and he never once pressured her. Why would he want her anyway when her ex-lover psychopath kidnapped her on their wedding night and assaulted her in the woods?

When Russians tore into her years before that?

She was used.

Dried up.

Abused and sullied by other men. Turning him away was in his own best interest.

Right?

Yet she wanted him to touch her. If they made love again, would he be thinking about what Cal did to her as he was sliding inside her body? Would she think about Cal on top of her? It just wasn't worth the risk.

The one time they had sex since Alaska, she'd consumed an entire bottle of wine. Couldn't breastfeed for two days because of it. Yet she could feel the stickiness of his semen inside her the next morning.

Then the secret.

Her horrible secret.

Shivering at the thought, she turned the keys to start the engine. Let the heat vents pump in her face. The damaged part of her made her pull away any time he seemed sexually interested. She'd fake having to feed the babies, a menstrual cycle or a headache. Not that it happened often.

He was a gentleman.

She pulled down the visor and took another look at herself. At least her skin was still creamy and white. Yet no makeup, no glamor. So this is what he had to look at every day now. The world always said she was stunningly beautiful. In the glass, she saw distaste.

A distorted reality.

Once she punched a bathroom mirror into shards before getting into a full bathtub with a bottle of wine and sleeping pills. Daniel had turned himself in for her first husband's murder. **30** Well, that's what she thought. There were warrants out for him after all.

Yet he turned himself in to clear his name.

Too late.

She almost died, not ready to live in a world where he was in prison due to protecting her. Thank God she had a father who was a heart surgeon. He found her dead in the nick of time.

Brought her back.

Then shit really hit the fan.

So here she was out of the press and spotlight, alone in a remote life with a hunky husband and adorable little girls, and she wouldn't let him touch her.

More guilt.

She slapped the visor up so hard her knuckles hit. Sitting in a truck was pretty boring. And her boobs throbbed on top of that. She already would have fed both toddlers by now.

Daniel.

Hands on her breast, relieving the pressure. "Ughhhhhhhh," she groaned loudly, annoyed at her lusty thoughts when she wasn't even woman enough to put out. "Stupid stupid."

Shame.

That's the real reason she wouldn't let him touch her.

Shame. Big shame.

What happened with Cal in the woods on their wedding night hadn't exactly been the way Daniel thought. "Stop!" she smacked her own face to jolt her thoughts. "That's in the past."

Puffing out air, she focused her attention on the street of Ketchikan. Thought it charming for the first glimpse in daylight. On one side, houses build like candy cottages in every color of the rainbow stood proudly on a slope to her right.

Across the street, shops.

She scooted into the driver's seat for a better look on the other side. A cheese shop, taffy shop, smoked salmon shop and popcorn shop. Every other kind of food shop. Hal's general store, of course, charming in red with an old Victorian porch and a swing.

On the seat on her knees, she spun around to see down behind her. More shops. Postcards, totem poles, art and jewelry. Music and...

Music?

Did it say music?

That old familiar swooshy sensation tingled her limbs. Squinting, she tried to read the sign. Frontier Second-Hand Music. **31** Strange name for a tourist town. Yet they sure did live out on the frontier of nothing.

Give or take a bear.

It certainly wasn't her opulent billionaire life back in Manhattan as the heiress of the richest family in America, and the Italian Mob to boot. Not like she asked for that last part.

Her breasts hurt more.

Grabbing them, she turned the car back off. A milking cow. One thing she was good for.

"Has to be more than this."

She peered at the clock on the dash. Fifteen minutes so far. Is that all? Glancing into the dentist office windows, she realized the blinds were drawn. Nobody would see. Daniel being nobody.

"It's my life too."

Keys in hand, she tucked the hat tighter over her hair and slid out of the truck. Pushed them along with her fingers into a fuzzy purple coat pocket and jogged across the street.

Liberation.

Is this what it would feel like?

She never appreciated the concept until now. Even before faking their death, she never spent a day alone. Bodyguards, staff, the public eye, paparazzi. And Jesse.

A lump knotted in her throat longing for the uncle who practically raised her while her dad kept busy with a cardiothoracic career on Long Island. A protective cop and guardian angel, he was her favorite person.

Passing by Hal's with her head tucked, she wanted to barf thinking how much pain she caused him. Prayed he made peace with their staged disappearance made to look like the Mob took and killed them.

Had he forgotten her?

She stopped outside the music store, looking across the street at the truck. She'd have to make it fast so he wouldn't know she snuck out. Stupid, she knew.

Music.

Her life once – called now to her.

Holding her breath, she entered the store. Bells chimed off a lovely tune without a customer in sight. To the left, a few pianos, conductor podiums, CD racks and rows of written music. To the right, a cash register and row of guitars. Nothing to write home about.

*Run, Yelena, run. This isn't you anymore.*

Turning around with her hand on the door, she spotted it on the far wall. A violin, lovely and dark. Something kept her locked. Her spirit instrument.

"Mornin', Ma'am," said a man coming out from the back.

Too late to run.

Pasting on a fake smile, she turned. "Sorry to bother you."

He opened up his arms wide like an angel. "No bother, we *are a store*."

Nice smile.

The man couldn't have been older than she. Dark hair, dark eyes, a gentle beard, he could have been a rock star. Dressed in the typical Alaskan flannel, he headed her way. "Where you visiting from?"

She thought fast.

Must think I'm a tourist. Cruise ship, good. **32**

"California," she replied their rehearsed fake identity.

"Oh, my mom lives there now. Place is an ugly desert if you ask me."

Uncomfortable with the eye contact, she headed for the wall with the violin. Stopped below it and angled her head. "Pre-baroque?" she asked, pointing.

"Very good. I'm impressed."

"*Lira de braccio*. Not that easy to find."

"Got this one from an estate sale just a few months back. Owner passed away, found this in her basement. Can't say I know much about this instrument. Not many people around here play."

She admired the lovely dark cherry wood.

Similar in appearance to the rare imported instrument she paid over a million for, this one was smaller, older and likely deeply off accent when it played. Yet it would probably hold for tempo.

"Interested?" he asked, now standing next to her.

"My husband has all our money. I just came in to look."

"No harm in that. Do you play?"

"I did once, when I was young. I'm thinking of teaching my daughter."

He checked her out in a guy checking out a gorgeous woman kind of way. Winked with, "Well then, let's play a little." He pulled it down from the pegs.

Set it in her hands.

"Beautiful instrument for a beautiful woman," he said kindly.

She'd never been so scared. Not having touched an instrument in two years, would she even remember how to play? Like riding a bike, her uncle Mario always said. Her tune would be out of whack though. In that moment she wasn't Yelena Vega, international superstar prodigy musician who from the age of five played remastered renditions of Beethoven's concertos with no training.

Who was on the top of the Billboards at the age of eight, fifteen, nineteen, twenty and twenty-five. Who traveled the world performing in front of thousands. Starred in her movie director uncle's musicals as Selena, Gia and Mamma Mia. Like other singers such as Barbara Streisand, J Lo and Madonna, she pumped out a few dramas as well, doing the soundtrack for her own movies.

Yet Julliard had been her passion.

Teaching prodigies like she herself had once been after the legacy of five Vega uncles who went before her. Opera, guitar, conduction. She was the only one in her family born with the piano and strings gift that could only have come from a deity.

“Ma’am?” he asked, touch her arm. “You ok?”

She shook off the dazed stare at the instrument. “Boa.”

“Oh, of course, yep.”

He picked up the case from a rack on the ground. Opened it on a table, handing her the boa. “Knock yourself out.”

Should she?

Daniel would say it’s the dumbest thing she could do that would get them all killed. If the man recognized her, she’d be done for. He could sell his discovery of her existence to the press and get rich.

She decided it was worth it.

“I can play Vivaldi,” she said, sounding stupidly unsure of herself.

“Can’t say I know much about him.”

“The Four Seasons, you know.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Chin pushed into the cup, she set the boa on the strings. Moved it for a squeak, stopped, slid it, stopped, tested the strings. No time for tuning. Daniel would find her gone soon enough.

“I can make you an incredible bargain on this thing,” he said.

Already she tuned him out.

Her eyes closed, transforming her in time and space to the last time she performed at Carnegie hall. She let her hand be the brain as the tune flowed out of her. Lost in the music, she focused on her air, the grav, the largo, rotating back and forth between all three.

Knew it was no good.

Not anymore.

Yet the man’s mouth hung open. When her famous rendition of Vivaldi’s Winter ended, she froze solid with her hand in the air clasping the boa. Her eyes locked with the man as if something terrible happened.

No words.

For either of them.

Their reflective interlude was interrupted by the entrance door flinging open with a violent crash. Yelena yelped, spinning around, crashing **33** into the man. He held her firm with both hands on her upper arms as they stared at the entrance. The bells had shot off, flinging across the place.

They broke into three.

Balls jingling rolls across the floor with a tune.

“Careful of that door, Sir,” said the shop owner.

Crap.

She couldn’t remember ever seeing Daniel so enraged. He stood with the door wide open in ape position panting, holding his gloves in one hand. “Let her go,” he said abrasively. “Right now!” . 34

Yelena gulped.

How had he figured it out so fast? Likely he heard the music in the street. She glanced apologetically at the man who shifted his worried eyes to her. “This your husband?”

She smiled, playing it chill. “Yep, that’s him.”

The man walked toward the door and pointed. “Letting in the cold.”

Daniel kicked it closed with his hiking boot. 35

“Looks like you put a dent in my wall too,” said the owner.

Eyes on Yelena, Daniel pulled his wallet out of a pocket. Slapped a few hundreds from it on the counter at . 36 his left. “We’re leaving.”

Yelena picked up the boa. Assessed it for damage, then set it on the table by the case. “Thank you for letting me look.” She turned around, matching a dead hard look with the father of her children. She’d gone too far and they both knew it. “Beautiful piece, it really is.”

The man walked her way, shaking his head with an obvious level of concern. . 37

“Alice,” said Daniel like a bastard military sergeant. “Now, *right now*.”

That fake name she hated.

One Lavie came up with since Alice in Wonderland . 38 was her favorite Disney movie. Cossette had severely argued that their mom should be Jasmine since she had long flowing black hair like the princess in Aladdin.

“This nice man was just letting me—”

“I know what he was doing. And we’re not interested in that any more than I’m interested in seeing your hands on my wife. A mistake I hope you don’t make again.” . 39

“Jake, you’re being rude.”

“Our child will be done soon. I thought I told you to wait for me.”

“It got cold.”

“I won’t tell you again. Let’s go!”

Adrenaline flushed her body, 40 she realized his paranoid behavior would draw attention. She faked a laugh, waving a hand his way. “That’s my husband. His biggest fear is us missing our cruise ship and being stuck without a vacation the rest of the week.”

Wrong thing to say.

She spotted a little muscle under Daniel’s eye twitch even from across the store.

“Sorry honey, but we’ll make it,” she played it off.

The shop owner didn’t seem impressed by Daniel’s control. He turned his back and looked her in the eye. Said low and steady, “Ma’am, is everything ok? I can call the sheriff.”

Double crap.

What was wrong with Daniel? He was always so poised.

“So not necessary, but thank you.”

“Do I have to tell you again?” barked Daniel. 41

“Yes yes, coming. Thank you again,” she said to the owner.

“You play beautifully.”

“Thank you.”

Eye still on the violin, she slowed her steps. 42 Daniel grabbed her elbow and hurled her forward in a manner she wasn’t accustomed to in all the years she’d known him. He’d moved the truck, now on their current side of the street right in front. Humiliation sizzled her cheeks as she hopped in.

Daniel did the same, slamming it so hard the glass could have broke. “Are you out of your *goddamn fucking mind*?” he yelled equally as hard. “What were you thinking?”

“Don’t talk to me like that!”

“A famous musician dead and buried on the run from the Mob and you pick up the one instrument you’re most famous for and play Vivaldi? You played that all across Europe the year before we died.”

“I’m *not dead*.”

“You may be now because of what you just did.”

She looked at the dentist, wondering if Lavie would be done yet.

“You tell me to play things cool and not make scenes, yet you barge in there acting like the biggest asshole on the planet drawing all kinds of attention?”

“The Russian mafia wants my wife dead. I come out and find you gone.” He slammed the steering wheel with both palms. “I’ve never been so scared my *entire life*.”

“You overreact.”

“Really, ok, right. So not true.”

“Yes, exactly right. *You do*.”

“So the last time we were in New York when one of them tried to burn down your family home during an Oscar party with our child and every person we love inside, that was me overreacting too?”

“Stop being so overprotective.”

“That will never, ever, ever happen.” 43

“You acted like Terry in there. A controlling wife beating sunavabitch. I already lived through that once. I won’t do it again, I won’t. How could you treat me like that?”

With that low blow, he turned and gawked at her. “So now you paint all men with the same brush.”

Shook his head.

Over and over.

“Can you blame me?”