

One

Someone needed to kill my boss.

I mean, *I* wasn't going to be the one to actually do it, but he had to die.

I had just won a huge case, the State of Oregon vs. Ramsey, and was disgusted from the victory. One of our lesser employees, Kenneth Ramsey, had been apprehended during a supply transfer; apparently an upstanding citizen decided he looked "suspicious" and called the police, who swarmed Ken within ten minutes of the tipoff. They found a substantial amount of cocaine and heroin in his pockets in small, unmarked, white envelopes, rolled up and bulging at the seams. Our employer, Ivan Vance, was more disappointed in the lazy way Ken had been transporting his product than he was at him being caught.

The case didn't take long to win. I was able to plant and later interview alibis, one of whom was a healthcare provider under Vance's employ. She created a phony patient record for Ken that showed he didn't have drugs in his system. Officer Grant Halpern, one of our best assets on the Redborough Police Department, had made all the evidence disappear except for a few small bags of marijuana, which, here in Oregon, has been legal for years. I made up the entire defense, attacking

the cops who did the arrest, stating they jumped the gun, that Ken was obviously in the wrong place at the wrong time. Vance paid off the judge, as he often did in cases such as this, and boom, Ken's a free man. We won. And it made me sick.

Leaving the courthouse, I took the train home. Vance treated his employees well, and provided each with their own decked-out SUV for transportation needs, but ever since he sent Darren on that fucking suicide mission last year, I've tried to avoid anything that reminds me I work for the city's most vicious, unforgiving kingpin. Who happens to somehow always find people who try to leave town to get away from him. Then he or his right-hand man, Alex, tortures them to death over a period of hours, sometimes days. Told you. Vicious.

I pulled out my cell, a sleek smartphone given to every Vance employee, and stared at the screen. A message awaited, bringing a slight tingle to the pit of my stomach. Scolding myself, I tapped at it, knowing it wouldn't show Darren's name no matter how badly I wanted it to. Instead, a text from Cassie lit up.

Hey, it read. Julie's performing at Cold Waters tonight. Keep an eye on her for me?

I smiled and replied back: *Of course. I thought you were excited for her?*

Moments later, her reply came. *I am! And*

thank you again for hooking her up with the big gig! I just know it can be dangerous, working in Vance territory. I want to make sure she's safe.

She'll be fine. I sent. I'll make sure of it.

Cassie always worried. She'd been working for Lotus Catering for the better part of two years, paying Vance back for funding her college tuition so she didn't have to get a loan. The girl was bright as hell, so her choice of going to law school was a good move. The catering gig paid her well, too, and was relatively safe. True, it was owned by Vance, but he didn't need them for every meal; she only occasionally had to cater for the crime boss himself. If she ever got out from Vance's company, under his eye, she'd go far in life. But I knew now even side employees that don't contribute directly to the business were always in danger.

My lips tugged downward as a thought came to my mind. *What if she could never leave, even after she paid him off?* I felt my heart quicken. Cassie was my friend, had been for years, and I'd gotten her and her sister, Julie, into working for Vance. True, Cassie's job, when catering for the Russian's parties, was to ensure no one fucked with his food, but Julie's put her out in the open more as a singer at his clubs, put her in the spotlight for awful men to possibly want—

No, I scolded myself. I will not go down this

path again. I leaned the side of my head against the window of the train, the cool glass giving me a slight shiver. Cassie nearly begged me to get Julie in. *They're adults. They can take care of themselves.* I just wish I had known how horrifying and fatal it was for people trying to leave Vance's rule *before* agreeing to hook them up.

I watched as the train slowed, then came to a gentle halt at Juno Station. I gripped the handle of my expensive briefcase, straightened my tie and smoothed my dark hair, then stood. As I exited onto the platform, a cool yet slightly humid breeze tickled my face. A faint scent of spring came with it, but I didn't have a single moment to enjoy it. A tall, well-dressed man with dark brown hair and black framed glasses stood a few yards away. His shoulders and back were set straight, the epitome of professionalism. I attempted to stifle a noise that would have sounded somewhere between a groan and a cry for help, and strode toward Vance's right-hand man.

"Right on time." Weston Alexander - Alex, unless you wanted an eye gouged out - extended his hand to me.

"Trains tend to do that, sir." I put on a friendly smile and we shook. When my skin touched his, I tried as hard as I could to not think about how many people he'd beaten senseless or how many

fingers he'd snapped off with a bolt cutter. *Calm down*, I told myself. *Those are just rumors. A lot of them. Growing in number ever since—*

I spoke again, eager to quell my ever-racing thoughts that always seemed to lead back to Darren. "What can I do for you?"

Alex began to walk away from the station, not checking to make sure I was following, but you better believe I was. He walked with a quick pace that irritated me.

"Our boss will no longer be at the club tonight," he said, staring straight ahead as he strode.

"Oh?" I weaved away from a woman who was on her cell phone, yammering away. "Has something happened?"

He glanced at me then, a cold slide of his deep green eyes. The man could be handsome, charming even, if he wasn't a fucking sociopath.

"Are you questioning me, Henry?" Alex turned to face me, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk.

"No, sir. I'm just trying to understand—"

"It is often that you forget who is in charge. That's not a quality we like to see in an employee."

The little hairs on my arms stood up, brushing against the long sleeves of my ironed dress shirt. "I apologize, sir. I don't mean to come across that

way. I want nothing more than to help V—”

Alex’s eyes narrowed and he glanced side to side.

“To help you and our employer succeed,” I corrected.

He adjusted his glasses with one hand, then turned and stalked away from me. *Fucking prick.* Jogging a few steps to catch up, I said, “Alex. I swear.”

“Good. Look.” He glanced at me, suddenly all smiles. “I need you to do something prior to arriving at the club tonight.”

“Oh?” This was new.

We arrived at a black, spotless SUV. Moments before we were close enough to touch it, Alex’s driver, Nate, hurried around the side and held the back door open for us. I nodded at the stocky man, and received a pleasant smile in return.

Once the door was shut, Alex continued. “You are the middleman between us and the two families of the city that are giving us...issues.”

“The Esposito and Bianci? Yes. Recently the Acerbi showed an interest in—”

“I met with the Dons of both earlier today.”

This guy is a total fucking prick. I know I’ve said that before. Still. I would have taken great pleasure in strangling him in that moment, if that was something I was capable of. And I’m not even

that violent.

Alex continued, unaware of my urge to punch him in the jaw. “Things got heated. I don’t believe either are willing to work with Vance. So I let slip that you’ve found some dirt on both that would put many of their people away, regardless of the hold they have on the DA and mayor.”

“Well, that won’t bode well with the meeting tonight.” It came out sassier than I expected, but Alex didn’t seem to notice. That, or he just added another mental tick on his list titled “Reasons I’d Like to Kill Henry.”

“That is why Vance will not be in attendance,” he said. The vehicle bumped along gently in traffic as Nate drove, and the pair of us swayed in sync. “I will take his place in full, and you will still be there as our liaison between the three businesses.”

Businesses. Ha. Rich.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “I understand.”

“Before you arrive at the meeting, I need you to talk with Officer Halpern and not only clue him in, but also come up with said dirt. He will keep it at the station, and if the meeting tonight does not go as planned, we will release it to the system. With so many on our side thanks to Vance’s timely payouts over the years, it will be easy to incriminate a good portion of both the Esposito and Bianci families.”

“Can do.” I checked my watch. “Gonna have to get creative with this dirt of yours. It’s already past four, and the meeting’s at nine.”

Alex graced me with a friendly grin. It gave me goosebumps, worse than if he’d smiled at me like he wanted to tear off a chunk of my face and eat it. “I have faith in you, Henry.” He gestured at the SUV’s door. I hadn’t even noticed we’d stopped. Looking out the tinted window, I recognized the front of the Redborough Police Department. “Clock’s ticking.”

Two

I glanced at my silver Rolex and muttered a curse. The time spent with Grant at the RPD had been valuable, but had taken way too long. I barely had time to run home to change and head to the meeting at Cold Waters.

Hurrying, I flagged down a cab. My place was only three blocks from the train station, but no, fucking Alex had to be an asshole and kidnap me, drive me nearly a mile away. I hate that guy.

When I arrived home, I shed my suit coat, letting it fall to the carpet of my bedroom in a shifting whisper, not caring if it wrinkled. The payout from Vance after what happened to Darren was enough for me to buy thousands of suits. Hell, I could probably wear a brand new one every day for six months and barely see a dent. Plus, the additional monthly income for my work as a dirty lawyer helped. Not like I have a choice now that I'm on his payroll.

As I changed, a glint of something bright struck my eyes. They unwillingly tore from watching my fingers undo the buttons of my shirt and landed on a framed photo by my bed. I felt my mouth tense, my teeth cutting into the soft flesh of my lips. Stepping closer, I looked down at the picture. It showed me, a wide grin frozen on my face, and Darren kissing my left cheek instead of

looking at the camera. I'd had it for a long time, since our honeymoon, and had kept it by my bed ever since his death. My heart tugged and threatened to sink if I continued to stare at my lost love, so I turned, eyes damp, back to my dresser.

Pulling on a dark green polo shirt and tan khakis, I ignored memories of the agony I'd felt when I learned Darren had been killed on his stakeout for Vance. I tried hard to push the thought of his hand in mine, our lips meeting, how soft his hair was, all out of my brain, but I just couldn't. Sagging to the ground, I knelt in the expensive beige carpet and wept.

Eventually, my sorrow blossomed into rage, as it often did. My fists clenched on my thighs, and my breath shot out in ragged gasps as I forced my tears back. I wiped at my wet face, not caring about the snot that dripped from my nose in my anguish. I stood, legs weak for the moment, and looked at the photo again.

"I'm going to find a way." My voice sounded too loud and intrusive in the silence. "I'm not going to just kill Alex and Vance. I'm going to tear their empire to the ground."

With new ambition fresh in my chest, I hurried into my large guest bedroom, which I'd turned into a home office. A quick glance at the clock showed I still had about ten minutes to waste before I'd be late to the meeting, but I didn't care.

The thought that Alex would have yet one more reason to kill me, if that's something he truly was keeping track of, didn't even cross my mind as I yanked out a piece of fresh, lined paper and a ballpoint pen. Sitting at my desk, I began to write.

Within only five minutes, I had listed the names of every single person I could think of high in Vance's ranks. I had put them in categories based on each Big Head, as the Russian liked to call them: Head of Finance, Head of Weapons Distribution, Head of Narcotics, and the Head of Acquisition and Enforcement. Underneath each, I listed all employees they were in charge of - at least, the ones I knew about. I stared at the paper, so delicate and fragile in my grip. *This alone could get me tortured to death*, I thought, and nearly tore it up. Resisting the urge, I stepped up to one of my tall bookshelves that lined the wall and pulled a random book from its shelf.

I folded the paper once, twice, and slid it in between two pages of the book. Shoving it back in its place, I felt a smile pull at my lips: *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Perks, indeed.

I turned off the light and left for Cold Waters.

Three

The meeting did not go well.

Let me rephrase that. The meeting blew apart in the most violent way possible.

From the moment I arrived, there was thick tension hovering in the air. The lighting, which was normally low enough to cast shadows into every corner, was turned up. Blue velvet booths and dark carpeting looked tacky in the brightness, and the sleek bar looked cheap and out of place. Crazy what a different perspective on something will do.

Alex was standing near the back, between the leaders of the Bianci and Esposito families. Surrounding them were bodyguards, or so I thought. As I neared, I recognized the other men, who were actually much higher up than that. It was as if they had brought their own managers, or Big Heads, to the meeting, but that was ridiculous. I couldn't imagine why the hell they would all risk being in the same place at once.

They're not afraid of us. The realization hit me hard, and that's when I first felt fear. I walked toward Alex with a quickness in my step, my mind again jumping to how Darren had died. Before I reached him, I saw Julie on my left, up on the stage, illuminated by a soft, white glow. Dressed in an elegant golden gown that glittered in the

light, she was singing in a morose tone, her soft voice barely reaching my ears. Clearly, Alex had wanted to provide entertainment, but not an audible distraction while his meeting took place. No doubt if the night went well and turned out in our favor, he would have Julie pick up the volume and the pace of her songs as the families celebrated well into the night with champagne that cost more than an average person's mortgage payment. *If* it went well.

"You remember Mr. Haas." Alex nodded in my direction as I drew up next to him. Standing on his right side, I reached out to shake hands with the Don of the Esposito family, but all I received back was a cold stare. I didn't bother with anyone else, and simply let my hand drop.

"We were just discussing our disagreement over—"

"Over you not tucking your tails between your legs and heeling like good dogs," the Don of the Esposito family, Alessandro, interrupted. His words chilled my blood; I'd never heard anyone talk to Alex like that and live. My superior, however, merely smiled.

"Gentlemen." The grin on Alex's face just barely revealed the malice beneath his mask. "I know we can work things out. We can all coexist in Redborough without controversy." He turned his head and addressed the Don of the Bianci

family, Riccardo. “You yourself said just the other day how pleased you were with Vance’s offer.”

“That was before your petty threat today, Weston,” the Italian sneered. I noticed a slight twitch of Alex’s right eye at the use of his first name. My heart quickened. *Jesus, he’s going to snap.* I took a small step away from Alex, hoping no one would notice, and glanced around the club again.

I was able to pick out a good number of our people scattered throughout the area. Marcus, a gruff man who thought he was funnier than he truly was, rested the palm of his right hand on the butt of his pistol, which barely poked out from underneath his leather jacket. His dark hair and beard were just beginning to grey. I found myself wondering how long he’d been employed by Vance, and I lost my focus for a moment. It wandered to Julie, outstanding on the stage, like a ray of sunlight with her golden dress and softly curled yellow hair framing her face. She caught me looking at her and smiled around her words as she sang, then threw me a wink before casting her eyes away once more.

“If you hadn’t decided to—”

“Stop interrupting me—”

“You pretentious little—”

Oh, shit. No one can even finish their sentences. I didn’t know what had been said in the

few seconds my mind had wandered. I felt not only a jolt of terror surge through me, but a sudden urge to be somewhere, anywhere, other than where I was.

Without excusing myself, I turned and walked away, my panic leading me from Alex and the families and toward the bar.

“Henry,” my superior snapped over the tangled voices of the Italians. “Get the fuck back here. We’re not finished.”

“Just need some water.” I quickened my step further and reached Syrus, the bartender with grey hair but a back still straight and tall.

Nodding at Syrus, I opened my mouth to ask for a glass of water, but my words were drowned out by gunfire.

The moment shots sounded, I jumped like a scared animal and, unable to think of anything else, dove across the bar, nearly tackling Syrus to the floor with me. He was yelling, but I had no clue what he was saying, or if he was even saying anything at all. I covered my ears, but the noise was still deafening. Glass shattered above and rained down upon Syrus and I as we huddled on the ground, knees tucked, backs hunched over, foreheads pressed to the sticky ground with our hands protecting our skulls.

It went on for hours. Hours and hours. In reality, it was no doubt less than a few minutes,

but to me, and probably Syrus, too, it was hours. When the bar finally quieted, we both stayed in our terrified positions on the floor, letting the minutes tick by. I was shaking so hard my spine was sore. Or maybe something had fallen on me and I hadn't noticed. Or maybe I'd been shot. *That* was enough to get me moving. I lifted my head. My teeth were clamped so hard my jaw screamed. There was broken glass from the bar's bottles littering the floor, falling off me as I slowly straightened. Syrus looked at me. Glass decorated his white hair, sliding around his scalp and dropping past his pale blue eyes.

"Marcus!" Alex's voice cut through the quiet, making me jump again. *Of course that fucker lived.*

My fingers trembled so hard, I lost my balance twice trying to push myself off the floor. I didn't know fingers could shake that much. I winced as glass pierced my palms, hissing in through clenched teeth at the bright pain. I peered over the bar and took in the horror.

At first I didn't understand how Alex had survived. True, we had our own men throughout the bar, but the Italians had us outnumbered. They had been in a tight formation, while our people had been scattered throughout the bar. When I looked at the heap of bullet-riddled bodies splayed along the floor, I understood just why our men had

been set up that way.

Several members of both the Espositos and the Biancis still stood, their automatic weapons pointing in different directions, some of which had smoke trailing from the muzzles. They had turned on their own. Somehow, Vance or Alex had talked them into switching sides, and at the most crucial moment, they gunned down their brothers.

Surveying the now quiet warzone I kept turning my head, unable to look away. Then I saw something that made my knees buckle.

I stumbled past a dazed Bianci with blood flowing from a crater in his arm, past Alex who was barking orders at Marcus. I lunged across the stage into the soft spotlight. Julie lay on her back, her eyes wide with terror. Her beautiful golden gown was now spotted with large, irregular, crimson blossoms. The hair she'd no doubt spent hours perfecting was twisted and splayed around her head. Her perfect, porcelain doll face was missing its lower jaw.

Maybe she'll be fine she'll be fine she'll be fine. The nonsense words careened through my brain until they smashed into a memory: *She'll be fine. I'll make sure of it.* The promise I had made to Cassie just this afternoon.

I threw up.

“The fuck is the matter with you?” I hadn't heard Alex approach, and I whirled around,

looking up at him from my knees. I didn't remember falling to them.

"Julie," was all I could say.

Alex looked at her body. Little droplets of blood were splattered across the left side of his face and neck, and his glasses were dusted with a fine coating of drywall dust. His expression of cold boredom didn't change. "The evidence you planted with Grant, at the RPD." He was still looking at Julie. "That will be enough to bring down the majority of both families. We will leave the Acerbi alone, for now. Let them see we aren't to be fucked with. Let them realize it's either obey or die." Alex's green gaze finally shifted back to me, and in that moment, I tensed my legs and nearly leapt at his throat. The only thing that stopped me was the enormous rifle he held.

"Report to Grant in the morning. Clean yourself up and get out of here." Alex turned away, then paused and threw a final command over his shoulder. "Go home."

I heard what he'd said. My mind, however, was only repeating one word, over and over.

Cassie.

Four

The air outside the club was heavy with threatening rain. It dragged my spirits and my shoulders into a slump. I leaned against the cool brick exterior of Cold Waters in an attempt to quell the tremors that still quaked through my legs and hands.

As my breathing slowed, I realized I could hear muffled voices off to my right. I ignored them. I had too much on my mind. *How do I tell Cassie? How CAN I tell Cassie? I promised to protect Julie for her and all I did was save my own ass.* I swallowed a sob. *Fuck, I'm such a coward.*

A few men I recognized as crooked cops that worked for Vance hurried toward me, running from parked squad cars with their red and blue lights spinning. My heart leapt and stuttered. I feared it would seize up completely under the amount of stress I've endured in a mere hour. To my relief, the men didn't even glance at me, and instead ducked inside the club. They were no doubt there to clean up the mess Alex had made minutes before. *But how had they gotten wind of it so quickly?*

My breathing had finally returned to normal, and I pushed myself away from the wall, straightening my shoulders, smoothing my unkempt hair. I needed to get home. I could figure

out what to do once I was in the comfort of my own—

“Of course it was a set up, I get that.” The voice was familiar; I’d just heard it that morning. Grant. His was one of the muted voices I had heard. I looked around to see the entrance to a small alley two yards or so from where I stood.

Officer Halpern continued. “But why in the hell would the boss not keep it clear? You know as well as I he doesn’t put his own at risk like that.”

“I don’t know!” a lighter male voice replied in a strained whisper. Inching forward, not wanting to get caught, I held my breath. “Henry could have been a liability, after the death of Darren. I wouldn’t doubt that Vance might try to get rid of him.”

“And that young girl in there? He wouldn’t do something like that.”

“Vance put her in there *knowing* the shootout was going to happen.”

“I know, I know.” Grant let out a rough sigh. “I just...I can’t do anything about this.”

“You’re going to be a dad. You said yourself you couldn’t imagine leaving your wife alone with—”

“I don’t need the reminder, kid.”

The voices began to strengthen, get closer.

“Let’s just get back in there and do our fuckin’ jobs.”

I began to step away from the alleyway, fearful of what these men would do should they find me, then paused. *Wait...*

Without giving myself a moment's thought, I strode forward and into the alley, nearly colliding with a young man with light brown curls and captivating green eyes. Isaac. One of our top infiltrators, and Grant's go-to guy for scene clean-ups. *Well, I'll be.*

Both men looked startled, and Grant's right hand dropped to his holster lightning quick.

I held up my hands in front of me. "Whoa. Whoa. Just...whoa."

"Henry," Isaac said, a lopsided grin spreading across his boyish face. "Glad to see you survived."

Grant shot the younger man a glance, then looked me up and down with a wary gaze.

"Yeah," I said, terrified of what would happen next. "I heard you guys talking. You know, you want to have a conversation like that, you might want to do it somewhere more, I dunno, discreet."

Silence. Both stared at me, and I stared right back.

"Julie's dead." My voice almost cracked, but I forced it to be firm. "She was my friend. She—"

"Yeah." Isaac looked away, eyes clouded with a mess of emotions.

"This is wrong." I kept my voice quiet, but locked my gaze with Grant's. The officer's

expression didn't change. His dark skin shone in the moonlight, as if he'd been sweating moments ago, and his goatee was an ebony scruff. "We should do something about this." I felt my fingers start to tremble again, ever so slightly. I had no idea if I had misjudged the situation and stepped into a potential bullet to the face for my disloyalty. But I had to try. I had to risk it. For Darren, and for Julie.

Five

I didn't get shot in the face. But neither was I allowed in on whatever it had been that I'd heard that night. Instead, I got to go back to my daily drudges. Vance paid for Julie's funeral in a sizeable anonymous donation to the family, as was his way. I wish I had never touched his disgusting payoff from Darren's death.

I almost didn't go to the service. Entering the parlor, my head was heavy and my mouth was dry. I attempted to shuffle around strangers who leaked tears and clung to each other. *Fuck, I can't do this.* I turned to leave before anyone saw me.

"Henry." Cassie's soft voice washed over me before I could even back away from my guilt and sorrow.

"Cassie—" I froze, unsure of what to say next. "I'm so sorry."

Her large eyes were rimmed red. "You need to stop apologizing to me," she said in a soft but unwavering voice.

Before I could respond, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around my waist. My throat closed, and I rested my cheek on the top of her head, hugging her back with a fierceness I wasn't expecting.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to." I kept my voice low and quiet.

“It wasn’t your fault, Henry.” Her words were difficult to understand, muffled by the front of my shirt. I let her hold me, and I held her back, both of us gaining strength from the other. Thoughts of Darren, as always, drifted through my mind, but they were now joined with ones of Julie. Not their deaths, not how they looked with their life drained from their bodies, but of them in simple, day to day motions. So many people overlook the small things. The way someone’s laugh makes you smile. The way their eyes can captivate you. How the way they speak can enlighten you, encourage you, inspire you. A touch of their hand to yours. A quick kiss on the cheek. An ‘I love you.’ All of those things are constantly taken for granted, and now, the people closest to Cassie and I, the ones who meant more than life itself, had been torn from us without warning, without mercy.

“I’m going to kill him.”

I almost didn’t hear her words. Pulling away, I held her at arm’s length, brow furrowed. “Cassie.” I stared into her eyes, now large and defiant, and said, “Not here. Come with me.”

We exited the building and walked toward a small pond to the left, grass swishing and playing a constant monotonous song beneath our feet. A warm breeze, so different from the one that buffeted me the night of Julie’s death, wandered around us as we stepped up to the edge of the

water. I stared down at my black dress shoes, shined and free of scuffs.

“Henry. I’m going to.”

“Good.” My answer surprised myself just as much as it did her. Glancing around to ensure no one had followed, I said it again. “Good. Someone needs to.”

“You’re...okay with it? I’m not joking, Henry. I know I seem weak and harmless, but there’s no way Vance is going to get away with this. When you told me how quickly the cops showed up to the scene...it was obviously a set up. You even agreed. You can’t just—”

“Cassie, I want to help you.”

She stared at me, as if assessing me from birth to death, and her hard gaze made me uncomfortable.

“I’m serious. After what happened with Darren, I...I’ve been thinking about leaving. But of course, the more I want to, the more shit goes down that shows me I can’t. Sometimes I feel as if it’s happening on purpose, as if it’s a warning to me, as if the universe knows what will happen if I try, and it’s preventing me from doing so.”

I hadn’t told her about the conversation I’d heard between Isaac and Grant. She had no idea who they were. She was barely a pawn in Vance’s employ, with no rights to any information or any access above what she needed to keep him fed and

free of poison at his occasional soiree. The only people she knew that for sure worked for the Russian were me and Julie. And I had no right to get her in deeper with these people.

“Leave, Cassie. Run away, start over somewhere else.”

“What about my parents?” She looked horrified at the thought.

“Take them with you.” I turned, fully facing her, ignoring the small lapping sounds of the pond nearby. I wanted to get on my knees and beg her.

“No.” Her answer cut me, but I had expected it. Cassie wasn’t one to turn tail and run. She’s a fighter. “Listen.” She inched closer. “I think I have a way of taking him out. I...know someone. Someone unbelievably strong, someone willing to kill in the name of revenge. He’d help us.”

“Who?”

“That doesn’t matter. What matters is I’ve discussed this with him already. Even now, he’s in the process of putting things in order, things that will help us.”

“Things like what?”

“Things that will bring Vance and Alex and everyone else associated with them to their knees.”

The violence in her voice, which should have startled me, brought forth a bright fire in my chest. I thought of the list I’d started, tucked away on my

bookshelf, and started to nod. “I can help.”

We should have run. Even though Vance no doubt would have tracked me down, would have known where I went as if he had eyes all over the world, at least Cassie might have gotten away. But vengeance clouded our minds, and the thirst for revenge for our lost loved ones was unquenchable.

“Cassie!” I turned to see a young man with carefully combed dark hair at the entrance of the funeral home, next to a taller man with brown shaggy hair and dark sunglasses covering his eyes. The latter gripped a white walking stick, and both looked morose as my friend turned and waved.

“I have to go, Henry.” Cassie lifted up onto her toes and planted a quick kiss next to my left ear. “We’ll bring him down.” She smiled then, and it lit up her tired face. “You’ll see. He’ll pay.”

Then she turned and hurried toward her other friends, throwing her arms around the neck of the dark-haired man. I knew from Vance’s files he had been Julie’s fiancée. I wondered if the Russian had sent him some kind of “anonymous donation” as well, or if that was just reserved for immediate family and spouses.

The young man sagged against Cassie, and the taller, blind one wrapped his arms around their huddled form. I couldn’t hear their sobs from where I stood. A fresh pang of guilt and loss stabbed me in the stomach. I turned away, busying

myself instead with our first move against Vance and Alex, the ripples of the pond providing a gentle soundtrack to my thoughts.

By Jennifer Reinfried

Grim Inception (A Grim Trilogy 0.5)

Grim Ambition (A Grim Trilogy 1)

Grim Misfortune (A Grim Trilogy 1.5)

Grim Judgment (A Grim Trilogy 2)

Grim Resentment (A Grim Trilogy 2.5)

Grim Vengeance (A Grim Trilogy 3)

The Souls of the Lash

Coming soon

Dawn of the Wraiths - A Grim Origin

All books available on Amazon in paperback and on Kindle. Signed copies available on www.reinfriedbooks.com (free shipping only applies to US customers).



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2016 All rights reserved.

Alex portrait by Stephen S. Gibson

Henry portrait by Evelyne Paniez, freelance digital artist

@ Secret D'ar Tiste (www.secretdartiste.be)

Cover design by Meagan Weber

Edited by D.W. Vogel