

Prologue

Ronnie Charles slotted the dirty champagne flutes into the plastic racks as fast as she could, two at a time, her arms flashing between trays and crates. Her skin tightened, an overall prickling that never failed her. It meant danger, meant she had to be out of there quick. The bracelet lay heavy in the secret pocket of her trousers, bumping her thigh as she moved. Someone shifted behind her, too close, and she worked faster. She didn't have time to fight off one of those ass-grabbers who always seemed to work these big charity dos, creeping on anyone. Even when Ronnie dressed as a man like tonight, they would reach out and squeeze a handful. Ronnie swung her bangs out of her eyes, peeked over her shoulder.

"You'll give me back my bracelet, or I'll rip your balls off." The silky voice caressed her ear, the woman crowding her into the boxes before she could turn around.

The Feline. Ronnie didn't usually name her marks, but those two words had sprung into her head as she watched the way the calculating woman slinked through the room, eyed the crowd, pounced on her targets. Ronnie took a deep breath, got a whiff of expensive perfume, and then did the only thing she could in a situation like this. She made her voice higher than normal and said, "Ma'am, I don't have any balls."

The tall blonde stepped back. Ronnie whipped around and saw the guys lugging chairs and tables into the truck, the caterer with her clipboard, and the cleaning crew hard at work. She so needed to keep this job.

The Feline tilted her head, narrowed her eyes, examined her through mascaraed lashes. "Well, well."

She scanned Ronnie up and down, checked over the details of her slim hips in the black pants, her flat white shirt and bow tie, her short hair in a boy's cut. She studied the one thing Ronnie couldn't fake: her lack of an Adam's apple.

"It's not often I'm fooled." The Feline's voice was low, dark clouds in the distance. "We both know you have my bracelet. I let you take it because I wanted to see how good you are."

Ronnie sucked in a breath and watched the certainty come over her, her brown eyes shining. The Feline wasn't trying to hide her age with makeup the way a lot of women did. She proudly wore the fine lines around her eyes, the smile lines on her cheeks. She was as beautiful up close as she had been in the crowds. Ronnie had watched her, watched as the men and women gathered around her as if just being near her would save their lives.

"And you're good," The Feline continued, "but I'm better. I could've taken it back from you." Her eyes flickered to Ronnie's hand, which had moved all by itself to cover the secret pocket in her trousers. The Feline smiled, lines etching her skin. "I could have, but I was curious about someone almost as brazen as I am, working a crowd of this caliber."

Tiny beads of sweat gathered at Ronnie's hairline, and she crossed her arms to keep herself still. The first time she got caught by a mark and it was this willowy goddess. She didn't know why she'd taken it in the first place. Not like she needed it. "Look, lady." The caterer approached them. "You have to go. Here, I'm giving it back." She reached into her pocket and fumbled around, for some reason, not finding the opening. "I'll give it to you, and you can leave. I really need to keep this job."

The Feline ran her eyes over her once more then grabbed her upper arm and started walking Ronnie away from the crates. She smiled and nodded at Ronnie's boss. Under her breath, she said, "No, you don't."

Ronnie tried to pull away, but the woman tightened her grip and kept walking.

"I've decided you're going to come work for me." Her heels punctuated her words as they strode toward the exit. "You have skills I can use."

Ronnie caught a glance from another waitperson as they passed. Pure envy. Amazing the feelings this woman could pull out of people.

"I have a garden apartment you can live in while you work off the bracelet." Isabelle cut her eyes to Ronnie, a lioness eyeing her prey. "Your androgyny will throw my marks off balance. I can teach you so many, many things." Her voice was hard, yet somehow soft at the same time. "I'm giving you an offer of a lifetime."

Ronnie stopped walking, planted her feet, and the woman's voluminous gown swirled around her legs as if to trap her.

The Feline stopped, too, but didn't let go of her arm. "Or I can call the cops."

No way. Ronnie could not go to jail again. She'd used up whatever goodwill the system had for her, and it would be prison for sure this time. She knew she could run, spin out of her grip, jump off the loading dock, and into the night. Down alleys and through back doors, up fire escapes and over rooftops, disappear into the grit and the cold and the peculiar community of the homeless of New York City. She sucked in her breath. Did she say "garden apartment?" The woman's earrings glittered at her. No more sleeping on the streets. No more dumpster diving. Okay, one night, that's it. She'd scope the place out, learn the alarm system and The Feline's habits. Tuck the information away for when she was desperate, and tonight, she could sleep in a soft bed. An offer of a lifetime.

"I have to get my backpack." Before Ronnie turned toward the setup tables where she'd stashed it, she caught the grin spreading over the woman's face, her eyes dancing.

Chapter One

Frank Jankowski burst through the emergency room doors, his sixteen-year-old daughter in his arms. He rushed to the front desk, pushed past people in line, yelled at the staff, tried to get someone to pay attention. Cathy moaned, her sweaty head lolling as if she had no neck. A rushing in his ears drowned out all other sounds, and his eyes darted from one person in scrubs to the next. When he opened his mouth to yell again, Cathy vomited on the floor. As if a director had yelled *Action*, everyone moved at once. A woman with a wheelchair waved aside the guy with the clipboard and yelled, *He can do that later!* They asked Frank for symptoms, for his daughter's name, then told the nurse at the desk to page the doctor. The curtain screeched as they yanked it back and deftly placed Cathy on the bed.

She looked like a rag doll. More nurses, stethoscopes, pulse-ox on her finger, someone in scrubs pulled him aside to quietly go over the symptoms with him, poking the iPad she cradled with each thing he said. The nurse turned him away as they inserted an IV in his daughter's arm and led him back to the waiting room to fill out the paperwork.

He got as far as "Catherine A. Jankowski" when his gut roiled, and he clutched the clipboard tighter, knuckles whitening, scalp tingling as he waited for it to pass. He breathed in through his nose, out through his mouth, counting breaths as images of his daughter surrounded by medical staff, machines, an IV hookup swam behind his eyes. *Not again.*

Damn. Susan. He called her, told her they were in the emergency room. "Everything's under control. Don't worry. I'll explain when you get here." He didn't want her to think it was as bad as it had been a year and a half ago. "Really, it's okay. It'll be okay." Her worry would make her anxious, and her anxiety would make her yell at him. He pressed the button to end the call.

Whatever this was, and it certainly warranted the ER, it couldn't compare to the hit and run that took more than a year from Cathy's life. The long hospital stay, the painful rehab. But she was past all that, seeing friends, catching up on her schoolwork. So this was just—dehydration from whatever cold or flu had laid her low.

He gazed down at the clipboard as if it had just leapt into his hand. He wrote the address of Susan's apartment on the form. His old apartment. The apartment they had found when he was first transferred to the New York Field Office, the one he thought they would stay in forever, stretching for a two-bedroom because they planned on children. He had been glad she'd kept the walls white, hung cheerful photographs, so when he came home, put his keys in the dish on the table, trying to shed the thoughts of all the evil things people did to other people, the nastiness he worked hard to fight every day, he would pause and try to put himself in the photograph, try to hear the people in them laughing, feel the gentle breeze—

Someone sat down next to him and he shifted in the plastic chair, irritated that a stranger would invade his space like that.

"Frank."

Susan, his wife—ex-wife—pulled the clipboard away from him and began filling in the form, glancing up at him as if trying to determine what kind of stupid he was. The rhythmic scratching of pen on paper calmed him. She checked off that Cathy had had her immunizations, was current on tetanus, that there was no history of diabetes in their family. The pen hovered over *What brought you in today?* She raised an eyebrow at Frank. “Are you going to tell me?”

“I thought it was the flu.” He stared straight ahead, not wanting to see the accusations firing from her eyes. “But then she started hallucinating...”

“The flu.” Susan’s pen scratched on the paper. “In August. You thought it was the flu.”

“SuSu—” Frank turned toward her but quickly looked away when he caught the flare of her nostrils and the flash of her blue eyes. He shouldn’t have used his old name for her, but it had just slipped out. He watched the activity at the front desk for a beat, then said, his voice quiet, “You would have thought so, too.”

“Not in August, Frank. I would never have thought that. Did she have a fever?”

“She didn’t seem to. I felt her forehead because she was sweating so much, but—”

“No thermometer at your apartment? How can that be? All these years of Cathy over there, and you don’t even have the rudiments of—the basics for—any way to take—”

Susan tripped over her words, sputtered in her anger, and Frank stayed still, waited for it to pass. A man a few rows ahead of them tapped on his phone, his three children around him squirming and kicking each other, whining at their father, who didn’t respond.

“...her symptoms?” His ex-wife had taken on a neutral tone, perhaps deciding that the paperwork was more important than fighting Frank.

He listed the symptoms in the order they had occurred, the aches, the sweating, the vomiting. Her pen flew over the paper, her frown deepened as the list went on, ending with the hallucinations.

“Mr. and Mrs. Jankowski?”

Susan flinched, her lips thin, jaw tight.

“Could you come with me, please?” The nurse checked for them over her shoulder, an iPad in her hand, led them down the hall, opened a door. “Okay, Mr. and Mrs. Jankowski, let’s go in here—”

“We’re divorced.” Susan forced the words through clenched teeth, sounding as if she wouldn’t mind going through the proceedings all over again.

They followed the nurse into a small room crammed with desks. The young woman in her cartoon scrubs and bright clogs didn’t ask them to sit. She shut the door and turned to face them. She held up her iPad as if it were a shield, aimed her question at the device, her tone mild as if merely confirming Cathy’s age, “How long has your daughter been addicted to opioids?”