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## Chapter 1

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**B**ecca hid her disquiet as best she could while the sleek black stretch limousine pulled up in front of a mansion with distinctive Italianate architecture, in a sandstone red that made her think of mesas in Arizona. The grand house stood out in a neighborhood and city that was already filled with flashy spectacles. Arched windows with elaborate bracketed cornices that dominated the home reflected the setting sun. From the center rose a tower a good story-and-a-half above the rest of the house. It stood sentinel like a guard tower at a prison. The circular drive sported an ivory marble fountain which, with its marbled depiction of angels, was reminiscent of ones she'd passed in Rome years ago.

But Becca wasn't here to admire the architecture, or the glossy interior of the limo. Far from it. The aerobic tumbling in her belly resembled a gymnast hyped up on steroids. She pressed her palm over her abdomen, attempting to quell the mad riot stirring inside.

Before today, she'd thought each week leading up to one of her art shows was fraught with terror and anxiety, wondering if the critics would love her latest pieces or relegate her work to the

level of the mass production line available at discount furniture stores. In reality, the self-doubt and terror of failure of those occasions was miniscule compared to the unease she was experiencing now. The short drive from her gallery on Royal Street in the French Quarter to this house that was beyond the Garden District made the standard unease before her openings look like a kindergarten playground.

Once the car came to a complete stop, her belly executed a little flip as the driver opened the back door. The droning hum of crickets infused the muggy evening, foreshadowing the coming storm forecasted later tonight.

Becca was overtly aware of the lethal man, Konrad, beside her in his dark charcoal gray suit, the black and silver handle of his firearm peeking out from a holster at his waist. His face reminded her of a bulldog's, with its bulbous nose and square cut jaw and a slight jowl beneath. His receding hair of blond bleached almost platinum was complemented by jade eyes that were full of death, much like a snake before it struck. He waved his beefy hand toward the open door and said, "After you, Miss O'Malley. The boss is awaiting your arrival." His voice was like an organ bellow competing with a running woodchipper.

Becca wished she could turn back time—rewind it somehow to that morning and her decision to head into the gallery: something she did only rarely, because while she wished she was more hands on in the day to day running of the business side of things, she was typically immersed in her art, in the midst of creation, away from the rest of the world, not knowing what time it was or even what day. It would have been better if she had stayed home in her studio, working on the pieces for her next art showing scheduled for this spring.

"Miss," Konrad pressed, his hand on the butt of his handgun.

Becca steeled herself, saying a prayer to whatever deity would listen. Her heart pounded and she felt like a startled rabbit as she

exited the limo, ignoring the driver's outstretched hand. This wasn't a pleasant invitation or a night out.

She'd be lucky if she lived through the night. Hell, through the next hour.

Betrayal weighed heavy upon her heart. It was thick and putrid, and curdled her stomach to the point where she wanted to vomit. She cursed her inability and limitations that she couldn't do it all, that she had to trust someone to run her store and she'd chosen wrong. She almost choked on the sensation.

How had the bitch hidden her intentions so well? Was Becca just that oblivious?

It was a classic Becca O'Malley mess. The latest in a long line of mistakes not just this year, but over the course of her life. Sometimes she thought all she did was make huge gaffes. She attracted crud of this magnitude and tenor like she was sending out a magnetic homing beacon. Her family would merely shake their heads in disappointment at her latest miscalculation. And that was only if she made it out of this one alive.

The manager of her art gallery, Sasha Brevard, had used Becca—used her place of business, the O'Malley Art Gallery, to launder drugs and money for the infamous Anton Rudnikov, Mob boss of Louisiana. Sasha had turned Becca's life's work into a mere cog in a criminal enterprise.

Anton was the boss Becca would meet tonight, with a little persuasion from Konrad and his Glock forty-five.

Curiosity and excitement about the latest shipment of art coming into the gallery had driven her into the shop. But Becca's desire to see the new art Sasha had ordered had set off a chain reaction of unfortunate events.

It was ironic in a way, since Becca normally didn't work at the gallery. As the owner and artist, she filled in if they were short staffed. Most often, she was in her home studio, painting her latest creation and oblivious to the rest of the world. Becca had opened the gallery two years prior, when the demand for her

art had grown beyond just a few showings. Her own artwork that was available to purchase was displayed in one half of the gallery, and she rented out the remaining space to other artists for a nominal fee. It was a system that ended up being highly profitable. Renting space in the French Quarter was monumentally expensive, even despite the constant stream of tourists into the city.

She had never imagined that, when she opened the crate to see the latest pieces, she would find kilos of cocaine bricks in with the artwork.

Horrified beyond measure, Becca had fumbled for her phone to call the police. Except Sasha had stopped her. Becca didn't think she would ever recover from looking down the barrel of the handgun into Sasha's cold, dead eyes and seeing her entire life flash before her.

Sasha had promptly organized tonight's little meet and greet with the prominent crime boss. Konrad had arranged for two more big, burly, armed men to join their party, both men had faces that could have been blocks of granite for all the warmth and expression in them. With their size and physiques, the men could give professional wrestling a try. The trio escorted her inside the mansion while she tried not to think about the amount of firepower each man carried.

Becca searched for a potential exit. Guards were stationed in groups of two at doorways and stairwells, each guy more terrifying than the next, with hard faces that probably wouldn't blink if she was shot dead where she stood. The further into the mansion she trod, the more Becca felt like she was heading to her own funeral. Bile threatened in the back of her throat. She hated that a part of her was impressed by the interior of the home because of the artwork on display. The paintings and sculptures were museum quality. If she wasn't mistaken, they passed an original Renoir.

The heels of Becca's black leather boots clicked against the

hardwood flooring. Her heart thumped in time with those clicks, like a ticking clock winding down to zero. Konrad and company ushered her up a grand staircase that made the one in *Gone with the Wind* look cheap and insignificant. At the top, they steered her to the right, down a wide hall with glossy hardwood floors and high ceilings.

When they reached the end of the hall, the two henchmen who had joined them opened a pair of double doors that must have belonged to a Buddhist temple at one time. Becca's clasped hands shook as she entered what amounted to a sitting room parlor with an enormous ivory marble hearth. The fire inside intended to ward off the chilly night couldn't make the cold terror in her bones dissipate. Every piece of furniture and décor in the parlor spoke of wealth. There was a Louis XIV desk in one corner. But the room held all the warmth of a mausoleum.

"Have a seat. The boss will be with you shortly," Konrad indicated in a bullish tone and pointed toward the chocolate Chesterfield sofas while his buddies shut the doors with a resounding thud and sealed them all inside. Sealed Becca inside. She assessed the room. Floor-to-ceiling inlaid shelves held first editions behind panes of glass. There was a vase on a pedestal that looked to be from the Ming Dynasty, or was at least an excellent reproduction. She studied her surroundings for a potential avenue of escape. The only way out would be to jump from the large crenelated windows. Two stories up, she could break something—like her neck. Only three guards were present in the room, odds that weren't great, but left her a fighting chance.

Konrad shifted his hand to the butt of his gun until she finally complied with his order. Even if she escaped past Konrad and his two buddies, jumped out the window and didn't break anything when she landed, the boatload of guards stationed over the grounds were far too numerous to outrun. The odds were not in her favor in making it to the gate and beyond for help.

Becca said a silent prayer at the echoing clomp of multiple

footsteps approaching. Her anxiety ratcheted up to cataclysmic levels.

The double doors swung inward. Becca wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, but it wasn't a relatively trim man with salt and pepper hair, dressed in gray tweed slacks and a button up navy cardigan sweater over his ivory dress shirt. He looked much more like a history professor than a criminal mastermind—at least, until you looked into his eyes. They were cold, devoid of any humanity or warmth, and calculating. Rudnikov assessed her from head to toe as she rose. That stare made her feel underdressed in her jeans and Kelly-green chenille sweater. A sense of helplessness invaded her soul. The uncertainty infused by doubt that she would live through the next hour.

Rudnikov didn't travel alone. He had four of his paid thugs guarding him. Becca skimmed her gaze over them. They were all similar in manner and form to Konrad, as if they had come off an assembly line. But it was the last man her gaze landed on who brought her up short. She kept her jaw from dropping to the floor, but just barely.

Quinten Blackthorne was a member of Anton Rudnikov's mob team? What the hell?

Not six weeks ago, she'd danced with the man at her brother's wedding. Quinten was an officer with the New Orleans Police Department and one of her brother's best friends. He'd been a groomsman in the wedding party, and had looked downright sinful in his tux, like a dark prince of the underworld.

Why was he here? What was he doing with Rudnikov?

Tonight, Quinten wore a charcoal gray suit, almost identical to the rest of the crime lord's hired goons. Shock flitted through his warm cognac eyes the moment his gaze landed on her. The man was mister badass personified. The utter confidence Quinten exuded in his pinky made the hired goons look laughable at best in their attempts to seem imposing. He was the alpha of alphas, top of the food chain, and he knew it. The suit,

combined with the ivory dress shirt, was unbuttoned at the neck and stretched over muscles that should be indecent. Becca knew that from experience. The night of the wedding, as he'd held her on the dance floor, she'd had the good fortune to feel those muscles flex beneath her hands. The man was ripped, and solid as a tank. He wore his hair, black as midnight, in a military style cut. And he had one of those masculine faces that tended to have perpetual dark stubble that, combined with his strong angular jaw, full lips and dark slash of eyebrows, only served to make him hotter. As in: five alarm fire, panties have disintegrated into ash and a woman was ready and willing to do whatever the man wanted.

"Miss O'Malley, a pleasure to meet you. I thank you for coming to meet with me on such short notice. I'm Anton Rudnikov. My associate, Sasha, speaks highly of you and your gallery. I admit, I've not had the chance to attend one of your showings, but I am impressed with your use of color in your art," Anton Rudnikov stated with a friendliness that belied the underlying air of hostility in the room.

"Thank you, Mister Rudnikov. You have a lovely home with some rather spectacular artwork. If I'm not mistaken, you have an original Renoir in your entryway." Becca redirected her attention to the mob boss. She shook his hand, hoping she was hiding the dread coursing through her.

"You've got a good eye. If we had more time, I would give you a tour," Rudnikov said with a frigid smile that didn't reach his eyes. Did that mean her time was running out?

Quinten marched up beside Rudnikov, directing a scowl her way. His fury was evident; he glowered, apparently angry that she was there. Well, that made two of them. Becca wasn't thrilled about the fact either. But he held her gaze, trying to impart some indistinct meaning that went straight over her stunned head. If she were being fanciful, she would have said he was pleading with her.

Quinten beg someone? Yeah, right.

She imagined even the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang moved out of Quinten's way when he approached. In front of the entire crime entourage, he snarled, "What the fuck are you doing here, Becca?"

Rudnikov glanced between them, speculative interest and suspicion in his dead gaze. "You two know each other, Quinten?"

Quinten grabbed her hand and squeezed her fingers. Hard. Like he was trying to pass along a meaning that she still didn't understand—mainly because her entire day had taken on a weird damn *Twilight Zone* bent, with danger and betrayal filtering in through every crack. Quinten, with her hand still gripped in his much larger one, turned to Rudnikov and said, "Yes, we do know each other. She's my fiancée, sir. She doesn't know that I work for you."

At the pressure on her hand, and Quinten's declaration, Becca stared at Quinten like he had gone mad. Fiancée? What the hell? What was the man playing at?

"Is that a fact? I don't see a ring on her hand," Rudnikov replied, his face an inscrutable mask.

That was it. They were dead. Her story would end, here, now, holding Quinten's hand. On the bright side, Becca thought, she wouldn't die alone. Tension oozed in the room. She froze, and even forgot to breathe. The guards had their hands in position against their firearms. Becca prayed she wouldn't pass out or pee in her pants in terror.

"That's because she's miffed with me. We had a fight the other night and she took it off. But she loves me." Quinten stared down at her from his six-foot plus height, his cognac gaze imparting a *play along* message while he pretended to be a man besotted.

Becca didn't understand—any of it. Not why Sasha had betrayed her trust, or whether Quinten was a dirty cop and only coming to her rescue because he was friends with her brother, or



whether the mob boss intended to let her walk out of his house alive.

“Is this true, Miss O’Malley?” Rudnikov asked like he was daring her to dispute Quinten’s outlandish claim.

Pain shot up her arm from her hand as Quinten squeezed. Becca tried to keep her expression serene. Doubt shrouded Rudnikov’s hard glare. Better to have the crime boss believe she was with Quinten than alone and at his mercy. With a silent prayer, she tossed her lot in with the devil she knew. “It’s true, Mister Rudnikov. I’m engaged to the big lug—for now, at least.”

“And why just for now?” Rudnikov’s stare made her want to squirm. But she held it together—barely. Staring Rudnikov in his eyes the color of mahogany, Becca knew what it was like to stare evil in the face. The man would have no qualms about ending her life, right here, right now. The bastard wouldn’t even flinch at the blood spilled in his ornate sitting room.

“Because the blasted man keeps dragging his heels. Any time I try to set a date, he gives me the runaround. He’s the one who proposed and made me all insane with wanting the whole fairy-tale wedding deal. It’s almost like he doesn’t want to marry me, and I took the ring off until he’s willing to set a date. And why didn’t you tell me about all this, sweetie?” She glanced at Quinten and found approval there.

Rudnikov chuckled and said in a deprecating manner, “Because business is the providence of men, Miss O’Malley... and to show that there are no hard feelings, I will help you young lovebirds out. I can’t have one of my men breaking a vow with my newest business associate, now can I? You’ll marry. Tonight, in fact. Robbie, call Father Vincent. Ask him to be here within the hour to perform a marriage ceremony.”

“But, but... I don’t think—” Becca sputtered. Marry Quinten? Was Rudnikov serious?

Quinten’s hold on her hand tightened even more. She wondered if she would have any bones left before the night was

over, or if they would crack into jagged pieces. Quinten protested, “Sir, that’s a generous offer. But she wants a big church wedding and I don’t—”

Rudnikov waved him off. “Nonsense. It will happen tonight. You can always do the fancy wedding later.”

Becca opened her mouth to refuse but shut it again at Rudnikov’s piercing glare. In the game of chicken, he had called their bluff and was waiting to strike. Becca moved closer to Quinten, choosing her side.

Quinten released her hand and slid his arm around her waist. It shouldn’t feel comforting. He was a dirty cop. He’d lied to all his friends. But she knew deep down, he was doing this to protect her. With a slight nod, Quinten replied, “Very good, sir. Thank you for giving us the opportunity. It will be a relief to have it done and legally make her mine. Perhaps then she won’t be mad at me all the time.”

“Not bloody likely, but you can dream, sweetie,” she replied even as he squeezed her waist.

Quinten loosened his grip and directed his attention to the mob boss. “If you don’t mind, I would like to speak to my fiancée in private before we say our vows. I need to apologize, and would rather she yell at me without an audience.”

Rudnikov shifted his suspicious gaze between them. “You have until Father Vincent arrives. You can use my library, down the hall and to the left.” The crime lord gestured toward the door, much like a king granting a boon to his subjects.

Quinten bowed his head in acknowledgement, totally playing the role of beta to Rudnikov’s alpha. The thing was, the Quinten Becca knew—or thought she had known—was entirely badass alpha. The man didn’t have a beta bone in his body. Then again, perhaps what little she did know about him had been fabricated, a façade he showed the world to hide that he was a dirty cop.

“Thank you, sir,” Quinten said then, without further ado, he steered her out of the sitting room.

## The Right to Remain Silent

Becca had a surplus of emotions surging inside her. Beyond tense. Beyond horrified. Beyond angry at his deceit. Her feet were like leaded weights on the journey down the hall. She expected Rudnikov to order his guards to shoot them in the back at any moment.

Married? She wasn't going to marry Quinten. No way, no how. Except... what choice did she have? Either she married him, or she died. She could die anyway, even if she did marry him. She wracked her brain for another option. But all she kept coming up with was door number one: she married Quinten in front of the crime lord and possibly met her maker, or door number two: the mob boss had his henchmen kill her.

If there was a door number three, one where she didn't die or end up married, or both, she prayed that she'd find it in the small reprieve of time they'd been given. Because without a door number three, she would be married before the night was done.

Married to Quinten? How the hell had she gotten here?