

Chapter One

Something's coming.

Charlie Moreaux, formerly Charlotte Finch, tucked a strand of long white-blond hair behind her ear, narrowing her eyes. This time of night, the party should have been in full swing, everyone a little too drunk, a little too loud. Instead, people kept to their tables and talked in low voices. It created a dull roar within the faded wood-paneled walls of the bar, but nothing close to what it would have been on any other weekend night. She picked her way around the full tables, ignoring the handful of regulars who tried to catch her eye.

Jacques nodded at her. The old man had taken a liking to her from the first time she'd wandered in here, scraping rock bottom and halfway down the road to drinking herself to death. He was the one who'd pulled her back into the land of the living, who'd inadvertently put her on the path to retribution.

Charlie leaned against the bar. "Weird mood tonight."

"It's a full moon."

No one tracked full moons like ER nurses and bartenders.

Jacques poured two healthy shots of whiskey and set one on the faded wood of the bar in front of her. "You're as edgy as they are."

"Yeah, I know. No specific reason." She downed the whiskey, but the warmth curling through her stomach did nothing to battle her nerves. Intuition or superstition, she couldn't shake the feeling of fate hurtling down the tracks, pointed directly at her.

Her first clue that something had gone wrong was a hush falling in a wave behind her. Charlie didn't spin around, despite the feeling of eyes on her. Her attention fell to Jacques, as still as a rabbit facing down a wolf. He spoke low, but the words reached her easily in the new quiet of the bar. "You know I love you, girl, but you're gonna have to take this one outside."

I was right. Trouble's come, and it's here for me.

She turned slowly, still fighting against the instinct to spin, and propped her elbows on the bar as if she hadn't noticed the change in the room. Trouble stood in the doorway, his broad shoulders filling the frame. The neon lights of the bar signs didn't quite reach his face, though they highlighted his square jaw. She didn't have to see his eyes to know he was looking at her.

She could *feel* it. And the danger was just as intense as it had been a year ago when he'd first come to find her.

Aiden O'Malley.

"I'll take care of it." Charlie put enough authority into her voice that Jacques wouldn't question her. This was her problem, and she wasn't about to bring the old bartender into it. She shrugged a little, testing the weight of her holster beneath her leather jacket.

She pushed away from the bar, stalking toward Aiden. In her six-inch heels, she was almost his height, but even the fancy suit didn't hide the fact that he was *cut*. It wasn't just the size of his shoulders. It was in the way his thigh muscles pressed against his slacks when he shifted. Utterly cold and contained, he watched her watch him.

Standing across from him made her feel...vulnerable. She didn't like that. She didn't like that shit one bit. "Outside," she snapped.

He took a step back and then another, allowing her to lead him outside and down the street.

Aiden kept his hands at his sides and away from any weapon he had on him. It was designed to make her feel at ease, but it only ramped up her tension. The man had come here for her. Pretending that he wasn't dangerous just meant he wanted her to underestimate him.

Fat chance of that happening.

Charlie wrapped her arms around herself, sliding her fingers along the butt of her 9mm. The feeling of metal warmed by her body comforted her. She'd defended herself before against worse than Aiden and his bodyguard. She could do it again if she had to. "Why are you here?"

Why now? Why wait an entire year to come back around?

"I said I'd be back for you. And now it's time. We're going to take down Romanov— together."

The old anger that she'd never quite escaped rose, threatening to drown her. She made herself let go of her gun and drop her arms to make sure she didn't do something regrettable, like shoot this damn idiot who'd decided to walk into her life to throw her past in her face. "Maybe I've gotten over it and moved on with my life."

She hadn't. She didn't think she'd ever be able to move past what Dmitri Romanov had done. She'd spent the last twelve months poking at the few people on the force who'd actually still talk to her, but no one could—or would—answer her questions on why it was taking so long to build a case against the Russian crime lord who ruled the city.

He'd never see trial. Not for what he'd done to others, and sure as hell not for what he'd done to her.

Four years. An eternity and no time at all. Cops had long memories, and there wasn't a single one in the NYPD who thought she was innocent. How could they when the evidence was so damning?

Aiden's green eyes flicked over her face, taking in every response, though she'd long ago trained herself not to give anything away. "I don't believe it."

"I could care less what you believe." There were several reasons the head of one of Boston's Irish organized-crime families would be in a shitty little bar in New York seeking her out, and none of them were good for her. Charlie turned to him, taking in the slight tension in his shoulders that hadn't been there when he'd first shown up. *Don't like being told no, do you?*

Well, too damn bad for him. "For the last time, why are you here? Why me?"

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Aiden O'Malley figured he should be grateful Charlotte hadn't pulled the gun on him that she kept touching like a security blanket. He hadn't really thought she'd fall all over herself to agree to help him—especially since she hadn't called him once during the last twelve months—but her cutting through all his bullshit didn't bode well.

He'd never had a problem getting people to do exactly what he wanted—whether he needed to force them or they only required a subtle nudge—but he couldn't do that with Charlotte Finch. He needed her to agree to help him of her own free will, or a vital part of his plan would fall to pieces.

It had taken him twelve months to get his dominoes in place and ready to knock down. The balance of power between the three Boston ruling families—the O'Malleys, the Hallorans, and the Sheridans—was as stable as it would ever be. The feds had backed off enough that he could breathe. Even Dmitri Romanov had been lulled into a false truce at the chance of bringing down a new player in the game.

The Eldridges.

They couldn't have timed their power grab better if Aiden had conjured them himself. All of it added up to a confrontation he knew he could win—if he played his cards right, he could remove the threat of both Romanov and the feds in a single strike.

But to do it, he needed Charlotte.

So he weighed his odds and, after careful consideration, decided being blunt was his best option. “You’re familiar with the Eldridge operations.” She’d worked the organized-crime unit in the NYPD, so there was no way she *didn't* know about them, at least in passing, but she wasn't going to trust him if he didn't slow-play this.

If she was smart, she wouldn't trust him even then.

Her step hitched almost imperceptibly. “They’re run by Alethea Eldridge and her daughter, Mae. Scary, scary ladies, who have a habit of making their competition disappear, though no one has ever been able to put together enough evidence to pin anything on them. Their main income is from drugs—heroin mostly—though they dabble in gunrunning and human trafficking when it suits their purposes. They’re small players in the overall New York scene.”

“Not anymore. Romanov has made a deal with them—a deal he has no intention of following through on.” Or so said the dossier Aiden had gotten from Jude MacNamara. Yes, he'd sold his sister Sloan for information on his enemy—a weight he'd never truly be free of. It didn't matter that Sloan had chosen Jude. If Aiden had paid better attention, she wouldn't have been put in that situation to begin with.

He wouldn't allow it to happen with his youngest sister Keira.

He didn't trust this unexpected opportunity from Romanov any more than he trusted anything in life, but he'd be a fool to pass up the chance to put his plan into motion.

“How could you possibly know what Romanov intends?”

“It doesn’t matter how. All that matters is that it’s the truth.” He understood her disbelief. Dmitri Romanov was about as easy to pin down as smoke. Aiden had spent the last twelve months verifying Jude’s information and looking for other options, but Romanov wasn’t the kind of man to leave bread crumbs that could be connected to him and his operations. Even with the sheer amount of intel Jude had on him, there was nothing concrete that could be used against him.

Or there hadn’t been until Romanov himself called Aiden.

Charlotte paused, and he stopped next to her. There was a distant look in her blue eyes. “Even if it’s true, I don’t see how I play into it.”

“You know the Eldridges. You know Romanov. You know what they will or won’t do in any given situation.”

“So do quite a few other people.”

She wasn’t saying no, so he pressed. “None of those people are as uniquely motivated as you are in seeing Dmitri Romanov taken out at the knees. The O’Malley family barely registers on your radar. You have no reason to double-cross me, because I’ll be giving you what you desire above all else.”

“And, pray tell, what is that?”

He had her—hook, line, and sinker. She just didn’t know it yet. Aiden just had to reel her in. “Justice.”

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Justice.

The word rang through Charlie like a bell, and something deep inside her responded. For whatever reason, this man wanted Romanov's downfall as much as she did—possibly more, if he was scraping the bottom of the barrel for *her* help.

She knew what her dad would say. John Finch had a very low opinion of anyone even remotely connected with organized crime, and Aiden O'Malley was the head of his family. *He's as much a snake as Romanov, and getting into bed with one evil to bring down another won't solve anything.*

That didn't change the truth.

And the damn truth was that she'd been living half a life for four years. Even after Jacques saved her and gave her a purpose, no matter how small, she still hadn't bounced back. The drive she'd had ever since she was a child—the desire to be a force of good in the world and to stop bad people from doing bad things—it was gone. It'd disappeared right around the time that Romanov won.

The bad guys won.

She'd learned the hard way that life wasn't a fairy tale, and good didn't always triumph over evil. Sometimes a compelling lie was sought above a harsh truth.

"I'll do it." She didn't give herself a chance to think too hard on it. Her dad had stopped being proud of her four years ago. One more disappointment wasn't going to break him.

Probably.

He hadn't been able to salvage her reputation after she was branded a dirty cop. No one inside the law had. If Charlie couldn't fix *that*, at least she could ensure that Romanov went down in flames as retribution.

She pressed her lips together. "What, exactly, am I agreeing to do?"

Aiden moved to a dark town car that had pulled up, and opened the back door. “Get in and I’ll tell you everything.” When she hesitated, he gave a mirthless smile. “Look around, Charlotte. If I was up to no good, I could have hurt you at any time.”

“Charlie.” She’d responded without thinking, even as she did what he said. They’d wandered several blocks away from the bar. He could have cut her throat right here and no one would have sprung to assist her—and they certainly wouldn’t have talked to the cops if they’d seen something. Even if Jacques had sent Billy out after her, they were too far away for him to rescue her.

Just as well. She didn’t need rescuing. “I don’t trust you.”

“You shouldn’t.”

Somehow, that eased her distrust a little. His offer—whatever it entailed—wasn’t too good to be true. Enemy of her enemy or not, this man was not a good man.

I’m not much of a good woman anymore, either. She’d tried—tried so damn hard it’d almost killed her—but when push came to shove, the very justice system in place to protect the innocent had worked against her.

She lost everything as a result—because of Romanov.

She climbed into the backseat and scooted over so Aiden could join her. He dominated the small space in a way he hadn’t on the street, and she realized he’d been containing himself. Even now, he hadn’t exactly let himself off the leash, but he’d stopped trying so hard.

Or maybe this is just another version of Aiden O’Malley—this one designed to put me at ease.

She couldn’t trust the change. She couldn’t trust *him*.

She took a short breath, inhaling his clean scent, which made her think of snow-topped mountains—beautiful and clear and deadly to anyone who tried to conquer them. “I won’t kill anyone.” She wasn’t *that* far gone.

He chuckled, the sound curling through the space between them like a living thing. “Believe me, if that was my main goal, I have several people better suited.” He shot her a look. “Theoretically, of course.”

“Theoretically. Sure.” She looked around the inside of the town car. It reeked of understated wealth. The leather seats were as soft as butter, and there was a retractable window between the backseat and the driver. With it raised, she couldn’t see more than an outline of the man’s head. It was entirely possible they were taking her to a secondary location for nefarious purposes, but Aiden had had a point earlier. Knowing that he could have tried to kill her several times over during their walk shouldn’t have comforted her—but it did.

Charlie leaned back against the seat, rotating to face him fully. “You have me alone and at your mercy. Enough circling. What, exactly, do you want from me?”

Heat flared in his eyes, a fierce flame of interest that she’d have to be extremely naive to misinterpret. He banked it almost immediately, the cool mask back in place, but it had been there. She was sure of it.

Aiden looked out the window. “As I said, I need your information, and I need you to be a distraction.”

“A *distraction*.” What the hell was he talking about?

“Yes.” His mouth tightened. “I need my enemies—*our* enemies—to underestimate both of us.”

She tensed. “If you need a *distraction*, then you should have hired someone better suited to the job. I’m not a sideshow circus freak.”

“I’m aware.” He finally looked at her again, and his expression was no less intense, for all that he seemed to be trying to rein himself in. “There is no one else, Charlie. You know the players, and you know what’s at risk if we fail. As a relative unknown in this game, you can move through them without raising suspicions. But you have a brain.” He reached out and touched her temple.

She swatted his finger away, not liking the fact that she could feel his finger against her skin even after he no longer touched her.

Even as a so-called distraction, it didn’t make sense that he’d need her. But she hadn’t made much progress in her own investigation, though she’d had access to several decades’ worth of police files. Charlie narrowed her eyes. It would be child’s play for Aiden to get a hold of those files. If he didn’t have ins with the NYPD, his family did with the Boston cops. All it would take was a favor asked by one of the cops on his payroll and he’d have all the information she had—more, since there had undoubtedly been new information in the last four years.

It didn’t make any more sense any than his supposedly needing her to be a distraction did.

There was something there, something she was missing. She crossed her legs. “Elaborate.” The more she got him talking, the better chance she had of figuring out his true purpose in inviting her into his game.

“Romanov wants my baby sister. The reasons behind it are complicated, but the end result is that if I push back, he will take us to war, and both New York and Boston will bleed as a

result. While there are benefits to war, our family has lost more than its fair share in casualties, and I refuse to lose another person.”

It sounded quite noble...if she forgot who she was talking to.

Aiden O'Malley and Dmitri Romanov were two sides of the same coin. Aiden wasn't some white knight charging in to deliver justice to her out of the goodness of his heart. She hadn't been able to find out much about the O'Malleys, but they had a reputation for being ruthless and they'd ruled one-third of Boston's underground for a few generations, which was impressive when considering how often power changed hands in other cities. She studied his button-down shirt, taking in the cuff links glinting at his wrists. *Cuff links, for God's sake.* “I'm still missing the part where you need me.”

He met her gaze directly. “You'll be my fiancée.”

“Are you out of your goddamn mind? Getting *married* is your brilliant plan? That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard.”

“Calm down. I'm not actually marrying you, so you can get that look off your face. The only way you can move freely—relatively speaking—in my world is if you're mine. A girlfriend won't cut it—an engagement is required.”

“Don't tell me to calm down.” She made an effort to smooth out her tone. They'd been talking a grand total of ten minutes, and the fact that he'd had every emotion and reaction locked down only made her feel crazier. “I don't want to move in your world.”

He didn't seem too bothered by her shock and denial. “If people think that it's a whirlwind romance, they'll believe that I'm thinking with my cock instead of my brain. The frenzy at the beginning of a relationship distracts even the most focused person, and Romanov

will know it—and underestimate the situation as a result. You'll have to be convincing, of course. Not even my family can know your true purpose there.”

It was an effort to pick her jaw up off the floor. She'd known he was desperate—he'd have to be to come to her twice—but she hadn't reckoned on him being insane. “No one is going to believe for a second that you fell head over heels for a *cop*—”

“Dirty cop, according to your record, and that's if anyone digs deeply enough to figure out that you aren't Charlie Moreaux.”

She ignored that. “Even if they did believe that, there's still the complete fiction that we're in love. No. Absolutely not. There has to be another way.” She pinched the bridge of her nose, thinking hard. “Your bodyguard. I can be your bodyguard.”

“Out of the question. My family would be less likely to believe that I replaced Liam than they would be that I fell for a former dirty cop—and Romanov certainly wouldn't buy it. Not to mention, bringing in outside security is a giant red flag that would have him watching me *more* closely instead of less.”

“I don't care. Figure out something else.”

Aiden studied her. “What is it about being my fiancée that bothers you so much?”

She didn't even know where to start, so she went with the first thing to pop into her head.

“How about the fact that I'm not going to sleep with you?”

He barked out a laugh. “You don't have to sleep with me, Charlie. You just have to pretend.” Just like that, all amusement was gone from his face, the intensity of his eyes leaving her breathless. He reached across the meager distance between them and captured her chin. Her heart tried to beat out of her chest as he leaned forward until his breath ghosted across her lips.

“No one would believe for a second that I’d wait for marriage to have you in my bed, and so you’ll be in my bed. But I won’t touch you without permission.”

She licked her lips, her skin too tight, her nipples pebbling until they almost hurt. If he’d looked down, he would have seen them pressing against the thin fabric of her shirt. But Aiden didn’t look down, didn’t drag his gaze away from her lips. His voice dropped to something akin to a growl. “It’s just pretend, Charlie. You can pretend to want me, can’t you?”

She squeezed her thighs together, but the move did nothing to alleviate the ache growing between them. *Oh God.* She tried counting to ten, but lost her place halfway through. There was only Aiden and his clear mountain scent filling the back of the town car.

He won’t touch me without permission. Do not give him permission. Some things you can’t come back from.

She held perfectly still, a rabbit in a trap, and when she spoke, she was pathetically grateful that she sounded mostly unaffected. “I think I’ll manage.”

“Good.” His lips curved a little. “Then we can begin.”