



STOLEN. BROKEN.
CORRUPTED.

DECEPTION TRILOGY **PREQUEL**

DARK DECEPTION

RINA KENT

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OceanofPDF.com

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To the lovers of villains.

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AUTHOR NOTE

Hello reader friend,

If you haven't read my books before, you might not know this, but I write darker stories that can be upsetting and disturbing. My books and main characters aren't for the faint of heart.

Dark Deception is the prequel of a trilogy and is not standalone.

Deception Trilogy:

#0 Dark Deception

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#2 Tempted by Deception

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BLURB

Stolen. Broken. Corrupted.

Being born a leader taught me one thing.

I take what I want.

Including the lone rose who's struggling to survive on the streets.

Only I'm no knight and I won't do any saving.

If anything, I'm the nightmare she can't wake up from.

The monster she can't escape.

The devil she can't fight.

I'm the blood that'll be coating her pure petals.

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PROLOGUE

Death can come in the form of a doppelgänger.
There's this myth as old as time that says when you meet someone who looks just like you, one of you will die.

Who is the question.

Who would die first? Me or her?

According to the myth, the first to see the other one is bound to meet their end. In the same decade. Same year. Perhaps even the same day.

I lift my trembling hands and stare at the blood coating them, intertwining with my fingers and crawling under my nails.

Oh.

I think this means I saw her first. I made eye contact first.

What bad luck. But I guess I've never had the good type. Not when I was born, and certainly not when I was shoved into this life.

My attention remains on the deep crimson covering my hands like a second skin. It's thick, sticky, and its dark color burns in my head. I rub my palms together to wipe it off, but that doesn't make it better. If anything, the fresh, warm blood smears further, as if it's already chosen my hands as a permanent place of residence.

I screw my eyes shut, dragging in sharp intakes of air. The sound is raspy, guttural, grating on the surface of my lungs with long rusty nails.

That's okay. When I open my eyes, I'll wake up. This isn't real. It's only my wild imagination and my superstition joining forces to torture my mind.

It. Is. Not. Real.

My lids feel like they've been glued together when they part from each other.

The blood is still the same—warm, sticky, and almost black due to the lack of light. I clench my fists, my body turning rigid as a taut whip.

Wake up. Wake the fuck up.

My nails dig into my palms, but nothing I do pulls me out. Nothing stops this nasty cycle.

I lift my head and study my surroundings. Savage trees envelop me like a cocoon. They're so tall that the dark sky is barely visible through the small opening overhead.

Clouds condense over the moon's silver hue, and I shiver. The thin sweater over my cotton dress barely protects me from the chill.

Feeling the cold should be a good sign, but it isn't. It's not a clear indication of whether or not this is real.

The blood on my hands won't disappear and neither will the tremor shooting through my body.

He is after me.

If he finds me, he'll kill me.

I squeeze my eyelids together and count aloud, "Three, two, one."

When I open them again, the trees are the same and so is the chill. The blood is colder now. Thicker. *Stickier*. Like a demon's possessing my mind and is starting with my hands.

No.

I dig my nails into the long scar on my wrist and claw at the skin as hard as I can, intending to remove it and peer under it. To see the blood actually flowing, to differentiate this nightmare from reality.

If there's no pain, then this is not real. It's only another cruel manifestation of my subconscious and another self-punishment. Soon, it'll be all over and I'll wake up, safe and sound.

My skin breaks under the assault of my nails and searing pain explodes on the injury.

My mouth parts and a tear hangs from my lid.

This is real.

This is not a nightmare. I didn't sleep and wake up in hell. I went there with my own two feet.

No.

No...

My dry lips tremble as a few droplets of blood fall from my wound and join the massacre on my hands.

This much blood can only mean one thing.

I took a life.

My demons finally won.

They're silent now, not even attempting to whisper those malicious things, those thoughts that have plagued me day and night. They rose in volume, crashing and clawing at the confines of my head until I heard them.

Until I made their wish come true.

"I'm not a murderer. Not a murder..." I murmur the words to myself. Maybe if I keep doing it, I can undo what happened.

Maybe I can go back and change it.

I stare up at the gloomy, bleak sky, tears clinging to my lids. "If there's someone out there, please let me go back to change it. I'm not this person. Don't let me be this person. Please..."

Only the howling wind answers me, its sound echoing in the empty forest like vengeful spirits with yellow eyes and gaping mouths.

"P-please..." I beg. "Please stop torturing me with my own self. Please."

I know my pleas have no effect whatsoever, but it's the last hope I can hold on to. The last thread that can save me. Because I desperately need saving right now.

And I don't trust myself to do it anymore. If I try, I'll just make it worse. I'll spiral out of control and slide down the path of no return.

Next thing I know, I'll be my own demons.

I'll be my own downfall.

I'll be the thing I've run away from my entire life.

"Please make it stop." My voice chokes and I sniffle. "Please. I'll do anything."

This time, the wind isn't my answer. The shuffling of footsteps comes from around the trees.

My feet falter and I stop breathing. My demons couldn't have found me this soon.

Though...*wait*. This is reality. My demons don't show up in reality. That means the footsteps belong to someone more dangerous than them.

I spin around and sprint ahead, elbowing the low branches out of my way. The fallen leaves crunch under my flat shoes, but I don't stop to think

about the sound I'm making—which gives a clear indication of where I am. That's not important right now. If I'm caught, I'll be killed.

Actually, my fate will be a lot worse than death.

Live. You're a fighter. You were born to live.

Mom's words echo in my head, charging me with a large dose of adrenaline. I have to live and stay that way for both of us.

I need to live.

The footsteps grow closer with every passing second until their thudding is right behind me. I don't look back or even try to. Instead, I use the trees as camouflage, dashing between them so fast, my tendons cry out in pain.

If my pattern is irregular, he won't find me. If I'm unpredictable, I'll be able to escape death's clutches.

I was taught to never take the short end of the stick or have less than what I deserve. It's ironic that *he* taught me that but is now coming after me.

So ironic.

The trees clear out and I come to a screeching halt at the top of a cliff. Pebbles escape from under my feet and roll down over the huge boulders and finally to the dark, murky water that's crashing against the rocks. The sound of raging waves echoes in the air like a symphony of death.

The sky is completely cloudy now, casting a gloomy shadow on the angry sea.

As I peer down, a strange yet familiar thought plays at the back of my head.

It would be so easy to end it. So easy.

One step is all it takes. One step and I'll drown my demons with my own hands.

One step and I'll kill them once and for all, so they'll never come out again.

"Do it."

A shudder zaps through my spine at the sinister voice coming from behind me.

He found me.

I whirl around so fast, I lose my footing and swing backward. I reach out to him and grip his arm with both hands, nails digging into his shirt. Blood smears on the light gray cloth as evidence of my desperation to live.

He's motionless, like a cold statue, as I remain suspended in mid-air. His face is shadowed and I can't see anything except the contours of his jawline and hair.

Since I know he won't make a move to help me, I try to use my hold on his sleeve to pull myself up.

"You ended a life." His calm yet threatening tone stops me in my tracks. I shake my head violently. "I d-didn't want to."

"It still happened."

"No, please...don't..."

"Die for your sins." He yanks his hand free and I stumble backward and down the cliff.

I open my mouth to shriek, but no sound comes out. The fall isn't as painful as I expected it to be. If anything...it's peaceful.

After taking one last look at the silhouette peering down on me, I close my eyes, letting the tears loose.

It's finally the end.

ADRIAN

Being brought up a certain way forces certain expectations. Sometimes, they're the easier type where all you have to do is go with the tide. Others, it's all about taking action.

I learned early on that taking action is proportional and depends on a set of predefined circumstances.

Acting too soon or too late can cause tragedy.

Refusing to take action in the first place is the main cause of self-annihilation.

Being birthed by monsters and raised among them had taught me a valuable lesson.

Never let my guard down.

If I do, other creatures of the dark would feast on my weaknesses. They won't hesitate to drag me down to the road of no return.

Or so they wish.

They'd have to reach me to touch me. They'd have to possess the ability to look me in the eyes and not tremble in fear.

They'd have to reach my level of power.

After losing everything as a kid and being raised in the ranks of the New York Bratva, I had to be smart about acquiring power. I couldn't be too obvious because that would trigger my father's suspicions.

He'd think that I'm after his rank and title, his power and assets. And while that's true, it's not even the beginning of it.

Georgy Volkov is one of the brotherhood's four kings and has been for decades, from before I was born. He shares an easy friendship with the

Pakhan, Nikolai, and the rest of the leaders.

They look up to him with a reverence that he earned by massacring traitors in cold blood. Even if one of those traitors was a defenseless woman.

While I'm his only son and heir, Georgy is smart enough to be wary of me. His guards watch me more than they watch outsiders, and he's often shipping me off to Russia or Eastern European countries, so I don't grow roots here.

The last exile was my enlistment in the Russian military special forces with the guards that he recruited to keep an eye on me since I was young.

That was his mistake.

While the Spetsnaz was brutal, it hardened my mind and purged out whatever humanity lurked inside me.

It made me the monster he wanted me to be since I was a boy.

And unfortunately for my father, monsters don't give two fucks about who they eradicate in their path toward their goals.

Monsters take until there's nothing left.

He's older now, in his fifties. It's time for me to take over willingly or unwillingly.

I sit beside him in a closed meeting with the *Pakhan*, the other leaders of the brotherhood, and some heads of the Italian families.

Dozens of guards occupy the private restaurant room, all armed and scowling even when their bosses are drinking and plotting an upcoming drug shipment.

I wouldn't usually be allowed in these meetings, but I'm the one who brought forward intel about a coup being plotted in one of the South American cartels.

In my plot to bring down my father's reign, I've been investing in hackers and behind-the-scene players. I've been slowly but surely building my arsenal with the help of my confidant and right arm, Kolya.

My father assigned him on a mission to watch me, but it's been a long time since Kolya switched sides.

When we found out about the South American cartel, I didn't hand that information to my father on a golden platter and instead spoke directly to the *Pakhan*. Nikolai appreciated the gesture and has been looking at me with respect.

Something I'll use in my favor.

The brotherhood and the Italian leaders are arguing about whose side to pick in the upcoming battle. Some are saying that we should stick behind the current boss because he's been ruling for a long time and has several loyal lieutenants. Others are arguing that we should back the coup because he has more ammo and traitors within the cartel.

My father is on the first side. He always went for the most obvious solutions, even if it meant destroying everyone's lives.

In the midst of all the bickering and arguments, the *Pakhan's* sharp gaze falls on me. He's older than my father and his features are covered by a sheen of the wisdom he acquired over the decades.

Nikolai Sokolov has been one of the founding members of the *bratva* in Russia back in USSR's times and his line is considered nobility in the *Bratva*. A fact everyone in this brotherhood brags about.

Nikolai twirls his drink. "What do you think, Adrian?"

I can feel my father stiffen beside me as silence echoes around us. Since I'm under Georgy Volkov's umbrella, my opinion shouldn't matter to the *Pakhan*, and yet, he asked for it. The reason is simple: I proved myself worthy to have an opinion.

"Shut your fucking mouth," my father hisses under his breath so only I can hear.

He knows I'm a threat.

Good.

This isn't the first time that I brought something to the table and Nikolai skipped over my father to ask for my opinion.

"Neither," I say calmly.

Others start to argue, but Nikolai raises a hand, demanding quiet. "Explain."

"If we take any side, it'll be a gamble because, at this point, both leaders have enough allies to eradicate the other. In case of our involvement, we might pick up enemies we don't need, especially with other cartels we plan to collaborate with in the future. I suggest that we wait some more, watch the scene, and only when we're sure the favors are dipping to a winner do we pick a side."

Appreciative murmurs break in the room. My father visibly clenches his hand around his glass of whiskey, and I can almost hear the earful he'll give me later for not telling him about my argument.

The times where my father took credit for my contributions are over.

“We will go with that,” Nikolai announces ever so casually. “Adrian, keep an eye on the cartels’ internal affairs and report back to me.”

“Will do.”

“I can do it,” my father interrupts.

“Adrian will.” The *Pakhan* stands, swiftly indicating the end of the meeting.

The shuffle of feet mingles with chatter as everyone stands up.

My father glares at me over his shoulder as he follows after his boss. I take my time and only exit the room after the rest of the leaders.

I’m not worried about Georgy’s attempt to persuade Nikolai. Once the *Pakhan* has made a decision, it’s absolute.

“Congrats, Boss,” Kolya whispers, falling in step right behind me.

He’s a tall man with thick muscles and a permanent scowl. His blond hair is still buzzed short from the special forces days.

“It’s not the time to celebrate yet, Kolya. This is only the beginning.”

“A very promising one. The *Pakhan* didn’t even think twice before giving you the mission.”

Which is why my dear father is scared.

At this rate, his ending is near.

We join everyone in front of the restaurant. I pause when I make out a black van slowing down near the entrance.

“Everyone down,” I yell in Russian.

It happens fast.

The van’s window lowers and then the loud bangs of gunshots reverberates in the fucking air.

I stare in Nikolai’s direction since he’s usually the target of assassination attempts. The strongest pillar always is.

My father doesn’t hesitate as he jumps in front of his boss, using his body as a shield.

I watch as the first bullet punctures his chest, then the second follows, and the third. I stop counting after the fifth.

His blank eyes roll to the back of his head as the guards pull Nikolai from behind him, leaving my father’s corpse lying on the floor.

He’s dead.

My father is dead.

And yet, I feel nothing.

It’s all thanks to him, really.

The only reason I'm unable to mourn him or feel any sort of grief is because he killed that side of me when I was a kid.

I don't think twice as I rush to my car waiting for us not far from the van that's now speeding down the road.

Kolya and I are barely inside as the driver kicks the vehicle into gear.

"Follow that van," I order with a calm that sounds twisted, robotic even.

We leave the chaos behind as we chase the van. It doesn't take us long to corner them.

They're not really that professional and must be some small-time bastards who have a grudge against Nikolai.

When you're powerful, the world is your enemy.

Life is your bitch.

That's exactly what I strive to be.

We corner the van near an empty, industrialized road with abandoned warehouses.

They open fire, but Kolya and I are faster. Our shots hit their wheels and they swerve before banging against the wall of a warehouse.

We storm out of the car, not giving them a chance to recover. Two men stumble out of the van, shaking their bloodied heads and holding AK-41s.

Kolya shoots the first between the head and he drops dead. I don't blink or attempt to take the kill.

I might use violence to my benefit, but I don't get off on it or seek it out.

Violence, just like everything else, is a means to an end.

A method to get things done.

Those who thrive on it become addicted to it, and I don't allow myself to get consumed by anything.

Or anyone.

Kolya easily disarms the other guard and hauls him to his knees in front of me. I don't even bring out my gun.

"Who sent you?"

"Fuck you," he snarls with an accented English then spits blood at my leather shoes.

"Fuck you isn't an answer. Either give me one or I will find your family and make them watch as they're being tortured and killed."

That does it.

Bringing up the family always breaks them. And it's why people like me can climb the ranks higher.

We have nothing that weakens us, no beloved ones to go back to, and certainly no people that control our fate.

We always go up while everyone else stays down.

After he finishes selling out his boss, the bastard in front of me stares up. "Go ahead and kill me, but one day, you will be killed, too, Volkov."

"That day isn't today. Thank you for killing my father for me." I bring out my gun and shoot him between the eyes.

Now, nothing and no one will stop me.

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ADRIAN

The scent of roses has morphed into the stench of death.
I stare down at the blood gushing from her wounds, at the life stubbornly leaving her body without pause or second thoughts.

The red color is marring her fair skin, painting rivulets down her arms and legs and contouring her soft face.

Her eyes are open, but she's not looking at me. Their blue is blank, vanished, already existing someplace else where I don't belong.

I cradle her head in my arms, gently stroking her dark brown hair. Lifting a wet strand, I inhale deeply, searching for what's possibly my last fix of roses. It doesn't matter if they're thorny and would prick me in the process. The method holds no importance to me as long as I get things done.

What greets me is the furthest thing from roses. It's not even death. It's worse.

Nothingness.

Numbness.

A place where she can't and won't feel me. Where she ended everything just so she could seal her heart and her soul.

Just so she could...disappear.

I sweep her hair away from her face and brush my lips over her forehead. "I'll find you again."

People say death is the end.

For me, it's only the beginning.

WINTER

I think I've stopped feeling.

It's not that I've turned off my emotions, but I'm pretty sure I've lost sense in my hands and feet.

I can almost see the blisters from the cold on my fingers inside my torn gloves and between my toes that are covered with old socks and man shoes that are a size too big, making my feet slouch with every step I take. The frigid air is even moving past the barrier of my four thin sweaters and the coat that's three sizes too big.

Snow season hit hard this year in New York City. I feel like I'm a walking snowman with the weight of the clothes I'm wearing. None of them feel soft or protective enough, but it's better than dying from hypothermia.

It'd be ironic if I died from the cold when my name is Winter.

Is Fate a little too cynical, or what? He must have thought of this moment when he whispered to my mom that she should name me after the coldest, harshest season.

Fate also chose the worst state to throw me in. Not only are the winters here cold, windy, and wet as hell, but the summers are also unbearable with all the humidity.

But who am I to complain? At least here, I can slip through the crowd unnoticed.

As if I don't exist.

Invisibility is a powerful tool. In a city that harbors over eight million residents, it's actually easy for someone like me to go unnoticed.

The cold forces me to stand out more, though. As I walk down the wet streets among the hundreds of thousands of people, I get looks sometimes. They're not always out of pity—oftentimes, they're judgmental. I can hear them say, *You could've done better, young lady*.

But most New Yorkers are so desensitized that they don't give a flying fuck about a nobody like me.

I try not to focus on the people exiting bakeries with takeout, but I can't ignore the divine smells that waft past me. I open my mouth, then close it as if that will get me a taste of the goodies.

If only I could have some hot soup right now or a warm piece of bread.

I swallow the saliva that forms in my mouth at the thought. Whenever I'm starved and don't have access to food, I picture a table full of delicious meals and pretend that I'm feasting on them. But my stomach just believes it for half a minute before it starts growling again.

It's hard to deceive that one.

As hungry as I am, however, what I'd really love is more to drink.

I lift the can of beer that's wrapped in a brown paper bag and down the rest of it. There goes the final drops that were supposed to get me through my day.

It's only the afternoon and I haven't eaten for the last...when was it again? Two days?

Maybe I should go back to the shelter for a meal and a piece of bread...

I dismiss the thought as soon as it comes. I will never return to that place, not even if I have to sleep on the streets. I guess I should search for another shelter where I can spend the rest of the winter or else I'll really freeze to death outside.

My feet come to a halt in front of a framed poster hanging on the side of a building. I don't know why I stop.

I shouldn't.

I don't—usually.

I don't stop and stare, because that would draw attention to me and ruin my chances of having invisibility superpowers.

But for reasons unknown, I halt this time. My empty can is nestled between my gloved fingers, suspended in mid-air as I study the ad.

The poster is for the New York City Ballet, advertising one of their performances. The entirety of it is occupied by a woman wearing a wedding

dress and standing on pointe. A veil covers her face, but it's transparent enough to distinguish the sadness, the harshness, the...despair.

'Giselle' is written in script over her head. At the bottom are the names of the director and the prima ballerina, Hannah Max, as well as the other ballerinas participating in the show.

I blink once, and for a second, I can see my reflection in the glass. My coat swallows my small frame and my oversized high-top sneakers resemble clown shoes. My faux fur winter hat covers my ears, and my blonde hair is disheveled and greasy, its ends hidden inside my coat. My hat is pushed back a little, revealing my dark roots. Feeling somehow subconscious, I pull the hood of my coat over my head, allowing it to shadow my face.

Now I look like a serial killer.

Ha. I'd laugh if I could. A serial killer is smart enough to not end up on the streets. They're smart enough to not drown so much in alcohol that sustaining a job becomes impossible.

I blink again and the poster returns to view. Giselle. Ballet. Prima ballerina.

A sudden urge to gouge the woman's eyes out overwhelms me. I inhale, then exhale. I shouldn't have such a strong reaction toward a stranger.

I hate her. I hate Hannah Max and Giselle and ballet.

Spinning around, I leave before I'm tempted to smash the poster to the ground.

I crumple the can and toss it in a nearby trash can. This change of mood isn't good—at all.

It's because of the lack of alcohol in my system. I haven't had enough beer today to get drunk in the daylight. The cold becomes more tolerable when my mind is numb. My thoughts aren't as loud and I don't get murderous feelings over a harmless ballet poster.

I absentmindedly cross the street like I do every day. It's become my routine, and I don't even pay attention to it anymore.

That's my mistake—taking things for granted.

I don't hear the blaring horn until I'm standing in the middle of the street.

My feet stop in place as if heavy stones are keeping them glued to the ground. As I stare at the van's hazard lights and hear its continuous horn, I think my twenty-seven-year-old life from birth until now will pass in front

of my eyes. That's what happens at the time of death, right? I should recall it all.

From the moment Mom relocated us from one city to the other, until life threw me into New York.

From the moment I flourished, until the accident that turned me into an incurable alcoholic.

However, none of those memories come. Not even a fragment of them. The only things that invade my head are little toes and fingers. A tiny face and body that the nurse put in my arms before she was taken away for good.

A lump forms in my throat and I tremble like an insignificant leaf in the cold winter streets of New York.

I promised to live for her. Why the hell am I dying now?

I close my eyes. *I'm so sorry, baby girl. So very sorry.*

A large hand grips me by the elbow and yanks me back so hard, I trip over my own feet and stumble. The same hand gently holds me by the arm to keep me standing.

I slowly open my eyes, halfway expecting to find my head under the van. But instead, the horn blasts as it passes me by, the driver screaming through the window, "Watch where you're going, fucking crazy bitch!"

Meeting his gaze, I flip him off with my free hand and keep doing it to make sure he sees it in the rear-view mirror.

As soon as the van disappears around the corner, I start trembling again. The brief wave of adrenaline that hit me when I was being insulted withers away, and now all I can think about is that I could've died.

That I *really* would've let my little girl down.

"Are you all right?"

I whirl around at the sound of the accented voice. For a second, I forgot that someone had pulled me out of that van's path. That if they hadn't, I would be dead right now.

The man, who's Russian, judging by the subtle accent he just spoke with, stands in front of me, his hand still gripping my elbow. It's a gentle touch compared to the brute force he used to pull me back.

He's tall, and while most people are taller than my five-foot-four, he goes way beyond that. Probably six-two or more. He's wearing a black shirt and pants with an open dark gray cashmere coat. It could be the colors, or the length of the coat, which reaches his knees, but he looks elegant, smart,

in a lawyer sort of way, and probably worked as a model to pay his college tuition.

His face tells a different story, however. Not that he's not handsome, because he is, with sharp, angular features that fit his model body. He has high cheekbones that cast a shadow on his thick-stubbled jaw.

His eyes are an intense shade of gray that's bordering on black. The color of his clothes could be intensifying their appearance, though. The fact remains that they're too...uncomfortable to look at. You know when something or someone is so beautiful it actually aches inside to look at them? That's this stranger. Peering into his eyes, however bizarre they are, hits me with a feeling of inferiority that I can't shake off.

Although his words conveyed concern, I see none written in his facial expression. No empathy that most people are capable of.

But at the same time, he doesn't seem like the type who'd feign worry. If anything, he'd be like the rest of the passers-by who barely looked in the direction of the near-traffic accident.

I should be feeling grateful, but the only thing I want is to escape from his clutches and his uneasy eyes. His deep, imploring eyes that are decrypting my face, little by little.

Piece by each tiny piece.

"I'm okay," I manage, twisting my elbow free.

His brow furrows, but it's brief, almost unnoticeable, before he goes back to his previous expression, letting me go as gently as he was gripping me. I expect him to turn around and leave so that I can chalk up the entire experience to an unlucky winter afternoon.

But he just stands there, unmoving, unblinking, not making one single step in any direction. Instead, he chooses to watch me, his thick brows drawing over his eyes that I *really* don't want to be staring into, but I find myself dragged into their savage gray anyway.

They're like the harshness of the clouds above and the merciless gust of the wind from every direction. I can pretend they don't exist, but they still make me lose the feeling of my limbs. They give me blisters and pain.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asks again, and for some reason, it feels like he wants me to tell him I'm not.

But why? And to what end?

I'm just one of thousands of homeless people in this city. A man like him, who's surrounded by an impenetrable air of confidence, hinting that

he's in some prominent position, shouldn't have even looked in my direction.

But he did.

And now, he's asking if I'm okay. Being used to invisibility makes me feel fidgety when I'm suddenly visible.

Ever since this Russian stranger gripped me by the arm, there's been an itch under my skin, urging me to jump back to the shadows.

Now.

"Yeah," I blurt. "Thank you."

I'm about to turn and leave when the authority in his voice stops me. "Wait."

My big shoes make a squeaky sound on the concrete when I follow his command. I normally wouldn't. I'm not good at listening to orders, which is why I'm in this state.

But something in his tone gets my attention.

He reaches into his coat and two scenarios burst through my head. The first is that he'll pull out a gun and shoot me in the head for disrespecting him. The second is that he'll treat me like many others and give me money.

That sense of inferiority hits again. While I usually accept change from people to buy my beer, I don't beg for it. The idea of taking this stranger's money makes me feel dirty, less than invisible and more like a speck of dust on his black leather shoes.

I intend to refuse his money, but he only retrieves a handkerchief and places it in my hand. "You have something on your face."

His skin brushes against my gloves for a second, and though the contact is brief, I see it.

A wedding ring on his left finger.

I bunch the piece of cloth in my hand and nod in thanks. I don't know why I expected him to smile or even offer a nod in return.

He doesn't.

His eyes penetrate mine for a few seconds, then he turns around and leaves.

Just like that.

He's erased me from his unlucky afternoon and is now going back to his wife.

Considering the extreme discomfort I felt in his presence, I figured I'd be relieved when he left.

On the contrary, it feels as if my breast bone is digging into the sensitive flesh of my heart.

What the hell?

I stare at the handkerchief he placed in my hand. It has the letters A.V. embroidered on it and appears to be handmade. Something of value.

Why would he even give me this?

Something on your face.

There's a lot of shit on my face. A layer of dirt, actually. Since I haven't been in a public restroom for some time. Did he really think a freaking handkerchief would be the solution?

Pissed off at him and at my reaction toward him, I toss the handkerchief in a trash can and storm in the opposite direction.

I need a hot meal and a bed tonight, and if it means meeting the devil again to have them, so be it.

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WINTER

I stop before rounding the corner toward the shelter.

Saying I'll face the devil and actually doing so are two different things. After all, I clawed at his face, kicked him in the balls, then shoved him against his desk the last time I saw him.

He might really catch me and force me to spend a day in the police station.

A low growl escapes my stomach and I wince as it contracts against itself. I can almost feel it opening its mouth and when it finds nothing, makes this god-awful sound.

I wrap an arm around my middle as if that will magically appease the ache.

Okay, I'll just try to sneak in some soup and leave. Many homeless people who don't spend the night here come only for meals, so my plan shouldn't be weird.

I pull my hood over my head and rub my hands together in a half-assed attempt to warm them as I round the corner.

Two police cars are parked in front of the shelter with their blue and red lights on. A few news vans are scattered around the shabby building. Reporters and cameramen are everywhere, like bugs searching for a juicy piece of trash to bite down on.

Don't tell me that slimy asshole called the police and the media because of me? I only kicked him. Okay, maybe I clawed at his face and punched him, too, but that was in self-defense. He's the one who called me into his office and was feeling me up where he wasn't supposed to be touching.

I might have little—okay, nothing—but I can protect myself against bastards like him.

But if I tell that to the police or the media, they won't believe me. Why would the respectable director of a homeless shelter, who's also running for mayor, touch an insignificant, dirty person like me?

I really should search for another shelter. But will they let me in if Richard has already blacklisted me?

Was it the clawing, the punching, or the kicking that sealed the deal for him? If it was the latter, so be it. Because kicking him in the balls isn't something I regret in the least.

A pebble hits me upside the head and I wince, turning around. A smile lifts my mouth when I make eye contact with the only person I'd call my friend in this shithole.

"Larry!" I whisper-yell.

"Come here." He motions at me to join him in a small alleyway that's used for tossing trash.

I briskly move to his side and wince at the smell of garbage. Not that Larry and I are the best smelling people around, considering the limited amount of time we get to shower.

Larry's tan skin appears even darker in the shadows. He's a middle-aged man—around mid-fifties, as he told me—and he has the wrinkles around his eyes as proof of the time he's spent on this earth. His features are harsh, angular, and the bone in his nose protrudes due to being broken before.

He's wearing a second-hand hot orange cashmere coat that he got from some charity. His boots and gloves are navy blue. Obviously, his sense of fashion is definitely better than mine.

We met a few weeks ago at one of the subway stations and he shared his dinner with me. I gave him half of my precious beer and we somehow became best friends. The one thing I love most about Larry's company is that he's not the talkative type. We both daydream in each other's presence, not bothering to ask too many questions. We've found camaraderie in silence. In shutting the door on the world. He knows about my alcohol problem, though, and he told me that he's a veteran.

Larry is the one who brought me to this shithole, saying we'd get free meals and a warm bed. We've stuck around for each other, so when one is sleeping, the other takes guard so no one touches us. When there are no

beds available, we sit beside each other, I lay my head on his shoulder, and we sleep like that.

"I've been searching all over for you." He pants. "Where have you been?"

"Around."

"Did you steal some beer again?"

"No!"

"Winter..." he pinches the bridge of his nose as if I'm an insolent child.

"Okay. Only one. I didn't have any change."

"We agreed to never steal."

"Desperate times, Larry. Besides, you know I don't like the sober me. She has issues." Maybe that's why I've been feeling off-balance all afternoon. I have a low alcohol tolerance, but even I need more than a single beer to get drunk.

"Winter..."

"Forget about me." I throw a dismissive hand in the shelter's general direction. "What happened here?"

He thins his lips before releasing them. "I ought to ask you that."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Why do you think the police and the media are here?"

"Because Richard called them over to demonize me?"

"Not exactly."

"Then what?"

"Richard was found dead in his office this morning."

I pause, a strange sensation gripping me by the throat and confiscating my air supply. When I speak, it's in a strained whisper. "What?"

"The cleaning staff found him in a pool of his own blood and the police are suspecting you did it."

"Me?"

"Yeah. I don't know if Richard called them before he died or if the staff and the others witnessed that you were the last person who saw him alive."

My fists clench on either side of me. "I didn't kill him, Larry. I didn't do it."

His brows draw over his wrinkled eyes as he sighs. He has thick skin with some blotches, probably due to staying out in the sun for so many years. "I know."

"Really?"

“Really, Winter. You’re a crazy little thing, but you’re no murderer.”

I smile a little at that. “Who are you calling crazy, old man?”

“I’m no old man, you little shit.”

“You act like one, Larry.”

He headlocks me, then swiftly pushes me away. Larry has always kept distance between us, as if he’s afraid to touch me, and I’m thankful for that. Not because his touch is bad, but because I dislike being touched. That’s why I prefer invisibility.

“Anyway, you need to leave before they find you.”

“No. I did nothing wrong, and if I hide, that means I’m admitting to a crime I didn’t commit.”

“So what do you plan, woman? Are you thinking of barging into the midst of those policemen? What are you going to say? Like, ‘umm, hey there, officers, I’m the one you think killed Richard, but I actually didn’t, so let’s just shake hands?’”

“I’ll simply tell them what happened.”

“No one will believe you, Winter. Your fingerprints are all over his office and you were the last one who saw him alive before you disappeared. You’re guilty in their eyes. And if you go in there, they’ll lock you up for twenty years. You won’t get a good lawyer either, because state-appointed ones are shit.”

His words penetrate my brain, slowly making sense, but I want to dismiss them as fast as possible. I want them to be untrue. Because I can’t accept that option.

“So what do you suggest I do, Larry? Run away?”

The older man snaps his fingers. “Exactly. Lie low for a while and then we’ll figure some way to get you out of this city.”

It’s the most logical thing to do under the circumstances. It is. But I’ve always been attached to this merciless city with super glue. Besides, it’s where I have memories with my baby girl, and if I leave, it’ll be like I’m abandoning a piece of me.

“But...Larry...”

He sighs, jamming both of his hands in his orange coat. “You don’t want to leave?”

I shake my head.

“But you might get locked up. You have to.”

“I know. Are you...coming with me?”

“Absolutely, woman. We ride together and die together.”

“That sounds like some motorcycle club’s slogan.”

“I stole it. Roll with it.” He peeks his head around the corner, his hazel eyes shining with concentration before he focuses on me. “Now, go. Don’t stay in open places and avoid cameras. I’ve got your back.”

I wrap my arms around him in a brief hug. “How will we meet again?”

“I have my homeless intel. I’ll find you. Just lay low.”

After I reluctantly release him, I carefully make my way through the back of the alley.

I glance behind me to cast one last glimpse at Larry, but he’s already gone.

USUALLY, WHEN WE’RE NOT AT A SHELTER, LARRY AND I SPEND THE NIGHT in the subway station. The benches are our friends and the marginal silence is better than the loud city outside.

So that’s where I go first, but soon realize my mistake when I see the news about Richard’s death on the station’s TV.

Two middle-aged men, who appear to be football fans judging from their blue Giants hats, stop in front of me to watch the news. I shrink backward and blend in with a wall in case anyone here recognizes me.

“What a mess,” one of them says, lighting a cigarette, despite the no smoking signs.

“Maybe it’s a sign that he wasn’t meant to run for mayor,” the other replies, shrugging a shoulder.

“Wasn’t meant to? Man, have you even been living in this city?”

“Why? What?”

“Richard Green was the prime candidate for mayor.” Cigarette Man leans toward his friend and lowers his voice as if he’s sharing Central Intelligence Agency secrets. “There are rumors that he was backed by the mafia.”

“The mafia?” the other man whisper-yells.

“Keep your voice down, you idiot. You want to get us whacked?”

I scoff at the way he mimics the famous mobster movies, but I find myself moving closer, while still keeping a distance, to get a whiff of their

conversation. If Richard was backed by the mafia, then the scary men dressed in dark suits make more sense since they dropped by occasionally and went straight to his office.

“Is it the Italians?” the non-smoker asks.

Cigarette Man blows out a cloud of smoke and I block my nose and mouth with the back of my hand to keep from coughing. “No. The Bratva.”

“Russians?”

“That’s what the rumors say.”

“Are the filthy Russians getting involved in our politics again?”

“Yeah, man. And their mafia is no joke. Heard they kill people like they’re flies.”

“This is a country of law.”

Cigarette Man bursts out laughing, waving his hand to catch his breath from the force of it. “What law, man? Those monsters make the law wherever they go.”

“Are you saying Richard’s death isn’t as simple as the media’s painting it out to be?”

“Yes, I am. All that is a diversion.” Cigarette Man motions at the line that reads “Richard Green, New York City mayoral candidate, was killed by one of the homeless people in the shelter he directed.”

I squint at the TV and frown. My picture should be all over the news with a wanted caption on top. How come they didn’t even mention my name? Did the police not give concrete statements to the media yet?

But that doesn’t make any sense. My handprints are everywhere in Richard’s office, and I’m, without a doubt, their prime suspect. So how come I’m just a homeless person in his shelter? Even my gender isn’t mentioned.

“The Russians are scary, dude,” Cigarette Man says.

“Worse than the Italians?”

“Right now? Way fucking worse. Their power and influence run deeper than any other criminal ring.” He throws his cigarette on the concrete without extinguishing it as he and his friend rush to catch a train.

I walk to where they stood and kill the cigarette with the sole of my shoe. The topic on the TV has changed to some other world news and I keep staring at the burnt butt. How the fire left a black line on the white exterior. So even after it’s gone, the evidence remains.

Just like my life.

I touch the bottom of my abdomen where my scar is tucked neatly under the countless layers of clothes. It still burns as if my fingertips are on fire, bursting through the clothes and flaming my skin.

Another protest of hunger comes from my stomach and I sigh, leaving the station. I need to go to a quieter place because, even though they didn't reveal my identity, they will eventually.

The Giants fans' conversation keeps playing in the back of my head as I sneak from one alley to another, my footsteps light and fast.

When Cigarette Man mentioned the Russians, the only thought that came to mind was the stranger from earlier today. His accent was very Russian, but not really rough like I've heard before. It was smooth, effortless, almost how I'd imagine Russian royalty to speak if they ever learned English.

Could he be a part of the mafia Cigarette Man mentioned?

I internally shake my head. Why would I place him with the mafia just because he has a Russian accent? He could be a Russian businessman, like the thousands who swarm New York all the time.

Or a spy.

A shiver shakes my insides at the thought. I really need to rein in my wild imagination. Besides, in what world is a spy that attractive? Except James Bond, but he's fiction. The Russian stranger drew so much attention, and the weirdest part is that he seemed kind of oblivious to it. Or maybe he was bothered by it, like he didn't want to be the center of attention, but he was forced into that position anyway.

I reach into my pocket and retrieve the handkerchief he gave me. Okay, so I did throw it in the trash, but then I took it out. No idea why. It felt like a waste, I guess.

Running my gloved fingers over the initials, I wonder if his wife made him this and if she'll question him about its whereabouts. Though he seemed to be the type who does the questioning, not the other way around.

Shoving the handkerchief back in my pocket, I push the weird stranger out of my head and take a few turns until I arrive at an underground parking garage Larry and I frequent.

The guard is snoring at the entrance, mumbling about some baseball player being an idiot. It doesn't take much effort to slip past him. Now, all I have to do is leave early in the morning before he wakes up.

The parking garage isn't big or fancy, only fit for around a hundred cars and half the slots aren't occupied. Just one-third of the neon lights work, but even if they all blinded me, it wouldn't make a difference. I've slept in worse places with stronger lighting and louder noises.

The key to staying safe is sleeping with one eye open. Not literally. But basically being a light sleeper so that the slightest movement springs me awake.

When I sit down on the concrete floor between two cars and close my eyes, I'm well aware of the buzzing from the half-broken lights and the swishing of the cars passing by on the streets upstairs. I can even hear the guard's mumbling, though I can't make out his words.

If he stops, I'll know he's awake and I need to be alert. He could call the cops on me, and that's the last thing I want in my current situation—or any situation, actually.

I try to get as comfortable as possible in my position, although the cold is seeping through my bones from the wall behind me and the floor underneath me.

I try not to pay attention to my growling stomach or the pulsing need to get drunk.

I try to think about where to go from here when I officially become a wanted person.

Soon enough, exhaustion takes its toll on me and I fall into a dreamless sleep.

I don't dream. Ever. It's like my mind has become a blank canvas since the accident.

The mumbling stops and the guard starts talking. My eyes pop open and I stare at the small opening across from me that serves as a window. It's still night, and judging by the lack of cars buzzing about, it's late enough that no other vehicles should come here.

And yet, a black car slowly slides into the parking garage. It's so silent, I wouldn't have heard it if I weren't so attuned to the outside world's noises.

I drag my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around them, then pull the hood of my coat over my head to cover it completely. Only one of my eyes peeks through a narrow gap.

As long as it doesn't park in the spot opposite me, I should be fine. It's more logical to pick one of the countless spots near the entrance.

The sound gets closer and I catch sight of the black car. I shrink in the tight space between a Hyundai and the wall, thanking everything that's holy for my small frame. It helps in my invisibility scheme.

But in doing this, I've blocked my vision of what the car is doing. For long seconds, there's no sound. Not the opening of doors or the beeping of a lock.

Crouching down, I peek under the car and see one pair of men's feet standing right in front of the Hyundai. I place a gloved hand to my mouth to smother any sound I might make.

The rotten smell from whatever shit I've been touching triggers a sense of nausea and makes me want to retch.

I breathe through my mouth while I keep watching his feet. He's wearing brown shoes and he's not moving, like he's waiting for something.

Go away. Go!

I repeat the mantra in my head over and over again as if that will make it happen.

Mom used to tell me that if you believe in something strongly enough, it'll come true.

And just like magic, the brown shoes walk away. I release a breath of relief, but it's cut off when a strong hand yanks me up from behind the car by my hood.

The force is so strong that I'm momentarily suspended mid-air, before a bulky man with scary features says with a Russian accent, "Got her, Boss."

WINTER

Got her, Boss.

I don't pause to think what those words could mean. My first and most important role in life is survival. I'm not living for myself. I'm living on behalf of my baby girl. For the life she couldn't have.

The man who's captured me is bulky and as big as a mountain. His expression is stern, harsh, like he was born with a permanent scowl. His hair is short, white-blond, and his light eyes are as cold and merciless as ice.

As soon as he puts me on my feet, I wiggle to slip out of the hold he has on my hood. Twisting and squirming, I grab his hand and try to yank it away, but I might as well be a mouse fighting a cat.

He appears utterly uninterested as he pulls me along, my struggle not deterring him at all. I step on his foot, but he merely grasps my hood tighter as he continues to take me away. My feet drag on the floor and I lose one of my shoes.

"Help!" I scream at the top of my lungs. "Help—" The man places a stone-like hand on my mouth, cutting off any sound I can make.

Unlike the stench of my rotten gloves, his hand smells of leather and metal. Despite the somewhat tolerable odor, it's still stifling as if I'm being stuffed in a small place where I don't fit.

My limbs shake at that prospect. I attempt to wrench my mind from it, but it's already grown and expanded, tearing through flesh and bones to materialize in front of me.

I'm in a closed space, it's so dark, so very *dark* that I can't see my own hands. The odor of urine fills my nostrils and my own breaths sound like

the red-eyed monster from my most terrifying nightmares.

I'm trapped.

I can't get out.

"Let me out..." I whisper with hoarse desperation. "Please let me out..."

"Where is the little monster?"

No!

I scratch at the hand holding me, at the one who will kill me. I won't let them.

I *have* to live.

Before I know it, I'm shoved into the back of the black car. I must've been so caught up in that moment from the past that I didn't pay attention to the distance he'd dragged me. Bulky Blond releases me and slams the door shut.

My fingers are shaking, and the remnants of the flashback of that dark, tight space still beats under my skin like a demon about to rear its ugly head. Usually, after such episodes, I run into an open space and keep running and running until the air burns my lungs and erases the image.

Not now, though.

Now, I need to force my body to be on a high so I can survive.

Survival comes before everything. Before pain. Before mental prisons.

Everything.

I attempt to open the door before Bulky Blond can get in the driver's seat and take me to God knows where.

But he doesn't climb into the car.

Instead, he stands in front of it with his back to me. Another man joins him and when he turns to the side, I catch a passing glimpse of his profile. He's shorter in size and appears younger than Bulky Blond. His physique is also on the leaner side and his suit jacket doesn't cling to his shoulders like that of the larger man. He has long brown hair that's gathered in a low bun and a crooked nose that I'm sure I've seen before, but where?

The moment of hesitation vanishes when Crooked Nose and Bulky Blond both face away from me.

I tug on the handle, but the door doesn't open. "Shit."

Jamming my sock-covered foot against it, I push, then pull until heat rises up my cheeks. I click the button to lower the glass, but it's also locked.

"It's useless. Save your effort."

I flinch, my movements coming to a screeching halt. In my adrenaline-induced haze, I failed to notice that someone else was in the back seat with me.

Still gripping the handle, I slowly turn my head, hoping to hell that what I just heard was a play of my imagination.

That I've thought about him for so long, I've started hallucinating.

I'm not.

My lips part as I'm wrenched into those intense gray eyes from this afternoon. They appear darker, more shadowed, as if the night has cast a spell on them.

I cut off eye contact as soon as I make it, because if I keep staring, my skin will crawl, my head will get dizzy, and I'll feel like vomiting my empty stomach out.

Using my foot on the door, I pull and push on the handle with all my might. At first, I thought the bulky man could be with the police and that he's picking me up for killing Richard, but there's no way this Russian stranger is a cop.

He doesn't look like one.

Maybe he's a spy, after all. This seems oddly similar to the beginning of some spy movie about an underdog—me—who will be recruited to work in secret for an intelligence agency.

When all the pushing and pulling doesn't bring me any results, I jam my elbow into the glass. A zing of pain shoots through my whole arm, but I won't stop, not until I'm out of this place.

It's starting to feel like that damn closed box. I need *out*.

I'm about to punch the glass with my fist, when the stranger's voice fills the air, "It's bulletproof, so you'll only hurt yourself."

My arm lies limp beside me. I might be willing to sacrifice pain, but I won't do it for no result.

"Are you done?" he asks in that calm, almost serene tone—just like royalty. His voice is velvety, smooth as silk, but still deep and masculine.

I don't look at him and, instead, lunge to the front seat. If I can open the door or go out the window, I'll run and—

Strong hands grip me by the hips and yank me back with effortless ease. I'm now so close to him that his thigh touches mine.

I expect him to let me go now that he has me by his side, but he doesn't. If anything, his hold tightens on my hips, and even though I'm wearing

multiple layers of clothes, I can feel the controlling warmth in his hands. It's different from the heat in the car. This is burning, tearing holes through my clothes and aiming at my skin.

This close, I can smell him—or more like, I'm forced to inhale him with every drag of air. His scent is a mixture of leather and wood. Power and mysteriousness.

He speaks against my ear, his tone dropping in range with the purpose of cementing the words in my bones, "It's useless to fight me, for you'll only get hurt. You're not at my level, so do not cause me trouble or I won't hesitate to throw you to the wolves. I'm giving you my hand, so be grateful, thank your lucky stars, and take it without asking any fucking questions."

My lips have been dry the entire time he's been talking. He's issuing clear threats, but he sounds like a calm lawyer presenting a case in front of a judge.

He has a particular way of speaking. His words are deliberate, sure, and have a commanding edge, without being too much in your face.

"What do you want from me?" I want to kick myself for the small voice. I almost sound scared. Scratch that. I *definitely* sound scared, because holy shit, I am. I just met this man today, and in the span of a few hours, my life has flipped upside down.

Up until now, my only purpose has been to live, but even that sounds impossible at the moment.

"I have an offer for you, Winter."

How do you know my name? I want to ask that, but it'd be useless. He seems like the type of man who knows everything he needs to.

"What offer?"

His lips graze the shell of my ear as he murmurs, "Be my wife."

TO BE CONTINUED

The story continues in [Vow of Deception](#).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rina Kent is an international bestselling author of everything enemies to lovers romance.

Darkness is her playground, suspense is her best friend, and twists are her brain's food. However, she likes to think she's a romantic at heart in some way, so don't kill her hopes just yet.

Her heroes are anti-heroes and villains because she was always the weirdo who fell in love with the guys no one roots for. Her books are sprinkled with a touch of mystery, a healthy dose of angst, a pinch of violence, and lots of intense passion.

Rina spends her private days in a peaceful town in North Africa daydreaming about the next plot idea or laughing like an evil mastermind when those ideas come together.

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