

Prologue

"Renee, are you available? There's a call for you on the private line in your office." Olivia's voice drew Renee's attention away from the limousine taking off from the front of the townhouse to enter the 68th Street traffic. It was carrying her husband, Preston and her daughter, Haley to a matinee.

With Preston newly released from prison, it should have been the best of times for her family, but the man who'd come home three months ago was a pale shadow of the one who'd left. Worse yet, she barely recognized the angry, rebellious teen who used to remind her of herself. The combination was explosive, literally and figuratively.

Renee promised herself that she would hold her family together and make things right. For now, she had a job to do. With an incline of her auburn head and murmured thanks to her personal assistant, Renee Dalton Sinclair crossed the Persian rug and glided past the spiral stairs on the first floor of The Gotham Rose Club to head back towards her office. Camouflaged excitement made the back of her neck itch. The only person who ever called on her private

line was the Governess, a mysterious benefactress who was well placed in the government. Whenever the calls came, one of the Gotham Roses' It Girls soon took on a dangerous mission to bring down a high society criminal.

Whoever the Governess was, she'd been powerful enough to pull the strings necessary to have Renee's beloved husband, Preston, released from prison early. Just back from his five-year stint in prison, Pres still got that shell-shocked look in his eyes from time to time. It made Renee burn with anger.

Despite Pres's refusal to discuss what had happened, she knew he had been the scapegoat for his corrupt family and their investment firm.

The Governess had approached Renee four years ago with a deal. In return for Pres's early release, Renee started the *It Girls* undercover organization. Made up of the best of the Gotham Rose Charity socialites trained to take down criminals and protect themselves, the It Girls had quickly established a reputation for skill and excellence.

In the quiet sanctuary of her office, Renee secured the door, slipped into her powder room and locked that door too. Making herself comfortable on the overstuffed white

loveseat, she lifted the receiver from the vanity table.

"This is Renee Dalton Sinclair."

"Renee... I trust you're enjoying Pres's return?" the mechanically distorted voice began.

Renee was overjoyed to have her husband back, but the sound of his name in the disembodied voice sent chills through her. Was there a threat lurking beneath the Governess's question?

"I love my husband," she answered simply, her tone ringing with strength and conviction. "Having him home has brought the life back to our house." In the ensuing silence she added, "Of course, I'm grateful for anything you've done to obtain his early release."

"Preston Sinclair was innocent," the Governess replied smugly. "Let's move on to the business at hand. Have you seen the story in the papers about the two models who were killed in their Miami apartments? Another model was caught at Miami International yesterday, trying to smuggle heroine into Miami in a case of bubble bath."

"I saw the stories," Renee confirmed. "You'd think that fashion models would have more options than the poor desperate souls who normally end up being mules in the drug trade."

The Governess expelled a contemptuous puff of air. "Someone made those models an offer they couldn't refuse. There's an active drug gang operating in New York and Miami and they're targeting models for mules. We need to identify this gang, find out who's at the top, get the evidence, and take them down fast."

Shifting the phone and its cord, Renee used her key to open a drawer at the carved antique vanity and remove the large file containing pictures and press information on all the Gotham Roses. Some of the women were merely members of her charitable organization that required all its members to pay twenty-five thousand dollars to join, ten thousand a year afterward, and then asked that they help raise at least one hundred thousand dollars a year.

She knew by heart, which members were also a part of her undercover organization. They were the best, the brightest, and most capable women imaginable. "We need someone who can move in the modeling and music worlds without raising suspicion," she murmured, paging past several members. "Someone they would actually welcome."

"We also need a high profile, well-connected operative who can take care of herself. Vanessa Dawson would be ideal," the Governess said in a firm voice. "We've

arranged for her to get a contract with *Inside Sports* magazine for the Fantasy Swimsuit edition."

Finding Vanessa's gorgeous picture and press information in the stack, Renee shook her head. "Vanessa left the modeling world under less than ideal circumstances," she began. "It would take a lot to get her back into that life."

"The stakes are high," the Governess insisted. "Lives have been lost. The murdered models moved in circles that included some of the younger members of the old money set. What if there is a connection between their money and the models acting as mules for the drug trade?"

What, indeed? As an heiress and bona fide member of the old money set, nothing surprised Renee anymore. Bored people with more money than they knew what to do with were liable to do anything. Renee closed her file, already imagining Vanessa back into the wild, unpredictable world she'd barely escaped. She knew Vanessa could successfully complete the assignment, but at what cost?

CHAPTER ONE

In the airy basement training room at the Gotham Rose Club offices, mirrored walls surrounded a hardwood floor dotted with mats. Covered with protective gear beneath her loose white workout Gi, Vanessa Dawson flicked back her

highlighted ponytail and aimed a long-legged side kick at her personal trainer, Jimmy Valentine.

He blocked it with a padded muscular forearm. "Good kick, Vanessa, but we know your kicks are always good. Move in and throw some punches."

Vanessa hadn't planned to spar with Jimmy. She'd arrived early to work off a little frustration and excitement before her scheduled tea with Renee. Once Jimmy spotted her at the abdominal machine, he'd refused to take no for an answer. She had been long overdue for a training session. Now here she was sparring with the master of several martial arts forms while she tried to preserve her fresh manicure.

Knees slightly bent, Vanessa crouched in a ready position. Tonight, she, Madison and Tatiana was going out for dinner and a night on the town. That meant she would not have time to sit through another manicure. Wrinkling her nose, and lifting her arms, she balled her hands into fists and curled the thumbs underneath. Her fists flew, connecting with his protected forearms more often than she liked.

Jimmy laughed. A lock of shiny dark hair fell over an eyebrow to lend a rakish appearance to his handsome face. With his good looks and height, he could have easily graced

the pages of a fashion magazine. "C'mon, Vanessa, hit harder. You won't be fighting the girls. You have to be able to trade more than a few punches with a man."

That got to her. Was he calling her a sissy? A wimp? Vanessa took pride in her ability to adapt the various fighting styles and techniques Jimmy insisted on teaching and make them her own. Because of her family's wealth and her days spent strutting down the catwalk or preening in front of a camera, most people thought she was eye candy and about as useful as a Christmas tree ornament in the middle of spring. She knew that nothing could be farther from the truth.

With the Gotham Roses and some of her wealthy friends, she raised hundreds of thousands of dollars every year for her favorite charity, The Golden Key Foundation for Battered Women and several others. The bottom line was that her training, her important charity work, and the exciting undercover missions made it all worthwhile.

Balancing herself, she threw her body into the barrage of punches she aimed at his torso. Jimmy's corresponding grunts as he scrambled to block the blows were music to her ears.

"Good job!" he called out, mixing things up with a few punches of his own. "Next time, don't make me ask for it."

If you're in a situation where you have to throw a punch, you need to give it all you've got. You might not get another chance."

At Vanessa's acknowledgement his hand snaked out to shift her balance and throw her. She flew through the air to land sprawled on her left hip in an ungraceful heap. Because she knew how to fall, she wasn't hurt. As Jimmy advanced, two well-aimed kicks kept him from getting too close. She scrambled to her feet, lifting her arms to block.

"That's enough for today." Jimmy pulled the Velcro on the pads covering his arms and drew them off. "Good work overall, but you're a bit distracted Vanessa. What's wrong?"

Other than the fact that she'd spent a good part of her morning arguing with her little sister, Michelle, and it had gotten her nowhere, there was the distinct possibility of an upcoming mission and Renee's verdict on a planned event. Vanessa met Jimmy's gaze and smiled. "I guess I'm just excited. I'm having tea with Renee. She wants to discuss a new project."

"I see." Jimmy patted her on the shoulder, a knowing look in his eyes. "Whatever it is, I know you'll give it the attention it deserves."

"Of course," she agreed. Pulling apart the Velcro on her own padding, she drew it down and off her arms. Her gaze dropped to her index finger and she cursed under her breath. The nail had broken off at her fingertip. In the heat of their sparring she hadn't even noticed.

Jimmy moved close to examine it. "I don't see any blood," he murmured, his dark eyes sparkling. "Those beautiful nails wouldn't look half so good on a corpse."

Glowering at him, Vanessa threw a playful punch to his wide shoulder. She knew what he was getting at. He'd told her on more than one occasion that her little vanities, which included the highlighted brown hair hanging past her shoulders, her long nails, and the three-inch heels she loved, could make it difficult to defend herself. Jimmy's comments had only made her work that much harder to hone her skills. She didn't need Jimmy to tell her that she was good at defending herself.

"Just keep your focus on your opponent and the job at hand," he chided gently.

"I will," she promised.

"And good luck on your project."

"Thanks, Jimmy." She leaned forward to plant a little kiss on his cheek. He didn't move, but she sensed him waiting defensively to see if she would try to press

herself against him as many of the other Gotham Roses had done. The women referred to him as *The Heartbreaker*.

Vanessa stepped away.

Jimmy was extremely loyal to his wife, something that many of the wealthy socialites in the Gotham Roses couldn't understand. Vanessa could. Her father, Manfred Dawson III, was still married to her mother Lonette, and from all appearances, neither had ever been unfaithful. A number of her wealthy friends' parents had been married and divorced so many times that fidelity was almost a novelty.

"Tell Linda I said hello," she murmured, tossing the arm pads into Jimmy's box of athletic aids. Then she hurried to the dressing room. She would have to return the rest of the pads back after her shower