

Mia

New York, Recently

He was a sweet lay. Charlie, that's what he said his name was, picked me up at The Pub. He thought he did the picking, but then most guys do. The Pub, a neighborhood bar on the upper West Side, heavy on the wood, pretenses of being English, dart board, shepherd pie, cheese and chutney nibbles. I was perched on a stool at the bar with a Vodka Collins. He was at the far end, a lean 6'2", sandy hair, horn rims. I turned his way once or twice, rested my eyes, not waiting to see if he noticed. He finished his beer, walked toward the door, stopped.

"Looks like heaven's missing an angel," he said.

"Think you've got that one turned around."

"I can go either way."

"If I can't?"

"Then it's the devil's way."

Light played off his smile and I thought, what the hell. He took my hand and we strolled back to his place, a block away. Nice, but a heavy decorator's hand: black and white Montmartre street photos, leather, plaid throws.

I liked Charlie, Charlie with the green eyes that told stories of mischief, the kid who peeked while his teenage sister's friend was taking a shower. He lit the logs in the fireplace, we sipped cognac, and he un-wrapped me, quickly, and a little rough. Sometimes, this time, a turn-on. Then he took his time as his lips moved slowly from my breasts to my belly to below. At each stop, he inscribed little circles of pleasure with his tongue.

In the second act, we traded places and I felt the heat from his smooth skin and savored his cedar smell as I licked my way down his body. After the third act, he fell asleep. I waited an hour, got up, dressed, and left. It had been a perfectly cozy tumble on a rainy night, but I had places to go and people to kill.

K, the guy that saved my ass at Maroun al-Ras, now with Mossad, had called late that afternoon. Asked if I'd do him a favor. A major problem with a Russian named Sergei R. in Brighton Beach.

"Can't you get the FBI to arrest him?"

"Tried that," K said. "For the last two years, but they're not buying the evidence we've collected, claim it's weak."

"And it's not?"

"It's solid, Mia, I promise."

Not something I'd ordinarily do. After my tour, I thought I never wanted to kill anyone again. What good did it do? But I owed K, and there a good reason this Sergei R. should die. He was the state-side link of a sex slave trade triangle run out of Kiev into Tel Aviv on to

New York. Roma girls were recruited on the pretext of becoming nannies, then sold off to pimps in the Midwest. K would take care of the Ukrainian and Israeli angles if I'd handle this one. No one else was going to stop this, only K and me.

We need to back up here. Out of Wharton I wanted a job on the Street, had a couple of offers—Morgan, Merrill, but then the market went in the tank, and when the tank broke, it was: we'd-love-to-have-you-and-we're-sure-business-will-pick-up-in-six-months-but-at-the-moment . . . So I did what every Jewish girl with an MBA/JD does, went to Israel to do the kibbutz thing. Don't they? Some do, if their grandparents were kibbutzniks.

Six months in the kibbutz when an army recruiter came through with stories about the exploits of the Israeli Defense Force. I knew the story. My grandparents had talked about being rescued back in '49. I signed up for a two-year stint. An added attraction, the training base was near Haifa—cypress trees, rain, lush green hills, beaches, and men.

In basic, it turned out I was a crack shot. Top of the class. Qualified for sniper school. There, I graduated second. A natural talent it seemed. Two things: metabolism of a cat and people with gray eyes have better vision, more light gets through. And to do something with impact. In the lingo, be a force multiplier. Eliminate commanding officers and the people manning the serious weapons.

My first action, Lebanon. Beautiful country – the crenelated landscape painted with deep green valleys and framed by pale gray limestone cliffs, but marred by villages with broken buildings and rubble from shelling. My Recon Company was sent in to Maroun al-Ras with K as my partner. We set up on a high point, a place with good sight lines. K was about 20 feet to my right. The field we overlooked was target rich. Out 500 meters were four Fajr-5 rocket launchers and their crews. I'd taken out the three crew members on the nearest launcher. I could see the faces of the soldiers I killed, but didn't allow myself to get distracted. I targeted a button on their chest and believed if I didn't kill them, women and children would die. And I tell myself that every time a settlement takes around.

I set up for the next launcher crew, heard the brush crackle on my left, turned, a dark hulk, blotting out the sun, a man, head wrapped in a black scarf, a long knife, a whisper,

“Hot-me-et-un-mote! Die!”

My stomach clutched. I'd been triangulated *So fucking stupid, Mia. Lesson one, shoot, move.* I was dug in, arms trapped by my rifle. I couldn't budge. I screamed, but nothing came out. Then, a shot, a knife clanked off my helmet, a man fell on my legs.

“Stay down, Mia,” K yelled. Then ran up and finished off the attacker with his bayonet.

My two years in the IDF up, I came back to the city. The economy still sucked and the Street wasn't

hiring. I had a bit saved, so I hung with some people from B-school, made a serious study of the after-hours clubs and the guys who go there. Some rough characters. Wolves in Street clothing. I hit the gym for a couple of hours in the afternoon and had my weekly mani-pedi.

I interrupted the Sergei R. story for some background. Now back to him. It took a few days to find him in Asser Levy Park. A stocky man, mid 50s, pasty complexion, sour expression, a track suit, finger thick gold chain and black leather shoes—Russian mafia couture. I sat on a bench watching. The first morning, as a mother cooing to her baby swaddled in a blanket. Another morning, as a threadbare homeless woman with an overflowing shopping cart. Sergei had a pattern. At seven every morning he walked his overweight toy poodle. Seemed to love the little thing. Picked him up, nuzzled him, fed him tiny biscuits.

The Park was bounded by high rises on one side, (he lived in 8905), and four-lane Surf Boulevard, behind Coney Island beach. A park saturated by ocean humidity and salt. Sergei walked the same paths, always, the ones between the amphitheater and the road. Not many people and not many cars early in the day, especially when the fog hung low.

I spent time mapping sight lines and covers. Found a grove of trees with the perfect angle. Waited for a rainy day. Bullets shoot flatter (more accurately), and footprints would be washed out. I went to Goodwill and picked up two long raincoats, standard tan and a pair of boots.

The rain started at four Wednesday morning. I was ready. When I saw him at the end of the path, I pulled the rifle from under my coats, lay down in the mud, set the bipod, adjusted the scope, a little to the left, for spin drift. Nailed him at 200 meters. He flopped, fortunately not on top of the little dog. A couple of days later, an envelope under the door. From K. Generous, down payment on a West Side two bedroom. That knife that clanked off my helmet, I hung it over my bed.

A month after the Russian job, K called again. "I hate to ask this, but Mia, one more. Please."