



the  
*brutal*  
truth

*Be careful what you wish for*

*lee winter*



# CHAPTER 1

## *The Apocalypse*

The apocalypse arrived when Maddie Grey had shampoo in her eyes, was half awake, and attempting to block out the whine of prehistoric plumbing from her ears.

“Mads! It’s the Armageddon!” Her flatmate, Simon Itani, thumped on the bathroom door, scaring the life out of her.

“What the hell?” Maddie shouted back. Her childhood friend had his good points, but he couldn’t exactly be considered trustworthy when it came to reporting end times.

“Your boss is texting you. Looks official. So I’m making the leap.”

Her boss never texted her. Maybe Simon was on to something. Maddie shut off the shower, quickly dried off, and pulled on battered shorts and a T-shirt. As she towel-dried her hair, she stared blearily in the mirror at the rings under her eyes. No sleep again. Not surprising. She was having more nightmares about getting lost and trying to find her way home. Her subconscious wasn’t exactly subtle. It was usually that nightmare or awkward sex dreams about the ex-girlfriend she hadn’t seen in three years. She’d always wake up anxious, aroused, and annoyed. Craving Rachel only because her ex was back home in Sydney was kind of pathetic.

The door thumped again, louder this time. “Are you decent?”

Maddie glanced at herself one last time and pulled a face. “Hard to say.”

The door flung open, resulting in way too much daylight.

*Ugh.* “You better be on fire.” Maddie glared at Simon. No singed hair.

“Even more exciting.” He ran his fingers through the trimmed two-day growth on his jaw.

“Wait, more exciting than a fire?” She reached for her tracksuit pants, rammed one leg in, and pulled them over her shorts. Sounded like a crisis worthy of properly getting dressed.

“Yep!” Simon tossed Maddie her phone. “It’s big. Which you’d know if you hadn’t slept the morning away. It’s eleven, and it sounds like your boss can’t wait.”

Maddie snatched up her phone. “Give me a break,” she grumbled. “I work night shift. I do need to sleep sometime.” She read the text message, her stomach twisting with anxiety. “They’re calling everyone in for a noon meeting. I guess the rumours were true. That company that bought us out last year? The owner’s finally noticed us and is probably coming in to gut us today.”

Simon nodded, a sage expression on his face.

She narrowed her eyes. “You sneak. You read his message?”

Simon lifted his hands in innocence. “Only cos your boss’s name flashed up. I wanted to see if it was important enough to rouse you from The Showering Dead.” He scratched his slightly rounded stomach. “So, she’s really on her way? *The Elena Bartell*? She who monsters itty-bitty papers to feed to her empire? And looks shit hot while doing it?”

“Looks like.” Maddie gave the message a final, morose glare. “Trust you to care more about her looks than her tactics.”

“Au contraire, Mads, I can care about both. That woman’s a bloody media genius. They did a case study on her at business school. Let me tell you how she racked up her first hundred mill—”

“Can’t wait for that story. Meanwhile, I’m not sure if I’ll even have a job by tonight. And with you moving back to Sydney soon, this is a total disaster. How am I going to afford rent on this shoe box on my own with no job?”

“Could be worse. You could actually *like* that shitty job you’re about to lose. I’ve seen you steel yourself to go into work. But now...” He gave her a grin.

Maddie huffed out a breath. “First, you could *try* to sound sorry for me. Second, I’m not going back to waitressing.”

“Hours would be better. And you might actually talk to people again. That has to be a bonus.”

“Okay, working for *Hudson Metro News* might not be perfect, but it’s a reporting job—finally. It’s what I’m good at. When I waitress, people get hurt.” Maddie’s mind drifted back to several regrettable incidents. At least the chef’s hair had grown back. Well, except his eyebrows.

“Come on, Mads, didn’t you come to New York to live the dream? Not tolerate the dream?”

A muscle in her jaw twitched. She hated it when people talked about the Dream. New York had never been her dream, although admitting that was social suicide. The truth was that every day she woke with a sinking feeling. The brightness, the buzz, and the constant rush left her feeling like a dead pixel on a Times Square billboard. Her friends back home wanted to live vicariously through her, so what could she say? *It’s great. So great. Yeah. Just. Wow.* Each day she cringed a little more at not living up to everyone else’s dream. Why didn’t she fit into a city that *everyone* fit into?

Simon was still talking. “You’ve been stuck doing the crapola shift, spending all your days sleeping and barely seeing the sights. So my point is, hoo-fucking-ray! You’ll be fired from a job you hate. We’ll celebrate tonight with the Fun Factory. Okay?” He paused and raked his gaze over her clothes. “And don’t change a thing. That outfit totally says ‘fire my ass’.”

Maddie glanced down at herself. He had a point. She must be more tired than she thought. That drug bust she’d been working on overnight had taken it out of her. “I’m not even working today.” She yawned. “I don’t have to get glammed up if it’s my day off. It’s the Aussie way.”

“Famous last words. Seriously, you want my advice?”

“Hell no. You can’t dress to save yourself, and my day’s disastrous enough as it is. So rack off and let me get my ass into gear.”

His laughter drifted through the door, as she toed it shut behind him. But Simon raised a good point: What *did* one wear to their apocalypse?



Maddie hauled herself into work with dark glasses affixed to stave off the beginnings of a tiredness headache and an all-black ensemble more befitting a gothic rock group than professional attire.

On the L train commute, she studied the Elena Bartell bio page she'd downloaded before she'd hit the subway. The chief operating officer and publisher for dozens of newspaper and magazine mastheads had sculpted, short, jet-black hair, pale features, and form-fitting designer clothes. There was a sleekness to her, like a lean, sci-fi action hero, and a dangerous look to her cool eyes.

She was listed as forty, although she could pass as years younger. The woman was notoriously media shy—ironic, given her profession and how much the camera loved her. Bartell had risen as a fashion writer on *CQ* magazine and, at one point, was being tipped as its future editor. Instead, Bartell had disappeared.

A year later, she'd turned up as the new owner of a small group of failing regional papers. Within a year, she'd turned them into profit; within two, she'd made her first million. She'd scored her first \$500 million by age thirty-five.

There was only one publication the media mogul had created from nothing herself—*Style International*, a fashion magazine which had five editions worldwide—*Style NY*, *Sydney*, *Tokyo*, *London* and *Paris*. That personal investment told Maddie that fashion mattered to Bartell, and her job at *CQ* hadn't just been a stepping stone. She'd been passionate about it—at least at one point.

Maddie looked down and considered her outfit. She winced. Her bold choice born of exhaustion and a faintly rebellious streak was not looking so smart right now.

She scrolled down her phone and found a brief mention of a husband in 1999, a reporter turned author who was gone by 2001. There was a second husband now. Richard Barclay. Lawyer. She glanced at his photo and suppressed a shudder. He might be toothpaste-commercial handsome, but he had a smug-bastard face.

So, two sharks had fallen for their own kind? That figured. From everything she'd read, Bartell seemed to love nothing better than to

strip a business to its rafters, if she could squeeze some money out of it. They'd even given her a nickname to go with her corporate cleansing. Tiger Shark. Maddie put away her phone and stared out the window at the underground blackness. Was the *Hudson Metro News* about to be another victim of the media mogul's rapier-sharp teeth?

As Union St station neared, she considered the prospect of being fired. Simon was right, although she'd never admit it. Eight months of working there, and she hated her job. Except for one thing—she was finally doing what she had told all her friends and family she would do. Be a reporter in New York.

The train pulled up. Maddie stepped onto the subway platform, nose wrinkling at the familiar stench of urine and rotting garbage. Time to face the apocalypse.



For a harbinger of doom, Elena Bartell was beautifully turned out in steampunk chic. A wide silver buckle adorned ebony ankle boots, standing out beneath black, tailored pants. They were a dark contrast against her crisp, white linen shirt, set behind a silky, black-and-silver embroidered vest with a fob-watch-style chain running from a button into its pocket. Maddie was transfixed. How unexpected.

Bartell's compact body radiated power and control and drew every eye to her. Even standing with the paper's editor, general manager, and news chief, three men who each had six inches on her, she was easily the most authoritative person in the room.

Scanning the gathering, Bartell's eyes were clear-blue and sharp. She smiled faintly through the introduction droning on in the background.

"...a delight to meet our new owner, Elena Bartell." Maddie's editor, a bespectacled, harried-looking man whom she had never had cause to meet—so lowly was her status—stepped back, clapping.

Bartell stood in front of the eighty *Hudson Metro News* staff members and waited for the polite applause to die. She held the ensuing silence until the only sounds were someone's phone in the distance and the



clatter of a printer spitting out pages nearby. Her voice was measured and pitched low, yet it carried to the back of the room where Maddie stood, half hidden by a pillar.

“I’m sure my reputation precedes me,” Bartell said, voice dry. “I’m sure you’ve been told all sorts of terrible tales about who I am. I know the names I’ve been called, some more creative than others. And I’m sure you’ve been told all sorts of ruthless things about what I’m going to do to your paper.” She stopped and slid her gaze over the room. “And it’s all true.”

A panicked murmur spread through the crowd.

She eyed them coolly. “It’s time *Hudson Metro News* grew a pair or got out of the game. The facts don’t lie. You’re an underperforming commuter rag with only one news breaker on your entire reporting staff and only one ad rep who meets the sales targets. Your publication’s online presence is a joke. An occasional updated weather report, front pages from two days ago, and only two lines on where to buy advertising. Not to mention, with a balance sheet like yours, you deserve to be scrapped. It would be a mercy killing.”

Maddie winced. Okay, so it wasn’t the world’s greatest paper, but it wasn’t that bad, surely?

“Of course,” Bartell continued, “I could inject capital, grow your online presence with a cutting-edge website, and find you a team of star marketers to boost brand awareness. But this is a saturated market, and you have no point of difference. I’d be just throwing good money after bad.”

Maddie’s heart began racing, and she glanced at the ashen faces around her.

“However,” Bartell said, “funny things happen when backs are to the wall. Occasionally, in their death throes, people have the ability to surprise me. So the bottom line is this—you’re on notice. I’m giving you six weeks to impress me.”

Relieved and shocked gasps filled the room.

The media mogul held up her hand. “I will base myself here for the duration. It will give me an opportunity to assess who has talent,

whether you deserve a financial investment, or whether being shut down would be a better option. If you have been holding back, then dazzle me in the coming six weeks. Be warned—my reputation for firing incompetent people on the spot is no lie. So, in six weeks' time, on March 15, I'll know whether any of you have what it takes. For your own sakes, do not disappoint me."

*March 15? The Ides of March?* Maddie blinked.

Bartell's gaze roamed, then paused on Maddie, sliding up and down her outfit. A frown creased her brow. "That's it. We're done." She exited the room without another word.

The general manager adjusted his crimson silk tie, mumbled something vague and conciliatory about impressing their new boss, and the meeting broke up.

Maddie stared at Bartell's departing figure. *We're done?* What kind of interpersonal skills were those?

"Holy shit," Terry, the court reporter beside her, said to no one in particular. "I need to call my wife. That shark's gonna gut us. I could see it in her beady eyes." He flicked a glance at Maddie's outfit. "She sure didn't like what you're wearing, huh? Didn't you get the memo she was coming in?"

"It's my day off," Maddie protested. "It's not like I'm wearing a coat of freshly killed baby seals."

Terry gave a sour laugh. "She'd probably want one if you did."

"Yeah." Maddie sighed. She was going to be out of work within six weeks for sure. One thing she knew about newspapers was that no one ever noticed the person on the graveyard shift. They weren't seen or heard, and their jobs were never saved. With that depressing thought, she sidestepped the milling groups picking over Bartell's speech and headed for the elevator. She had a bed to crawl back into.

When she reached the hallway, the elevator doors were closing, so she called out for the shadow she glimpsed inside to hold them. The doors kept closing. Maddie sprinted and threw her arm into the gap. The doors paused, then slowly reopened. She skidded inside, finding herself face to face with Elena Bartell, who looked irritated at having



an interloper. So—travelling with minions was obviously against Bartell’s religion.

Maddie could smell her perfume, a soft, faintly spicy caress that made her want to sway forward for more. She stabbed the already lit up *Ground* button in annoyance at that random thought and leaned into the side wall as far away from Bartell as she could manage. She swung her gaze upward to the numbers ticking down.

“Bold choice,” Bartell abruptly said, shattering any hopes for escaping this elevator ride unscathed. “Does your garage band have practice now?”

“It’s my day off.” Maddie was startled to have been addressed. “I didn’t expect to be called in for your special Ides of March speech. The day Caesar got knifed? Interesting choice of dates.”

“A millennial who knows history? Well, well.”

Maddie shrugged.

“I suppose stranger things have happened.” Bartell examined Maddie’s clothing as though it offended her on a cellular level. “So you...voluntarily...wear this?”

Maddie frowned at the glint in those cool eyes. “Yeah,” she said in her most neutral tone. “I do. It’s comfy.”

“Even knowing I’d be here today to evaluate you all.”

“Are you planning on firing me based on my outfit?” Maddie asked politely, turning to look at her properly.

“What if I did?” Bartell’s eyes were challenging. “One’s wardrobe choices speak to their professionalism and whether they wish to be taken seriously. As opposed to the appearance of having crawled out of a nightclub at 4:00 a.m. for example.”

“That’s...” Maddie shook her head in disbelief. “So...”

“Go on.” Bartell’s expression dared her.

“If you fire people because of what they wear, you could lose someone brilliant. What if someone had this incredible talent but couldn’t dress to save themselves? How’s that good business?”

Bartell gave her a sharp look. “And is *that* what you are? An incredible talent? Dressed up in a gothic sack, just waiting for me to bother unravelling?”

Maddie's mouth fell open. She clanged it firmly shut. "I didn't say that," she mumbled.

"What do you do here?"

"The graveyard shift. I write briefs on the news events happening in the middle of the night. Sometimes they get followed up by the day shift and expanded on. Sometimes not." *Shit. I'm rambling.* Maddie hastily jumped to the point. "Crime. I write crime. Mostly. And, um, obits."

The edges of Bartell's mouth twitched at that, which spiked Maddie's irritation.

"And you're not from New York. Not with that accent."

"Sydney."

"Living the dream, then? Country mouse here to dazzle us city folk with your incredible talent and woeful dress sense?"

"Hey, Sydney is no country backwater. I came here for a change of scene. And I'm making the most of things." She aimed for nonchalance, but winced internally at how stiff it came out, like privileged apathy.

Bartell gave her an assessing look. "You sound like you'd rather be back home. Perhaps I should do you a favour and fire you now." Her voice dropped to a soft, loaded tone. "You can scuttle back to Sydney in relief it's all over."

"No! I can't!"

"No? Well then, Graveyard-Shift Girl, *are* you a good journalist?"

"I..." The elevator began slowing. Maddie scabbled for an answer. Her university professors all said she had talent. On the other hand, she had nothing spectacular to point to that she'd done in the past eight months at the *Hudson Metro News*. Nothing beyond short police briefs and occasionally touching obituaries that probably no one read.

"If you can't answer a simple question," Bartell said, giving her a look so direct that it felt like an X-ray, "then perhaps your secret little fears are right: you *don't* belong here. We're done."

Maddie stared at her as the doors dinged and opened. Was "drowning in New York" written all over her face?

"Oh, and improve your wardrobe. I don't want to be looking at a deconstructed beat poet for the next six weeks."

Bartell swept out of the elevator, leaving Maddie to grind her teeth. “Well, we can’t all afford yesterday’s steampunk, can we?” she said under her breath. She pushed off from the back wall and took two steps out of the elevator before freezing.

Bartell was standing just around the corner, staring back at her, hand inside her bag.

*She’d heard?*

Bartell’s expression was hard, as she plucked out her phone. She spun on her heel and pulled her shoulders back, with an insanely expensive-looking, Hermes-stamped handbag wrenched tight on her shoulder. She stalked through the foyer, pressing a button on her phone, and began barking instructions.

A blonde woman, all clopping heels and bony elbows, rushed forward to meet Bartell outside the building’s giant glass doors and pointed her to a chauffeured black BMW.

*Way to go, Maddie thought. In a single elevator ride, you actually guaranteed you’d never get a job at another Bartell Corp masthead. Anywhere. Worldwide.*

And that was a *lot* of newspapers.

She definitely should have stayed in bed.



That night, Maddie experienced Simon’s idea of a Fun Factory. It involved alcohol and lots of it. Specifically, bottles of strange colours, which her housemate mixed and matched and turned into exotic-looking homemade cocktails.

After drinking Simon’s third concoction—dubbed Car Seat Cover—Maddie confessed what had happened in the elevator.

Instead of being sympathetic, he laughed his head off. “Wha-did-I-tell-ya!” he said with a snort. “Stick a fork in yourself, you’re done. You’re cactus! I mean you did look like a death worshipper.” He slugged back something obnoxiously green.

“No, it’s she just has stupidly high fashion standards. I mean, I looked a tiny bit goth but not *bad* bad. I...it’s streetwear. I looked normal!”

“You looked like a death-cult member. But that’s okay, Mads. Look, let’s recap your day—Elena Bartell, world-famous media mogul, told you off for looking unprofessional, and then you sounded your usual underwhelmed self about your job, New York, and life in general. After that, you couldn’t tell her you were a good journalist when she asked, and finally...for the perfect cherry on top...you insulted her by telling her she was decked out in yesterday’s fashion.”

“Yesterday’s steampunk can look hot. Not my fault she took it the wrong way. It was kinda H.G. Wells if you want to know. Like, from that show, *Warehouse 13*?” Maddie slurped her drink.

He lifted his hands. “Her again—you and your posh British actresses.”

“Except Bartell isn’t posh, just cold.”

“So cold that instead of firing you on the spot, she just jumped in her car and drove away?”

“Uh. Yeah.”

“So stop fretting then. If she was as thin-skinned as you think, you’d already have your marching orders.”

“There’s still time. I’ll probably find them on my desk when I clock on tomorrow evening.” She peered at him and stuck out her glass for a refill. “The yellow thing this time.”

As Simon obliged with her cocktail, he asked, “Don’t you think a global media mogul has more things to worry about than the midnight-shift girl on a second-rate paper she’s thinking of gutting?”

“I guess.” She drained her drink in one hit.

“You guess? I bet Madame Slash-and-Burn has forgotten all about you by now.”

“Good point.” Maddie brightened. “Actually, great point! I’m, like, an amoeba in the scheme of Elena Bartell’s world. Right?” She felt a burst of hope and thrust her glass out again. “Some green with the yellow this time. The blue one makes my tongue look like some weird Outback lizard.”

“You may even be lower than an amoeba,” Simon agreed amiably as he poured. “Single-celled organisms probably get more thought than you. Fear not. Cheers.”

“Cheers.” She clinked her glass against his. “Wait, aren’t amoebas single-celled organisms already?”

“You’re asking the business studies major?” Simon squinted at her before slugging back his drink.

She laughed and, for the first time in hours, felt kind of positive.

**BlogSpot: Aliens of New York**

**By Maddie as Hell**

*Today there was an old woman sitting on a garbage can outside my Williamsburg apartment building, next to the auto repair shop. She sang softly to her bags of junk, a chaotic pile of blankets, clothes, newspapers, and food wrappings. Off-key and missing some teeth, she swayed gently to the rhythm. A scraggly white dandelion dancing in the wind, hairless in a few places but undaunted nonetheless. The upturned hat in front of her gleamed inside with a few coins. As I passed her, I realised one of the bags was actually a small child. The girl, maybe aged ten or so, had old, old eyes. She didn't smile at me or the woman beside her. She stared into the distance.*

*I swayed along with the song for a few moments, before dropping a few notes into the hat. That earned a wide, toothless grin.*

*Look after her, I thought.*

*As I walked away, I wasn't sure which of them I'd meant.*



## CHAPTER 2

### *Tales from the Dark Side*

Elena Bartell's lips curled as she listened on her phone to the witless prattling of her allegedly top editor-in-chief of her Australian fashion magazine. It might be just after four in the morning in Sydney, but she had questions that needed answers. She was being whisked away in her car from the commuter rag to which she'd given a stay of execution. Although if that disastrously dressed reporter in the elevator was the standard of staff they employed, Elena probably shouldn't have bothered.

Her gaze slid out the window, as she reviewed the odd meeting. The reporter had an expressive face beneath her pixie-cut titian hair. Elena had recognised the intelligence behind her intense, green eyes. They were also the only eyes that had lit with recognition at her choice of date on which she would announce the fate of the paper.

Still, it seemed the woman's appreciation of history might be her only redeeming feature. In fact, Graveyard-Shift Girl was lucky to still be in her employ, but Elena had been too astonished at being insulted to do anything more than walk away. Not that it mattered. The insolent Australian would be unlikely to survive the axe any more than her underperforming colleagues would.

Speaking of cursed Australians... Elena pursed her lips and moved the phone away from her ear a little. Jana Macy was still jabbering away, trying to cover her ass.

"Enough!" she spat down her phone. "Your excuses are inane. There is no sound reason *Style Sydney's* circulation should be in a death spiral. Turn the circulation figures around and quickly. Try to remember you're supposed to be part of the world's premier fashion

magazine imprint. Run some actual in-depth fashion stories. I wouldn't paper the staff bathroom with the features you've been commissioning. And make some hard budgetary decisions, or I'll come down there and make them for you, starting with your contract. We're done." She ended the call with a vicious punch of her thumbnail.

"Felicity," she said, not glancing at her chief of staff, who was on the other side of the spacious rear seat. "I believe I told you I wanted a new PA by the time I reached the *Hudson Metro News*. And yet all I see in this vehicle is you. Was I not clear enough? Did you feel keeping me fully staffed was somehow optional?"

"No, Elena. It's just, she got lost." Felicity began tapping on her phone. "Or something. I told her when," her voice rose to a desperate height, "I told her where. I told her not to be late. And she keeps texting me with updates on her attempts to get here. And she's miles away—still."

"Fire her. Get me a new assistant who is not geographically challenged. We're a global company, so one would think grasping how a map works would be a prerequisite."

She flicked a glance at Felicity, who showed no reaction to the order. Why would she? PAs were changed like heels when they failed to meet her standards.

The record for the longest-lasting assistant was still sitting at a year, nine months, and two weeks, or so she often heard Felicity tell the new PAs. The title holder was Colleen, a sweet-faced, plump Scottish girl with an impenetrable accent, blinding red hair, and an eidetic memory. Elena had personally written the girl a reference when she'd moved on. The event was so rare that the astonished woman had cried great, gulping, alarming sobs that made Elena regret her largess instantly.

Elena scrolled through her text messages and stopped on one. Her husband wished for her presence at yet another party. The health insurance company Richard worked for had more parties than lawsuits against it. She sighed as she studied the invitation. It all became clear.

She typed out her reply.

*I'd rather see flares make another comeback. Besides, I thought you had a convention on then? Miami? What changed?*

She already knew the answer. He was busy sucking up to the new vice-president, a man who had yet to forge alliances, so they'd all be sniffing around to toady up to him. Richard was singular in his hunt for status and power. There was no way he'd miss the opportunity. Ironic that people thought *he* was the charming, less ambitious one of their coupling.

Elena hadn't felt the need to share that she knew the VP's wife, Annalise, because Richard would insist she make use of the connection. She and Richard saw power differently. For her husband, it was about boosting his ego, getting attention, and having people admire him. For Elena, power was finding a company on its knees that everyone said was worthless or a lost cause, and resurrecting it. Breathing life into a corpse? Creating a heartbeat from absolute death? *That* was power. Her ability was in seeing the possibilities and talents buried in a forest of media deadwood. But most people only focused on the destruction, the dying products she pulped, not the ones she pruned to allow fresh growth. What she did was a skill that few could understand.

Elena dropped her phone in her handbag. Her mind wandered to the usual place it did when she recalled her underappreciated abilities in times long past. Times best not raked over.

"I will temporarily base myself at *Hudson Metro News*," she told Felicity. "I've informed them I'm giving them six weeks to prove themselves. You will work from there, too."

There was no disguising the confusion on the woman's face. "Seriously? Oh right, sorry, I mean of course you're serious. When are you not?"

Her chief of staff gave Elena a pained look. Little was hidden on the woman's face—and right now it bore dismay, shock, and a hint of revulsion.

"Problem?" Elena asked in a warning tone. She did not have to explain herself to anyone, although Felicity had been with her long enough to raise the occasional question. But not today.

“No,” Felicity said quickly. “It’s nothing.”

“Are you quite certain? I’d hate for you to withhold your insightful thoughts,” Elena said in her softest tone. Only a fool would take her words at face value. And Felicity was no fool.

The other woman’s eyes widened. “N-no. I would be honoured to work with you out of a building the size of a fish tank with an equivalent aroma,” she said politely, her voice clipped.

Surprise jolted Elena. “You’ve been inside?”

Felicity nodded. “It smells like the Hudson it’s named after. I mean just the lower floors—the advertising and finance departments. Our accounts team members were green at the gills when I had to visit them there last year. It was right around when you first bought them out. There were some due diligence papers I needed to collect.”

“Maintenance costs...” Elena said under her breath. “Add it to my list of pending issues for that little rag.”

“Yes, Elena.” Felicity’s head bobbed up and down. “May I ask...you say you’ve *informed them* you’ll assess them for six weeks. What are you really going to be doing there?”

Elena regarded her, impressed at how nimble her chief of staff’s mind could be at times.

“Why do you ask?” she said.

“On most new acquisitions you know in days or a week what their future is. Usually just from going over the books. I mean, I know you got the *Hudson* in a bundle of other commuter papers, so maybe you don’t know enough about them, but still...*six weeks*?” She petered out under Elena’s intense scrutiny. “It’s just, um, interesting...”

“Yes, it is interesting, isn’t it? Any further questions?” She injected steel into her voice, and Felicity shrank back at the tone, shaking her head.

“Good. I need you to get one of our lawyers in London to lean on my useless ex-husband and get him to grasp the importance of not mentioning my name to talk himself up in interviews.” Her voice dropped to chilly. “Remind dear Spencer that the confidentiality clause he signed upon our divorce has teeth. Expensive ones. Oh,

and if he takes credit for my career one more time, I *will* have him blacklisted. He'll have to get his next book reviewed by a non-Bartell Corporation publication. And how many of those are left on either side of the Atlantic these days?"

"Yes, Elena." Felicity scribbled a note. "And I'm not sure. Not many."

"Mm. Contact the Australian executive team, as well as their national accountant, lawyers, and Don McKay on the board, and tell them all to examine the spreadsheet I'm emailing them. Something's going wrong at *Style Sydney*, and the rot needs to be stopped before it gets worse. I need explanations. I want Don in the loop in case I have to do something drastic...and expensive.

"Then book my Lexus in for a service. I want to do a run to Martha's Vineyard to convince Stan to sell. Maybe he'll be more open to compromise on home ground. And tell Perry no, I will not wear pink to the Publishers' ball; I'm not a sixteen-year-old prom queen or a tea-cosy. I don't care how 'exquisite the cut' or 'brilliant the new designer' that he wishes to promote. He's an art director for a global fashion magazine empire—tell him to think like it. I want daring not dreary, and I'm perfectly capable of finding my own dress if he doesn't grasp that..."

She paused, as she was reminded of her bizarre ride down in the elevator with that green-eyed fashion tragic. Elena still couldn't believe she'd been trolled by the graveyard-shift reporter. How...disappointing. She would have to find out who she was. It had been a very long time since she'd had someone directly spit insults at her. And never an underling still in her employ.

"We're done," she ground out.

## **BlogSpot: Aliens of New York**

**By Maddie as Hell**

*They promised to visit. They haven't. The reasons pile up like unpaid bills. I get it. They're busy. Life gets crazy. But I long for the wash of home, and wish I could afford a ticket back.*

*I want to hear, hidden in their broad accents, the hum of cicadas in summer and the gentle tik-tik-tik of backyard sprinklers.*

*I want the smell of them to be a reminder of the salty air of Bondi Beach, mixed with the tang of vinegar from fish and chips spread on butcher's paper across the sand. I want the whiff of cut grass and eucalyptus trees and the faint disinfectant on the train to Bondi Junction, which always signalled the start of the weekend.*

*I want the taste of them. In the hello-again kiss, brushing tanned cheeks, I want to find the unique, almost dusty, taste of the air back home.*

*When they promised to visit, was it a lie told knowingly? Do they think having my best friend here means I don't need them? Even if we didn't work the wrong shifts, my housemate has absorbed New York into his skin. He's become the city I recoil from.*

*I miss them.*



## CHAPTER 3

### *New Yorking Badly*

Maddie flopped onto her sofa, considering her options. It was mid-morning, and she was officially awake. Dressed even. Ready to seize the day. She'd slept off the Fun Factory hangover, but Simon had still looked as if he wished he could end it all when he'd schlepped off to his business internship. Such a wuss, she thought fondly. She yawned. Then again.

She never felt fully awake anymore. At first, she assumed it was the night shift messing her up. She'd get home around 1:45 a.m., pace her apartment, or cook up some treats until she felt tired or until a ruffled Simon crawled out of bed and threw something at her. Then she'd fall into bed and sleep until noon.

But it had been getting worse. Maybe it was the bad dreams. She was sleeping later and later. Maddie sighed and wished she could just hit the beach and let the sun poke her back into life for a few months. But they were at the pointy end of winter in New York. She definitely missed watching Simon half drown himself at surfing. He'd been at it for years and still couldn't survive a half pipe. He was pure shark biscuit. She yawned again.

She should probably do some housework or attempt a half-hearted floor workout to a DVD. Maddie stared at the silent TV. Then at the floor.

Or not.

She rose and headed for the kitchen cupboards to take stock. A trudge to the grocery store for more baking supplies would do her some good. That almost counted as embracing New York, didn't it? If you squinted?

Losing interest, she considered her final option. She could update her page. Maddie's secret blog about her experiences here filled the

hours between waking, feeling guilty about not “New Yorking” properly, and going to work. Not even Simon knew she did this. It was hard to make friends at work, given the hours she worked. Her blog made her feel less lonely, not so much of an alien, and it felt nice to be followed by so many others who also felt as out of place as she did.

Maddie resolved not to dwell on how bad she was at the New York experience. She had bigger things to worry about. Like staying employed. And tonight, she had her first shift back at work since the unfortunate run-in with Elena Bartell.

Maybe she should just take another nap and not think about any of it right now. She headed back to the couch, flopped down, and pulled the blanket up to her neck. No harm in that.



Maddie got to her desk at five minutes to five and combed her fingers through her cropped red hair. After dumping her canvas backpack on her desk, she rooted through it for her lunchbox that she’d prepped for dinner. She took it to the office fridge and returned with a steaming mug of coffee.

The graveyard shift was not as exciting as she’d first thought it would be when she’d won her job. That had been such a shock—a call out of the blue. Someone had seen the résumé she’d passed around everywhere when she’d first landed in New York. She’d been so thrilled. It was her chance to prove herself at last.

Her friends meant well with all the Facebook good wishes and emails, declaring she’d be doing Pulitzer-winning stories in no time. But it was all just pressure. She’d done her best and flung herself into stories, trying to get the notice of the paper’s bosses.

Instead, anything good she dug up overnight, the day-shift crime reporters would take and develop. They had the luxury of having people around they could interview at length. They even got to do their jobs embedded within the New York Police Department, which had set up an office for all the media outlets.

As for Maddie? Well, who was awake at midnight and wanted to talk break-in statistics with her or bat around a few crime trends?

Maddie pulled up the wire feeds on her computer. They were summaries of breaking news from the press agencies—such as AP, Reuters, and AFP—that the paper subscribed to. These slid across her screen in reams of type. As words filled her screen, she scanned them with a dispassionate eye, looking for stories she could expand on. They had to fit her beat. Crime. If the subject wasn't dead, about to be, or in the process of getting its ass arrested, she moved on.

Seeing nothing that would interest the readers of the *Hudson Metro News*, she picked up her phone. She had a laminated list of seventy-seven police precincts across the five boroughs stuck to her desk divider. Technically, she wasn't supposed to call any of them directly. So, her first call of the night always went to the deputy commissioner, public information—or DCPI as the job was known. Bruce Radley was usually on duty now.

"Hi, it's Maddie at the *Hudson Metro News*," she said, after Radley answered. "Anything happening?"

"The usual, Miss Grey. I've already emailed you the day's media releases along with everyone else."

Radley always sounded so long-suffering, as if she'd bothered him, even though it was his job to be called up by the media all night. He made a point of calling her by her surname and drawing out the title Miss, because it was never Ms. Some passive aggressive shit, probably.

"Yes, I see that," Maddie said politely, tapping on one small briefing note that had caught her eye. "The serial jewel thief on Longley Ave—what are we talking, crown jewels, society women's baubles or...?"

"A break-in at a couple of old pensioners' apartments. I don't think the stolen goods were worth much."

She doodled on her page. "Okay. Hope you catch them. Hey, the drug bust two nights back was pretty impressive," she said in her most casual voice. "Fourteen arrested."

The key to drawing out an officious little roadblock like Radley was to slip in something you really wanted to know about as an afterthought to something you had no interest in. Sometimes the man had his guard down and didn't notice and things slipped out. But not often.

“Mmm, yes, I did enjoy your little story, Miss Grey,” the deputy commissioner said, but Maddie picked up the wariness. *Damn*. “What’s your interest in rehashing it?”

“Oh, just wondering why thirteen of them have had their charges dropped. There was such a big show of it all over the news. Fourteen arrested! Major drug breakthrough! And now, nope. All of them free, bar one.”

“It’s all in the media release. It went out yesterday—your day off I gather.”

“It’s not in the media release, though.” Maddie frowned and called up the briefing email in question. “It just says charges are proceeding for one person. I’ve looked and...”

“What can I say, Miss Grey? It’s old news. Charges stuck on one of them; can’t speak to the others.”

“But...”

“Anything else? Anything that’s not yesterday’s news?” Extra snippy now.

Maddie wondered what she’d trodden in. Had the arrests been all bullshit to start with just to make the nightly news, and they knew it? And then, when everyone’s backs were turned, they’d dropped the crap charges and followed through with the only guilty person? Or was the remaining accused even guilty? This smelled fishy as hell. Maddie knew she’d have to follow it up, or the curiosity would kill her.

“Which precinct handles the area that the bust was done in?” She flipped back through her notes from two days ago. “101st?”

“Miss Grey, it is highly advisable for the media to direct all their calls to my office and not bother individual precincts, which will simply direct your inquiries back to me. As you well know.”

“I hear you.” She underlined 101 in her notes. “So you’ll send me a statement on why thirteen arrests were dropped? Otherwise I’ll just ring 101st and ask direct.”

“You can’t. It is *strongly* advised...”

He could advise her all he liked, but he couldn’t actually stop her from picking up the phone and calling them. She wondered whether his bluster worked on the rest of the media. Were the other journalists

all compliant and went along with this arbitrary rule? That's not how she'd been taught. Maddie tapped her pen on her notepad, interrupting his speech on NYPD regs. She'd heard it dozens of times.

"Okay, so when can I expect your statement?" She doodled a circle around the 101 and wrote "Queens" beside it.

"I'll get back to you later, Miss Grey," he finished, dismissing her, and hung up.

Maddie rolled her eyes. Sure. She wouldn't be getting a statement from him tonight or any other night on this. Or, if she did, it would be one paragraph long, say a fat load of nothing new, and be emailed within the next thirty seconds. A straight-up copy and paste. She could set her watch to it. Maddie looked up the 101st Precinct and dialled.

"Hi, this is Maddie Grey from the *Hudson Metro News*, could I speak to the deputy inspector, please?"

"She's left for the day."

"What about whoever's supervising there now?"

Maddie hit refresh on her email. Nothing.

"He's busy. And besides, shouldn't you be calling the DCPI?"

"Yes, but I need a small clarification that the DCPI can't help me with. It's just background about the drug bust at Redfern Houses two days ago. Could you get the desk officer to call me when he's free? Won't take a minute."

"I'll tell him you called. Name?"

"Maddie Grey at the *Hudson Metro News* crime desk. My number's—" *Click.*

She sighed at the unsubtle message that they wouldn't be calling her back. Just then, an email from Radley landed.

Forty seconds. He was getting slack.

*The NYPD has no further comment on the drug operations on Sunday at 00:40. Charges are proceeding in the case of one Ramel Aiden Brooks, 18, on multiple counts of possession of a controlled substance, namely, quantities of Vicodin, ecstasy, marijuana, and oxycodone. The arrest was carried out at an apartment in New York City Housing Authority's Redfern Houses, Far Rockaway.*

So—nothing new; no further comment. And if anyone at 101st Precinct rang her back, she'd buy a lottery ticket. Such was life. That's why the day shift was where the action was. Deputy inspectors, for instance, worked regular hours and tended to return calls.

God, this job could be boring.

Maddie worked her way through the rest of the NYPD media releases in her inbox. A flasher was doing the rounds of kids' parks. The description was laughable—trench coat and combat boots. Nothing else. There was a shooting in the Bronx, but no fatalities beyond someone's hotted-up, black muscle car. Break-in stats made her pause. She wrote that one up, highlighting the safest and most risky areas in New York. No shocks. It was pretty much a standard evening's haul.

Maddie checked her watch. That late already? She headed for the office kitchen and grabbed her lunchbox. It contained a basic ham sandwich, a sad little Tim Tam (the last of her chocolate treats from Australia until her mother sent more), and a can of diet cola. High living. Not the most appetising selection, but the staff canteen had shut hours ago, and she couldn't face how many people would still be bustling around on the streets outside, even at this time of night.

Back at her desk, Maddie leaned back in her chair and contemplated her existence. She did that a lot lately. *Why am I so bad at cracking New York—personally or professionally? What made me think I could ever do this?* She was out of her depth and drowning.

Giving her soda a morose glare, she cracked the can and had a sip.

It wasn't as if she hadn't been here long enough. She couldn't use that as an excuse. Hell, Simon had been in New York half the time she had. He'd been born with a gregarious soul and seemed to know half of everyone in no time. Everyone loved Simon.

Her phone rang, so she dropped the can back on the desk and flipped the phone to her ear. "Maddie Grey, *Hudson Metro News*."

"Sergeant Malloy, desk officer for 101st Precinct. You had questions about the Redfern Houses drug bust two nights ago?"

Maddie scabbled for a pen, in a state of shock. The fact he'd called back meant he'd actively had to track down her number, which his



office hadn't taken. Malloy had to *really* want to talk to her. "Yes," she said, heart thudding.

"That one was *all* Queens Narcotics Squad's baby. This ain't nuttin' to do with us. Don't call again. 'Night."

The phone went dead. Maddie stared at it. *Or he really wanted it on the record that his office was not involved in something stinky.*

"Hey, chickee."

She started.

The editor's secretary and office gossip-hound, Lisa Martinez, was shoving her cell phone in her bag and smiling at her. "Forgot my phone again. Had to come back for it."

Lisa wasn't a friend, but they were cordial enough, and she often passed along the day-shift gossip that Maddie missed as the lone night-shift girl.

"Did you see the new thing? In the lobby?" She leaned over the desk, giving Maddie an unexpected view of her ample assets.

"What thing?" Maddie slid her gaze higher.

"Oh, a li'l thing called Jake. Squeezed into a security uniform. Muscles up to his nostrils!" Her eyes glazed over. "Tell me you wouldn't want a prime piece of that."

*So wouldn't.*

Lisa gave her hair a toss and told her in a fascinated tone, "I think he's from Texas. He's got that way of speaking. You know—all drawled-out words, like he can't bear to say them fast. He can pat me down any day. Am I right?"

She looked to Maddie for backup, as though she had an ogling comrade-in-arms.

In the eight months Maddie had worked at the *Hudson Metro*, Lisa hadn't yet picked up on her complete indifference to girly bonding. Especially on topics she had zero interest in. Like swooning over men with muscles. Or men at all.

"I met him on the way in. He only seems to know five words," Maddie pointed out with a grin. "None of which are longer than three letters. What would you two even talk about?"

Lisa exploded into a fit of giggles, forcing her mammoth bosom to rise and fall under her blouse. She gave her long, dark hair another flick. “Ha, *chica*, you seem to think I like my men for their conversation.”

Maddie forced a smile. “Ah. So, anything happening? I wasn’t here yesterday. What did I miss?”

“Oh, honey, it’s all on!” Lisa’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, even though they were the only two people in this part of the building. “So Jake’s been brought over from Bartell Corp, because the tiger shark thought our night security sucked.”

“It does,” Maddie said. “I mean Garry’s a nice guy, but a seventy-year-old with a bad heart and two hip replacements shouldn’t be our first line of defence at midnight.”

“Well, the boss lady obviously agrees cos *zzzt...*” She ran a finger across her throat. “No more Garry. Hello, Jakey.” Her eyes lit up.

“Lisa, you’re married,” Maddie said, half amused.

“True, but I’m not dead yet. Anyway,” Lisa continued shooting her an unrepentant look, “the other huge bomb is that our big *jefe* is gone.” She pointed behind Maddie.

Maddie swivelled around to check out the general manager’s glass, corner office. She sat so close to him that she could often hear snatches of his phone conversations. The reverse was also true. Colleagues always gave her sympathetic looks whenever they found out where her desk was. No one wanted to sit under Barry Bourke’s all-seeing gaze.

The only person who sat closer to Bourke than Maddie was his secretary. Melissa had a double-length desk immediately behind Maddie and right outside her boss’s office. His now *completely bare* office.

Maddie frowned. She suddenly realised Melissa hadn’t talked her ear off tonight, as she usually did between five and six when the secretary was winding up her day. Maddie’s gaze dropped to Melissa’s desk. It looked as bare as the general manager’s. How the hell could she have missed that? Well, she had been kind of preoccupied with her own employment issues.

“So Bartell fired him? And Melissa, too?”

“Yup. Just like that. Guess Elena wanted his office.” Lisa cackled. “And Melissa went with him. Her choice. Guess the rumours about those two were true.”

“So much for Bartell’s fancy speech about us all getting six weeks to prove ourselves.”

“Yeah, but what did Bourke expect? His expenses are...were... *insane*. I know—I put through some of the invoices to Accounts.”

“I doubt Bartell’s expenses will be any less, though. Come on, the woman owns a private jet for God’s sake.”

“But that won’t be billed back to us. You know, from an accounting point of view, she’s already saving the paper a ton of money by ditching Bourke’s greedy ass.”

“Still seems kind of arbitrary to me.” Maddie shook her head. “How does she know Bourke wasn’t a genius? She barely knows him.” She was still rankled by their elevator conversation, when Bartell had taunted her about possibly firing her on the spot.

“Well, you’ll know sooner than the rest of us what she’s like,” Lisa said with a naughty gleam in her eye. “Hell, now she’s sitting behind you, you’ll be able to hear pretty much everything she’s up to. So, don’t forget to pass on any good gossip.”

*Sitting behind me.* Maddie glanced back at the glass office with a sinking feeling. She was damn sure she didn’t want to be this close to the woman. Maddie realised Lisa was waiting for an answer. “Um, nope. For some reason I think low-level espionage would get my ass toasted in no time. I need this job to pay rent, especially seeing my housemate’s leaving soon.”

“Oh,” Lisa said with a pout. “Okay, I suppose. Well, enjoy virtually sitting in her lap, though. You two are gonna see an awful lot of each other for the next six weeks. She’ll be peering out at you from her desk every day like *el demonio!*” Lisa laughed heartily and waved good night.

Maddie recalled Bartell’s snide dig at her—“I don’t want to be looking at a deconstructed beat poet for the next six weeks.” It was going to be awkward as hell if Bartell really didn’t like looking at her. Although Maddie didn’t work normal hours, so the problem of Bartell being unimpressed by her wardrobe wasn’t going to be an issue.

It wasn't as if some highly successful, world-famous media mogul would want to be sitting in her poky, borrowed office for hours on end. The fact she was here for six long weeks was weird enough. But being here after hours too?

Maddie was pretty safe. She exhaled in relief.

**BlogSpot: Aliens of New York****By Maddie as Hell**

*Expectations are one of life's most powerful, invisible forces. They crush our throats tighter than any necktie. We chafe at them, deny they exist, pretend we don't care about them, yet we can't get enough of them. Expectations alter our world. They can win or cost us a job, a lover, a lawsuit, a life.*

*We are addicted to expectations. Me, I'm the expectations junkie. Check me out, living the life I'm expected to. I could be failing happily back home. Instead, I'm succeeding miserably here.*

*I know focusing on expectations is a pointless waste of mental resources. They aren't real. They're entirely in our own minds.*

*And yet, I'm always going back for another hit.*

*Why?*

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# THE BRUTAL TRUTH

BY LEE WINTER

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