



BROKEN GLASS

A Prelude to Smooth Operator

Gamal Hennessy

Broken Glass

A Prelude to Smooth Operator

Written by Gamal Hennessy

© 2013 Nightlife Publishing LLC

All Rights Reserved

To learn more about Nightlife Publishing visit:

<http://nightlifepublishing.nyc>

Dedication

To Alysse for giving me the chance to be a part of her life

Chapter 1: One Too Many

“Last call!”

Russ Warner shut off the music in the bar as he projected his voice across the room. He wanted to make sure he had everyone’s attention, so he repeated himself over the hum of the collective conversation. “Last call, everybody. If she won’t go home with you tonight, you blew it.. Come back tomorrow night and try again. Last call”

Russ heard a few drunken chuckles as people grabbed their coats and filed out into the street. Some of the regulars waved their good-byes as they passed him, stumbling out into the cool fall night with the exaggerated affection that comes from a long drinking session with coworkers. He wondered how many of them would wake up in the morning next to a naked office mate. Russ shook his head, thinking about his last day at the hedge fund. It started with a quick drink at happy hour, descended into embarrassed groping for clothes in the morning, and ended with a trip to the HR office, a sexual harassment lawsuit and a pitiful severance package. He knocked back another shot to celebrate the fact that he didn’t have to deal with that nonsense anymore.

“Hey, boss. Let me get another one too. Don’t hog it all for yourself.” Russ looked up to see Alex leering at him. Now that the overhead lights were on, Russ saw that the man’s tight black curls looked extra greasy, his tan looked extra orange, and his smirk looked extra slimy. The Hermes tie was loosened just enough and the sleeves of his Thomas Pink shirt were rolled up to a precise point on his forearm. He tried so hard to look relaxed. Russ decided the man practiced the look when he was alone, comparing himself to a picture in GQ to make sure he got it right.

He stood there, waving his platinum credit card around like a magic wand capable of conjuring up anything he wanted. Russ knew Alex was a douchebag the first time he came to the bar several months ago. The impression became stronger with repeated exposure. Tonight the effect was particularly potent. It must have shown on Russ’s face, because Alex shrugged his shoulders and gaped at him.

“What the fuck is the problem, son?”

“I don’t have a problem.” Russ reached for the Patron and looked at the table where Alex had been sitting. He’d left two women chatting. Jenny sat on the right. She was a plump, dumpy girl with dirty-blonde hair and too much makeup, who never seemed comfortable drinking with her coworkers. She offered nervous laughter in response to something the other girl said. Russ didn’t know the other girl’s name but he knew that she was gorgeous. Russ spent most of the night wondering who she was, even though he knew those thoughts led to trouble.

He didn't think she worked with Alex and Jenny. She was too cool and stylish to waste her time at a stiff Wall Street bank. He couldn't tell if she was black, South American, or Indian. Her smooth dark skin and long black hair could have been from any of those places. Russ liked blondes. His lawsuit had been a blonde, but this girl had a tight supple body and mysterious eyes that stunned him whenever she caught him gawking. She didn't notice his gaze now. She giggled like a maniac and swayed back and forth, as if she might lose her balance and fall out of her chair. Russ looked back at Alex and inclined his head in her direction.

"I don't have a problem, but don't you think she's had enough?"

Alex snorted and tilted his head back in an attempt to look down at the bartender. "Don't worry about it, chief. This one's for me. I need to catch up to her." The dark girl let out a loud laugh and teetered on the edge of her chair. Jenny had to grab her arm to hold her up.

Russ poured the shot of Patron, focusing on the pour and barely glancing at Alex. "Your new friend has been drinking tequila all night. You and Jenny have only been drinking Absolut. I don't think this is for you. If it was, why would you let me keep pouring the Patron?" He kept the shot glass close to him and he capped the bottle, as if he wasn't going to give up the drink without an answer to his question.

Alex's face screwed itself up into an ugly mask of resentment. "Mind your fucking business, dude. You can't tell me what to drink or what to do!"

Russ slid his hands between Alex and the Patron, shaking his head in slow satisfaction. "Sorry. I can't legally serve someone who is clearly intoxicated. Why don't I get her a glass of water instead?"

The platinum card shot out of Alex's hand and hit Russ squarely in the face. The plastic had no real weight, but the arrogance of the action made Russ stagger back. Alex leaned over the bar until his face was inches away from Russ's. "Fuck you bitch! Give me my drink or I will shut this whole fucking place down! You know who I am! You know who I work for! You know you better not fuck with me!"

The first instinct Russ had was to reach across the bar and knock the product out of Alex's hair. But as he raised his fist to swing, he could see the slimy smile was back. Alex just waited for the blow. He wanted it. Russ realized what would happen after he punched a customer, and he lowered his fist.

"What's up, son? Not in the mood to pick a fight with the new exec? Not ready to get your ass sued off and your shithole bar shut down? Good! Now take my card, close my tab, and hope that I give you a little tip."

Russ glared at Alex, trying to strangle the man with the power of his violent thoughts. But nothing happened. That stupid smirk only dug deeper into the slimy man's face. Defeated, Russ snatched the

card off the bar and turned his back on Alex to process the sale. He could hear the douche lift the glass off the bar and amble away. He caught the one word Alex chuckled as he went back to his table.

“Bitch.”

Russ threw down the card, grabbed his cigarettes, and stormed outside.

Chapter 2: Passed Over

Russ exhaled the first drag of the Marlboro, when the door to the bar swung open. He felt his spine tense up with the thought of another confrontation with Alex, but it Jenny's thick leg crossed the threshold instead. Russ took another drag in an attempt to calm down as she passed him. She didn't say a word. That pissed him off. Her eyes were cast down and away as if she was ashamed of something, as if she felt the guilt that her coworker was incapable of. That only pissed him off more.

"That's a great fucking guy you work with."

The words stopped Jenny in her tracks. She responded to him in a huff, without turning to face him. "Not with. For."

"What?"

Her face was flushed red as she spun to face him. "I don't work with him. I work for him. He's my boss now. We were celebrating his promotion tonight."

Russ shrugged and glared down at her. "So what? Does that mean he gets to treat me like shit? Does he get to take your friend home as soon as she's drunk enough to not realize where she is?"

Jenny looked away. "Rita is a big girl. I'm sure this isn't the first time she's let a guy buy her drinks and then gone home with him."

Russ leaned back against the wall and folded his arms across his chest. "That seems a bit spiteful. Would she leave you alone with some douchebag if you were drunk?"

Jenny whirled back on him again. This time, there were tears in her eyes and a feral sneer on her face. "I don't know, Russ. No one has ever bothered to try to get me drunk before! I guess I'm not worth the effort!"

Her flash of angry vulnerability shut Russ up and diffused his self-righteousness. Her lumpy oversized bag slid off her shoulder as her anger boiled over. "I don't want to leave her. I don't even want to be here, but I can't do anything about it! I've done all I could for the bank. I've already been passed over for this job...twice. Alex doesn't even know what the fuck he is doing at work without my help. But none of that matters. He has the connections and the pedigree. I don't. He got the job. I didn't. I can't tell him what to do or get in his way. And you know what? If I don't start kissing his ass I'm going to lose my job. I can't do anything about it. I can't."

Russ felt like he stared at Jenny's tear-stained face for hours, even though it was probably only a few seconds. He desperately wanted to say something supportive or comforting or just mildly intelligent. But all he could come up with between pulls on the cigarette was, "So you're gonna let him fuck your friend to keep your job? That's fucked up." He regretted the words as they left his mouth.

"Fuck you, Russ. Fuck you and your shitty little bar! You didn't give a fuck about her when she was getting drunk, when you were taking the money for the liquor." The tears were flowing freely when Jenny hoisted up her big bag and walked away. "You're no better than he is...bitch!"

Russ wanted to grab her and force her to take the words back. He wasn't like Alex. He didn't have to get girls drunk to bring them home. That's not what happened. But before he could lift himself off the wall, the door to the bar opened again. The slam of the thick wood was punctuated by another drunken giggle. This time, Alex strolled past Russ with his arm around the girl's shoulders. The two men locked eyes in a silent challenge. Alex drew the girl closer, flaunting his victory. Russ tried to look into her eyes again, but they were unfocused. She wasn't looking at anything. Alex practically held her up. Russ watched her small muscular body stumble away and imagined Alex on top of her, holding her down so she couldn't fight back. He remembered Jenny's tirade and the credit card that got thrown in his face. Russ fumed, unable to look away from the pair.

Somehow, Alex felt the stare. When they were a few feet away, he looked over his shoulder and locked eyes with Russ again. With a final slimy smirk, the banker flipped him off and turned the corner.

Russ stormed back into the bar. The cigarette still dangled from his lips. The only one left there now was Fernando, Russ's bar back, bouncer, DJ, and maintenance man. He dutifully flipped chairs onto the tables when Russ snatched up his jacket from behind the bar.

"Fern, start closing up. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Russ didn't know how old Fern was, but there were times when the man would shake his head with wisdom, as if he had seen it all before. He didn't know how much of the altercation the little man had witnessed, but he spoke as if he could read Russ's mind. "Leave it alone, man. You don't want to deal with that shit. It's not worth it."

Russ looked back and pointed at Fern, but he didn't stop moving. "Ten minutes. I'll be right back."

Chapter 3: Above and Beyond

Pearl Street was empty at that time of night. The frantic Wall Street crowds wouldn't swarm this narrow alley for a few more hours. Russ could see the couple stagger down the street, bouncing off the walls and weaving around the abandoned police barricades. He couldn't hear what they said, but he could see Alex take every opportunity to grab Rita's ass and pull her in for a clumsy kiss. He could hear the voice of reason whisper to him like another man walking with him in the darkness.

Now would be a good time to call the cops.

They were close to Alex's apartment. Russ knew where the banker lived, because Alex never failed to brag about it to anyone at the bar who would listen. It was 55 Beaver Street. Russ winced, remembering the number of lame sex jokes Alex squeezed out of his address.

If you don't call them soon, he's going to get away.

Russ was the only other person on the street, but Alex wasn't paying any attention. His drunken brain could only focus on groping Rita. Russ thought about confronting him on the dark street and wiping that smirk off his slimy face with the heel of his boot.

No. Don't fight him here. You'll probably win, but he'll recognize you. That douche might call the cops on you instead of the other way around. You have to call them first.

His internal debate was heated by his anger and the liquor. But why call them now? It's not illegal for a man to take a woman home, even if she is drunk. I can't call them now. It's too soon. I need to catch him in the act. I need to make sure he gets busted.

Would that make you feel better? Is that really what this is about? Russ tried to ignore his own cynicism.

Alex turned Rita onto Beaver Street. Russ followed close behind. He wanted to reach the lobby after they left to see what floor they took the elevator to. He didn't know what apartment Alex lived in, but he figured he could narrow it down once he figured out the floor.

So what are you going to do when you figure out where he lives, knock on the door and ask to watch?

No, I'll just happen to be in the hallway when Rita starts screaming. Then I can call the cops. Then I can bang on the doors of his neighbors and get other people involved. I can let everyone know what kind of guy he is and let everyone see him dragged off in handcuffs.

How can you be sure the cops will come in time? What makes you think everyone in that building isn't just as self-involved and douchey as Alex? They might want you arrested for trespassing before they go after him for rape.

Then I'll improvise. I can't just let him fuck her and throw her away because Jenny didn't get a promotion.

This isn't really about Jenny's promotion, is it? Russ suppressed the irrelevant question.

He pulled up short in front of the building. Although 55 Beaver was older compared to the high-rises springing up downtown, it was retrofitted with modern trappings and polished with an upper-class veneer. The revolving glass door was held in place with gold fittings that sparkled in the darkness as Alex pushed his way through. The marble floor resembled a mirror as he dragged Rita through the lobby. The hallway of floor-to-ceiling mirrors reflected dozens of images of Alex lumbering toward the elevator bank with his prize.

The doorman looked official in his topcoat, suit, and matching hat. He smiled and waved to Alex without raising an eyebrow. Clearly, the sight of a resident lugging a helpless woman into the building was a normal sight for him. Russ wondered how many douches lived at 55 Beaver Street and how many of them practiced this type of "dating" on a regular basis. He pressed himself against the side of the building, imagining a tribe of Wall Street cavemen who hit women in the head with Grey Goose shots instead of clubs before pulling them by the hair to their high-priced caves.

You know all about that life, don't you? You know you're not going to get any help from other people in the building. You can't even get in there without mixing it up with the doorman. Maybe this isn't your fight, "boss." Maybe you should just close up your bar, go back to Bushwick, and try not to imagine this girl getting thrown out on the street in the morning.

Russ saw the reflection of Alex step into the elevator with Rita in tow. The mirror's reflection revealed the brushed steel walls of the elevator and the dark eye of the security camera. The doors closed and Russ felt that he'd lost his chance to do anything.

His inner voice mocked him. I know. *I know. You don't want to leave her. You don't even want to be here, but you can't do anything to stop it. Face it. Jenny was right. You had your chance to save Rita in the bar, but you were too busy making money. Now it's too late.*

He saw the elevator stop on the third floor. Then it came back down. The doors opened and it was empty. Russ thought about Alex forcing himself on Rita right now. He thought about how he would feel the next time Alex or Jenny came into the bar. He didn't think about going back to Bushwick.

So what are you going to do?

Russ stormed past the revolving door. From the corner of his eye he saw the doorman look in his direction, but he turned left at the corner before curiosity compelled the man to come outside. Russ quickly made another left into an alley and into the darkness behind 55 Beaver Street.

The back of the apartment building was very different from the residential entrance and more similar to the back of his bar. The naked bulbs above the doors cast a feeble light that barely penetrated the shadows. The stench of decades of carelessly discarded garbage and the occasional homeless squatter assaulted his senses. Overhead, the old fire escapes hovered like steel spider webs that blocked out the moonlight. Russ came up with a plan. He scanned the ladders for one that was low enough to climb, but they were all pulled up.

So much for using the fire escape. Why don't you get out of here before the doorman has you busted for trespassing?

As his vision adjusted to the near darkness of the alley, Russ noticed a steel Dumpster sitting open under the fire escape. He rushed over to it and tried to close the lid. He maneuvered it with two hands, not wanting the heavy metal sheet to slam down and alert the doorman, or anyone else. Russ had to strain his back muscles to control the descent of the Dumpster lid. It slid in his hands when his fingers came into contact with something slimy that smelled like fish, urine, and sweat. With the lid closed, he wanted to wipe his hands on something, but he didn't want to get the foul smell on his clothes. He shook his head and slid his hand back across the Dumpster lid in a vain attempt to scrape the mysterious slime off his hands. All the while, the voice in his head chastised him.

What the fuck are you doing? Have you lost your mind?

Russ clambered up the wobbly Dumpster and positioned himself under the fire escape.

Who do you think you are, Batman? Do you think you're just going to climb into his apartment and save a girl you don't even know from being raped?

He hesitated for a moment at the edge of the Dumpster, considering the wisdom of his inner voice. Beating it back a third time, Russ made the short leap of faith and grabbed the ladder. After more than a little struggling, he took slow movements up the ladder to the third floor.

But his common sense wouldn't give up. And what do you think is going to happen if you manage to "save" Rita, you ass? Do you think she's going to be grateful? Do you think she's going to fuck you instead of him because you risked so much to save her? Or are you trying to make up for your own mistakes?

For the first time, Russ spoke to his inner voice out loud. "Shut up."

So THAT'S what this is about. You don't give a fuck about Jenny or Alex. You don't really care about saving Rita from being raped. I see it now. You just want to prove what a good guy you are. You want to show the world you're not like Alex. As if you didn't buy the same vodka and use your position the same way he is. I get it now.

"Shut up," Russ whispered to himself.

Or maybe it's worse than that. Maybe you just hate Alex because he's getting away with it and you didn't. Maybe you're climbing up a fire escape in the middle of the night to keep him from getting what you want for yourself. You're a very noble soul, Russ. You're going above and beyond the call of duty.

"Shut the hell up."

Chapter 4: Tables Turned

Russ reached the third floor and curled up next to the window. The curtains were drawn but they were thin enough for him to see through. He had a view of the entire spacious bedroom. He could see the plush white carpet, the elegant king-sized bed, and the blood-red abstract sculptures mounted on either side of the huge flat-screen TV. All of this provided a stark stage for Alex and Rita.

The douche was close to her, in the center of the room and in front of the bed. His arms were rough around her waist. He tried and failed several times to lean in for a kiss. Her movements frustrated him. Her hands were up to push him away. Her head bobbed and weaved to avoid his mouth. The more she struggled, the rougher he became.

It looks like she needs saving...the voice whispered.

Alex threw away the pretense of seduction. He pushed her down on the bed. When she tried to sit up, he pushed her down again, barking something at her that Russ couldn't make out. She tried a third time to sit up, and he pulled back his fist as if he was about to punch her in the face. She laid back onto the bed on her own this time, holding her hands up in pleading defeat.

If you're going to do something, you'd better do it now...

Russ reached into his pocket to pull out his phone. He saw Alex move in on Rita, unbuckling his belt with a slimy grin. Standing triumphant above her, he pushed her legs open with a rough sweep of his arm and reached for the belt of her jeans.

Did you come up here just to watch her get raped? Do something!

Russ didn't know what to do. He thought about banging on the window, he thought about yelling or calling the police or breaking the window or running away. But he didn't do anything. He just sat there, curled up next to the window watching the man he hated pull down his pants.

And that's when everything changed.

Russ never spent much time watching MMA fights. He bought the pay-per-view package for the bar, because people like watching sports when they drink, but he always thought the whole thing was too bloody and too gay for his tastes. Still, he'd seen a few fights, even if he didn't understand them. As he watched Rita move, the first thing he thought of was the men he saw in the octagon.

In one moment, Alex climbed on top of her. Then, Rita's legs coiled themselves up and around his head and shoulders. At first, Alex didn't seem to notice. He just kept moving in on her. Then her hips

shot off the bed like a piston. Arching her back, she clamped her thighs around Alex's neck and arm with a violence that made the slimy man's body shudder. That's when he tried to pull away, but he was trapped. Alex tried to push her away. He tried to punch her. But nothing worked. Rita wasn't moving like a giddy drunk anymore. Her hips rolled back and forth, guiding her prey like a python, controlling every move Alex made, and from what Russ could see, she squeezed the life out of him in the process. Russ watched in silence as Alex struggled with wild rage, then with slow determination, and then not at all. His body dropped onto the plush carpet like a heap of old clothes.

That's when Russ dropped his phone and heard it clatter onto the landing. He struggled to catch it in the low light and the narrow landing of the fire escape, but his hands were cold and clumsy. The phone dropped between the gap in the bars, and the clatter echoed as his phone bounced down three flights into the alley. He hoped he could find the stupid thing when he got downstairs. Then he hoped that Rita didn't hear the noise he made.

He looked back in the window and saw her walking straight toward him. He had the sensation of watching her glide across the plush carpet, but he couldn't see her moving. He couldn't see past her eyes. The mysterious eyes that stunned him in the bar terrified him now. The closer she came, the more burning anger he could see in them. He knew she was coming to kill him. His heart began to race. His body was seized with a fear that pushed him to flee. He couldn't let her get to him. He wouldn't make the same mistake as Alex did and let her get too close. Russ ran. He lunged for the stairwell as fast as his cold and clumsy limbs would carry him. He fell more than ran down the steps.

He heard the window open behind him as he reached the ladder. He saw the light from Alex's bedroom in the corner of his eye when he turned around to climb down. A shadow fell over him. She was chasing him. He felt himself running in slow motion. He felt her closing in on him. Russ was only able to make it down two rungs of the ladder before his cold and clumsy limbs conspired with the slime on his hands and the fear in his heart. His hand slipped off the metal. He felt himself suspended in the air as the world did somersaults around him.

Then there was a flash and a thunderous bang.

Then there was the smell of carelessly discarded garbage in his nose and the taste of blood in his mouth.

Then there were footsteps.

Then there was nothing.

Chapter 5: No Good Deed

Russ didn't know how he got to the hospital and he didn't know how long he had been there. He did know that he could hardly feel his back. He knew his arm was broken. He knew he had to pee into a bag. He also couldn't walk, although the doctors said the pain in his legs meant that he'd probably be walking again soon. All the doctors had talked to him about his broken ribs and punctured kidney, but he couldn't focus on any of that now. His eyes were fixated on the badge, swinging from the chain, around the neck of a man who called himself Connor.

He couldn't look at Detective Connor's face. Connor's gaze made Russ feel small. The flimsy gown he wore, and the helpless position he lay in made him feel vulnerable. But the questions were the worst part. Connor made him retell the story a dozen times, and the effort sucked the life out of him. He wanted to sleep. He wanted the doctor to give him something for the pain. He wanted to forget the look in Rita's eyes for a little while. There was a little Asian doctor or a nurse or someone standing in the room with them, but she didn't help. Every time Russ looked to her for support, she just stared into her phone.

"Before I go, let me get a few things straight..." Connor groaned in a way that made him sound just as tired of this conversation as Russ was. Russ hoped he really planned to go soon, so he tried to focus for just a bit longer. "You followed Alex Genard and this woman, Rita, to his apartment and then climbed up the fire escape, because you were afraid she was going to be raped, right?"

"Yeah, I know it sounds strange but..."

"But you wanted to catch him in the act. I understand." The tone in Connor's voice was not understanding. "Then, when you were watching the attack take place, you say Rita choked Mr. Genard until he was unconscious, and then she came after you. Is that right?"

The way Connor said 'you say Rita choked Mr. Genard' made him sound even less sympathetic. "Yeah, she heard me when I dropped my phone. I was going to call the cops when..."

"...when you thought Mr. Genard was about to commit rape? So when Rita came to the window, why did you run?"

Now Russ couldn't even look at Connor's badge. He looked down at the pale blue sheets, pulling on the lint with his good hand. "I was afraid of her. I needed to get away."

Connor tilted his head and sucked his teeth. "If she was drunk, like you said, and you were trying to help her, like you said, then why would you be afraid of her, Mr. Warner? Why would you be trying to

save someone who frightened you? Why would you climb up a fire escape in the middle of the night to witness a crime and then run away when the victim saw you?"

Russ felt like the question hung in the air for hours, even though it was probably only a few seconds. He wanted a cigarette to help him stall. He wanted to say something revealing about the anger in her eyes or find words that could convey the terror that gripped him as he ran. He wanted to say something that could explain things to Connor without sounding like a fool or a coward or a liar.

All he managed to mumble as he looked away was, "I was afraid of the look in her eyes."

Connor didn't respond right away. He just stood there looking down on Russ and making him feel smaller and smaller. Agonizing seconds passed, and the detective reached into his coat pocket. Russ assumed it would be a business card with a number. He imagined Connor telling him to call in case he remembered anything else about what happened, like the cops did on TV when they finished asking questions. Russ felt hollow and weak, but he was relieved that this would be over soon.

"So when did you get Genard's wallet, Mr. Warner?"

The question hit like a slap in the face. "His wallet? I never had his wallet. Why are you asking me that?"

Connor pursed his lips and pulled out a sheet of paper. "Well, I need to figure out how his wallet wound up in your pocket. The ER staff recorded it as part of your personal effects when you were admitted."

Russ spoke slowly, trying to understand what Connor was trying to say. "I didn't take his wallet. I never touched him. I never..."

Connor handed Russ a sheet of paper. Russ saw that it had the letterhead of the hospital, but he couldn't read any of the words. The harsh tone in Connor's voice dominated his senses. "They found it in your pocket, Russ. They also found a watch that we think belonged to him too. How do you explain that?"

"What are you talking about? I didn't take his wallet!"

Connor leaned in only a few inches, but he towered over Russ like a colossus. His words rained down like physical punches. "So can you explain the window to his apartment that we found broken from the outside? Can you tell me why we found a damaged piece of Bali artwork on the ground next to you in the alley? You know the one I'm talking about. It's part of the set that was in Genard's apartment! Can you tell me why the statue we found next to you had Genard's blood all over it? Or why you weren't wearing shoes when EMS found you? If you can tell me all of that, maybe you can also tell me who killed Alex Genard, although at this point I think I can guess!"

Russ felt himself try to lean away from Connor and his words, but he couldn't escape. He struggled to deny the accusations, but he just felt his head shaking. It was as if he came out of one nightmare and fell into a worse one one. "Killed? I didn't kill any..."

Connor kept on coming, leaning onto the bed and clutching the thin sheets like a hawk snatching up a mouse. "Let me tell you what I know, Mr. Warner. I know Alex came into your bar and gave you a hard time. Based on his credit card statements, he was in there pretty often. We know he embarrassed you when he threw that card in your face. We've got that on the video tape from your bar. We've also got witnesses who say they saw you rushing out of the bar right after Genard left. Then the doorman of the building confirmed you were outside on the night of the murder. We know you climbed up to his window, because you admitted it, and we know you fell on your way out. That's how you wound up here."

Russ cringed now. He tried to curl into a fetal position in the far corner of the bed, but his broken arm and his pee bag held him in place. Connor continued to lean in, but his tone had softened to a conspiratorial whisper. "Here's what I think happened, Russ. I think Alex was probably a dick to you every night, and I think you got fed up with it. You got tired of him flashing his money around. You got tired of seeing him get all the girls while you were stuck behind the bar. That night, after that shit with the card, you just snapped. At first, maybe you did think that girl was in trouble, maybe you didn't. That didn't matter, because all you really wanted to do was get back at Alex. You just needed an excuse."

"No, that's not it. That's not what..."

"You were drinking and you were frustrated. I get it. You followed him to his apartment. You avoided his doorman and climbed up to his window. You broke the window to get in, and you took off your shoes so you wouldn't leave footprints on Genard's nice white carpet. Did you watch them fuck before you went in, Russ? Is that what sent you over the edge? You got hit with a sexual harassment charge a few years ago, didn't you? Did you hate him that much for getting what you couldn't have, even while you were watching him? Is that when you decided to break into his place after the girl left? Is that when you hit him with the statute?"

"NO! NO! She was still there. She choked him! It wasn't me!"

"But we didn't find any girl, Russ. We have no ID on her and no real description. The doorman said she left soon after she arrived, but she hid her face when she got out of the elevator. It was probably a walk of shame thing. You know how that is." Russ felt Connor closing in for the kill, but he couldn't find anything to say.

"We didn't find the girl, but we did find Genard's skull caved in from repeated blows with a blunt object. We found the broken window near the fire escape. We found you in the alley with his watch, his

wallet, your shoes, and the murder weapon. Did you think it would look like a robbery that way? Did you think that would fool us, Russ? Did you think it was that easy?"

"NO!" Russ screamed, repeating the same denial over and over. He wasn't trying to talk to Connor or even make sense. He just screamed to drown out the lies. He thrashed around in the bed like a child throwing a tantrum, threatening to pull out the IV and dislodge the pee bag. That's when the little Asian doctor finally got involved.

"All right, Connor, that's enough! Give my patient a chance to rest. He's not going anywhere anytime soon." She snatched opened the door to the hall to emphasize her command.

Russ turned his head to hurl more defiance at Connor, but the words never came out. He was too stunned by what he saw to shout or even speak.

First, he saw Fern sitting in the hallway. The shoulders of his bar back, bouncer, DJ, and maintenance man were slumped, like a child being punished. He nodded to whatever was being said to him, offering no response in return. As Connor stormed out of the room, Russ saw the woman who stood over Fern berating him.

He couldn't tell if she was black, South American, or Indian. Her smooth dark skin could have been from any of those places. She had a tight supple body that Russ would never forget. Her hair was short and spiked now, but her eyes were the same when she glanced in his direction. They were dark, mysterious, and more terrifying now than when he saw them in the window. He looked away from those eyes instinctively. That's when Russ saw something else.

As the door closed, his eyes fixated on the badge, swinging from the chain, around the neck of the woman who called herself Rita.

That's when Russ understood what kind of trouble he was in.

Then he screamed.

Chapter 6: Things Change

Jenny Callahan looked like a soaked rat as she stood on the corner of Thirty-First Street and Tenth Avenue. A cold wind blew rain across her body and under her umbrella. The miserable weather made her long black skirt cling to her thick legs. Her excessive makeup ran down her face, making her look like a wax statue melting in front of a fireplace. She shivered there alone, oblivious to her appearance and the shadows around her. She was so lost in her own thoughts that she didn't even notice the dark blue Ford Fusion that pulled up beside her. But when the door opened she got in, without even looking to see who the driver was.

Ria Marlen, the woman who called herself Rita at the bar, locked the car door as soon as Jenny closed it. Without a word spoken between them, Jenny reached into her raincoat and handed Ria an envelope. Whatever was in it made it thick and heavy. Ria took it and placed it under her phone on the armrest between them. Turning back to her passenger, Ria looked quizzical. "What's with the all-black outfit, Jenny?"

Jenny looked at her feet when she responded. Her voice was flat and distant. "Alex's funeral was today. I didn't have time to change clothes before I came to meet you."

"My condolences" Ria grinned. "So now that Alex is gone, did you get his job?"

Jenny nodded without raising her eyes. "His murder took everyone by surprise. I'm going to be the interim director until the end of the year. There's no time to look for a replacement." She was barely audible when she buried her face in her hands. "We've got a major roadshow coming up at the beginning of next quarter and I've already handled most of the offering." She pulled shaky pale fingers through an unkempt nest of dirty-blonde hair. "I got the job."

"Congratulations." Ria's voice was thick with insincere happiness. "Then you got what you wanted and everyone got what they deserved."

"NO!" Jenny's flash of rage finally gave her the strength to look Ria in the eye. "I didn't want any of this! Alex was only supposed to get hit with a rape charge! He wasn't supposed to die! What did you do? What happened?"

Ria shrugged. "I could ask you the same question. You were supposed to leave the bar and go straight home that night. Is that what you did?"

“Yes! I did everything you...!”

“Did you talk to Russ when you were leaving? Did you say something to him to set him off? Did you give him a reason to get involved?”

“I didn’t say anything to him! I just told him to mind his own business.”

Ria shrugged and looked away. “Well, whatever you said to him inspired him to be a hero. Things changed when he got involved. I had to improvise, but you still got what you wanted, so everyone is happy.”

Jenny shook her head, whimpering. “I wanted Alex to get fired. I wanted to finally break through the glass ceiling. But I didn’t want a murder on my hands. I didn’t want to send anyone to prison. I just wanted the job I deserved.”

Ria rolled her eyes. “You have your job, Jenny. It’s too late to complain about how you got it.”

Jenny continued to shake her head as if the movements of her body were no longer under her control. “No. No, I can’t do this. I don’t want it this way. I won’t do it. I’m going to quit in the morning and leave town. I can’t...”

With a slow, calm hand Ria picked up her phone and turned on the screen. She pressed a button and then pressed another. A hollow, metallic, and whimpering voice echoed through the car. “I wanted Alex to get fired. I wanted to finally break through the glass ceiling. But I didn’t want a murder on my hands. I didn’t want to send anyone to prison. I just wanted the job...”

Jenny glared at Ria in horror. The implications of their conversation, of her confession, sank into her mind. With a slow, calm hand Ria put the phone in her jacket pocket and broke the silence.

“Jenny, you are not going to leave New York. You are not going to leave your job. You are going to do everything and anything I tell you to do unless you want to be convicted in the conspiracy to kill Alex Genard and frame Russ Warner for the murder.”

Jenny’s body began to shiver. Her words came out as a desperate whisper. “You can’t do this to me! I’ll go to the police. You did this, not me! You did it.”

Ria was unconcerned as she picked up the envelope and checked the contents. “You could go to the police. You could turn yourself in and name me as an accomplice.” She glanced over at Jenny with the same look that sent Russ screaming into the night. “But if I was able to take care of Alex and Russ, think of what I might do to you, or your brother up at UConn, or your dad who takes all those business trips, or...”

“Stop it!” Jenny cried without reservation now. The magnitude of what she’d done and what she was involved in overwhelmed her. “What do you want from me?”

Ria lashed out and snatched up a huge handful of dirty-blond hair on the top of Jenny’s head. The blow was so sudden and so vicious that Jenny didn’t know what happened, until she was being pushed up against the door. “Stop your fucking whining and stop questioning me!” Jenny’s bawling became louder and more pathetic. “I said, Shut! Up!”

Jenny held her hand over her mouth to stifle her cries. Ria jabbed a threatening finger at her. “Here is what you are going to do: you are going to take this money and you are going to open a trust fund for the Safe Haven Children’s Center. You are going to manage it personally. You are going to make sure that the donors are anonymous and the structure of the account never raises any red flags with anyone. You are going to do your roadshow to the best of your ability, and you are going to keep this job. You are going to do what I say when I say for as long as I say. If you can do all that, then everything will be fine. If you do anything else, I am going to fuck you on every level imaginable. Do you understand?”

Jenny’s hair had fallen down into a ragged tumble over her face, but her head nodded slowly. Ria unlocked the doors. “Then get the hell out of my car.” Jenny fumbled for the envelope and slinked out of the car without another word.

Jenny Callahan looked like a soaked rat as she stood on the corner of Thirty-First and Tenth. A cold wind blew rain across her body. She didn’t even bother to open her umbrella. Her excessive makeup ran down her face, smeared by tears, sweat, and rain. She cried there alone, oblivious to her appearance and the shadows around her. She was so lost in her own thoughts that she hardly noticed the dark blue Ford Fusion that pulled away from her on the corner.

She also didn’t notice the off duty taxicab a block away and across the street. The man inside the car was invisible to her. She had no idea that he had a high-speed night-vision camera aimed at her. She didn’t know he’d taken several dozen photos of her in her darkest moment. “Do we have any idea who she is?” He asked into the microphone on his cheek.

The response sounded distant in the rain. “No, But if she gets into Marlen’s car and then gets back out without going anywhere, she might be worth taking a look at. Do we need to clear a new surveillance request with Baker first?”

The man who wasn’t a taxi driver put down his camera and started the ignition of the car. “No. Corporate gave him a blank check on the Marlen case. I’ll follow the main target. You stick with the new girl until we can start a file on her. Understood?”

The unseen voice responded quickly. “Understood. I’ll stick with her and see if I can get a home address and work from there.”

“Outstanding.” The fake taxi driver blended into traffic to follow Ria, driving past Jenny without a second look.

End

Thanks

I hope you enjoyed this short trip into the world of Crime and Passion. If you want to find out who is following Detective Marlen and what is motivating her ruthless vigilante tactics, check out *Smooth Operator: The Life and Crimes of Warren Baker* on my website and pick up the e-book at [any store where the book is sold](#).

And if you want to find out more about the Crime and Passion series, [please join the RSVP List](#) (no spam I promise) at

I hope you enjoyed the book and your trip in the world of Crime and Passion.

Have fun.

Gamal