

BLUE JUSTICE



**VOW
OF
JUSTICE**

LYNETTE EASON



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Dedicated to Jesus—
justice seeker, abundant forgiver,
and passionate pursuer of his children.
Thank you for allowing me to do what I do.



LATE APRIL
VLADISLAV NEVSKY'S HOME
COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA

FBI Special Agent Allison Radcliffe fingered the key in her apron pocket, debating whether she could break into Vladislav Nevsky's office without getting caught. "Are you there?" she asked, her voice low. She stood inside the vast kitchen pantry with the door shut. With listening devices all over the house, this little bug-free area was the one place she could verbally touch base with her fellow agents without fear of being overheard by enemy ears.

"Always." Linc St. John, her partner, answered immediately through her earpiece.

"I think this is my chance."

"You're sure?"

"Somewhat."

"That's not good enough. We've waited this long, we can wait a little longer."

"I don't think so." She rubbed her palms together. "My Spidey senses are tingling and telling me time is running out. I think he suspects me." Nevsky's keys had gone missing and mysteriously

turned up under his favorite recliner. His eyes told her he was gauging her reaction when he asked her about it.

“Then forget it and get out.”

“No way. My whole life has been leading up to this. I’m not leaving without getting in that office. Soon.”

“Your whole life?”

She bit her lip. “In a manner of speaking.”

Eighteen months ago, Russian Mafia head Vladislav Nevsky, also known as the *Pakhan*, had moved part of his New York–based organization to South Carolina, and the outfit had proceeded to grow like a cancer. The team had all agreed that taking out Nevsky was the only way to start the process of eradicating the worst of the disease. Allie had her own reasons for wanting the man stopped. Personal reasons.

They had met to brainstorm a way to infiltrate his home to find the evidence they needed to do that.

“He likes to eat,” Allie had said, slapping the conference table covered in surveillance photos.

Linc blinked. “Huh?”

“Look at these pictures. What do you see?” She jabbed a finger at the nearest one. Then another and another. “Nevsky is eating in just about every picture. Well, guess what? I like to cook. Not only that, I’m good at it. Very good, thanks to a college roommate studying to be a professional chef. I’m going undercover as Nevsky’s personal cook.”

Supervisory Special Agent Henry Ogden and Linc had exchanged glances, shrugs, and finally nods. Only they hadn’t known who else she’d seen in one of those pictures.

Gregori Radchenko—the man she wanted almost more than Nevsky.

So, here she was. Looking for a way to take down Nevsky and settle an old score with Radchenko.

Only time was running out and Radchenko was nowhere to

be found. It was better to get what she could on Nevsky and get out—and live to fight another day. “Right now, there are no guards in the hallways,” Allie whispered, “and none in the kitchen.”

The study, accessed from the hallway or from the master suite, had been her goal since entering the home. Unfortunately, finding a way in had proved impossible, since Nevsky had almost as many surveillance cameras inside his home as he did outside and no way to disable them without setting off alarms. The time had come to take her chances, then pray he didn’t have any reason to look at the footage before she could slip out of the house once and for all.

While her mind grappled with when to act, she swung open the pantry door, then turned back to grab the flour, along with a bag of apples, cinnamon, and everything else she needed to make a mouthwatering apple pie. Nevsky’s favorite dessert next to baklava.

“What are you making today?”

Allie swallowed a startled screech and popped out of the pantry to find Nevsky’s seventeen-year-old daughter, Daria, perched on one of the stools at the kitchen island. “You scared ten years off of me,” Allie said, pressing a hand to her beating heart.

“You’re young, you can spare them.”

“Ha. No one can spare ten years. Are you looking for another cooking lesson?”

“Nope.”

Allie lifted a brow. “Okay.” Usually Daria showed up about this time after school, and the two spent the afternoon preparing dinner. As long as her father wasn’t home. If Nevsky was home, Daria sketched or painted. But today was supposed to be different. “What are you doing here? I thought you had that field trip to the museum downtown.” She glanced behind her. “And where’s Gerard?” Daria’s bodyguard was usually ten paces behind her.

“He’ll be along soon enough. I gave him the slip.” She rolled her eyes. “And I did.”

“Did what?”

“Have a field trip. I canceled it—or at least my participation in it.”

“Because?”

“Because life is short and it’s time to live, take the bull by the horns, and chart my own course,” the girl said. “Or something along those lines.”

“I’m sorry, what?” The teen was forever speaking in riddles—or saying one thing and meaning another. Usually, Allie could follow along, but today, she’d been caught off guard by Daria’s change of plans.

Daria grinned, twin dimples peeking at Allie as she swept her long blonde hair up into a ponytail, then hopped down to turn on the sink. She stuck her hands under the water. “I’m going to do the whole thing by myself.” She paused midlather to frown. “Unless you don’t think I can?”

“I totally think you can. It’s just . . .”

“What?”

“Well, it’s my job. It’s what your dad pays me for, remember?” Allie let out a little laugh. She grabbed a few ice cubes from the freezer, dropped them in the blender, and flipped it on. She leaned in close to Daria’s ear. “You and I both know he wouldn’t approve—and if he finds out, which he will if he looks at the security footage he has going 24/7—then he’d probably fire me.”

“And I don’t really care—about the approval and finding out part, not the firing part.” Daria’s eyes darkened for a fraction of a second. She lowered her voice, just enough that Allie could hear her above the blender. “He does plenty of things I don’t approve of.”

“Oh?” Allie said, keeping her own voice casual and soft while she pulled measuring spoons from the drawer to her right. “Like what?” she whispered. She cut the blender off and dumped the ice into a glass.

Daria shrugged. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters.”

She gave a small, curiously unreadable smile. “Let’s just say”—she motioned to the blender again and Allie refilled it with ice and turned it on—“he’s not as smart as he thinks he is.”

“How so?”

Daria pursed her lips and her eyes flashed. “He thinks everyone and everything can be bought,” she said, her voice so low Allie had to move even closer to hear her. “More than that, he thinks I’m stupid and therefore I’m invisible to him. If I was a boy, I’d be his favorite person. Like my brother.”

Allie blinked. “You don’t have a brother.”

“Actually, I do. He’s older and he doesn’t live here. I never see him. I think I’ve been in the same room with him maybe four times that I can remember.” She doodled on a napkin in front of her. “Truthfully, I’m not even sure he knows I exist. Which is fine since he’s just as evil as my father.”

A brother? There’d been nothing about Nevsky having a son in their copious amounts of research.

“But I’m just a girl,” Daria said. “A stupid, worthless, invisible girl.” On the napkin, a unicorn emerged beneath her skilled strokes.

“I hope you realize you’re none of those.”

“Hmm. I’m beginning to, thanks to you,” she said, her voice soft. She cleared her throat. “But I did something he’ll notice. Something he definitely won’t approve of.” A giggle slipped from her.

“Daria?” Allie wanted to shake her. “What’d you do?”

“It’s funny how such a smart man can be so very foolish.” At Allie’s blank stare, she sighed. “You know what they say about the foolish man who builds his house upon the sand.”

“No, what do they say?”

“When the rains come down and the floodwaters rise, the house built on the sand will meet its demise.”

“You’re talking in riddles again.”

Her smile flipped. “It’s the only way I can talk around here so I don’t get into trouble,” she whispered.

Allie avoided glancing at the camera in the far corner of the room. “What are you really trying to tell me here?”

The teen laughed and waved a hand in dismissal. “Nothing. I want to make a pie. You’ve got the roast in the slow cooker. I can handle the other veggies just like you’ve taught me. I’ve got this, so you can take the afternoon off. And that’s no riddle.”

“But—” Allie turned the blender off. She’d already left it on long enough for Nevsky to be suspicious should he decide to watch or listen in on the footage. “Seriously, Daria—”

“No, no, no. No buts allowed. Literally. So remove yours from the premises and go read a book or something. But first, pass me the apron and then I don’t want to see you until six.”

Allie’s adrenaline flowed a bit faster. “You’re sure? I really don’t want to get you in trouble,” she said, handing over the apron after slipping the key from the pocket.

“One hundred percent.” The girl’s face softened. “You’ve taught me so much. I love to cook, and since Papa’s not going to be here for dinner, this is the perfect time for me to put my new skills to the test.” She bit her lip, then gave Allie a quick hug. Then looked at the blender. “Then maybe I can surprise him one day with something he loves, and he’ll be glad I took the time to learn.” She sighed. “Then again, probably not.”

“Daria—”

The girl waved a hand. “Forget it. It’s not important.”

But it obviously was. “All right, then. Holler if you need me.”
“Will do.”

Allie slipped from the kitchen and hurried down the hallway toward the study, located past the circular stairwell and the massive living room. The house spanned twelve thousand square feet, and at first, it had taken her a good two days to find enough time to sneak away from her duties in the kitchen and learn her way around. The only thing she liked about the place was Daria’s artwork subtly displayed in various rooms.

The teen was hands-down talented when it came to creating unique pieces using any medium she chose. Although she did seem to favor using everyday items from ChapStick tubes to measuring spoons in her creations.

After spending a little over four weeks undercover and sleeping in the guest room on the second floor across from Daria, Allie now knew the place as well as her own twelve-*hundred*-square-foot apartment.

“Allie? You there?” Linc’s voice came through the earpiece.

“I’m here,” she said softly. Low enough that any mics wouldn’t pick up her words. “Did you get all of that?”

“Most of it. There were some spotty places because you were whispering, but I got the gist of it. I’d give my right arm to know what Daria doesn’t approve of.”

“Same here. I’d also like to know who this brother is that she’s talking about.”

“Ask her.”

“I will when I get the chance.”

“You’ve gained her trust.”

“I know.” A flash of guilt hit her. From the beginning, she’d played on Daria’s desire for a mother figure and had Daria’s adoration within days. At least she thought she did. Unless the girl was playing her as well as she played everyone else in her life.

Allie slid the key into the lock and gave a quick sigh of relief when it turned. She slipped inside the office and shut the door behind her. “I’m in.”

Without wasting any time admiring the luxurious décor, since she knew the money used to outfit it had been gained via the deaths of good people, she strode to the desk, to find the laptop right where she’d last seen it. Next to it were two new EpiPens. The man was terrified of bees even though he had no allergy that they were aware of. “Is Annabelle ready to do her thing?”

“She is. And if she hears you calling her Annabelle, she’ll probably shoot you.”

Allie inserted the flash drive that would allow Annie, their IT genius at Quantico, to take over the laptop as long as she could crack the password. Once she was in, she'd copy as much of the hard drive as she could. Depending on how much was on the laptop, even with Annie's high-dollar technology, Allie wasn't sure she'd be able to get it all before she had to pull the device.

While the machine worked, Allie opened the top drawer and found a stack of file folders.

"Annie's in," Linc said. "That was almost too easy."

"He keeps this place locked up 24/7 and he's got guards all over the place outside. As far as he's concerned, no one's getting in."

"As long as you can get out."

Allie set the folders on the desk and opened the first one. It looked like legitimate business information, but she took pictures of it anyway and sent those while she went to the next folder. More pictures. Not what she was looking for, but one never knew what would come in handy.

"Hurry up, Allie, you're taking too long."

"I'm fine. According to Daria, Nevsky's not due back for a while." Finally, at the last folder, she opened it and gasped.

"What is it?" Linc asked. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, but you're not."

"What do you mean?"

"They're watching you." Quickly, she worked her phone's camera. "And sending pictures to Nevsky."

"Me? Why would they be watching me?"

"I don't know." She paused and bit her lip. "Unless my cover is blown and they're trying to figure out who I'm communicating with."

The next picture sent her reeling. "He's got a picture of us together. The date stamp is from a week ago. It's when we met with Henry at the hotel in Irmo."

"You need to get out of there."

Allie's stomach twisted. "He's got pictures of your family too," she whispered.

"What?"

"You and Brady and Chloe playing basketball in your parents' drive. The dates on the pictures are from last Sunday afternoon." Terrifying, but still not what she was searching for.

And another picture of her and Linc sitting on his parents' back porch swing. Stomach in knots, she shoved everything back where she found it and went to the next drawer. Locked.

"He probably thinks we're a couple, Linc. And he most likely knows who I am." Or at least that she was there under false pretenses. So why was she still alive? Something was off.

"Allie—"

She slid the specialized knife from her front pocket and opened the tool that would give her access to the lock. Within seconds, it popped and she pulled the drawer open. More files. She opened the one on top. "Oh my," she whispered.

"Allie." Henry's voice came through her earpiece this time. "Put everything back now and leave."

"He's got a whole list of military equipment for sale," Allie said. "Where would he be getting that stuff?" She snapped pictures, then shoved everything back where she found it. She stood there for a moment while she sent the pictures to Henry.

"Get. Out. Of. There. Now," Linc said. "Walk out of the house and head to the van."

"Working on it."

The door to the office opened.

Allie jerked her head up. "Uh-oh."