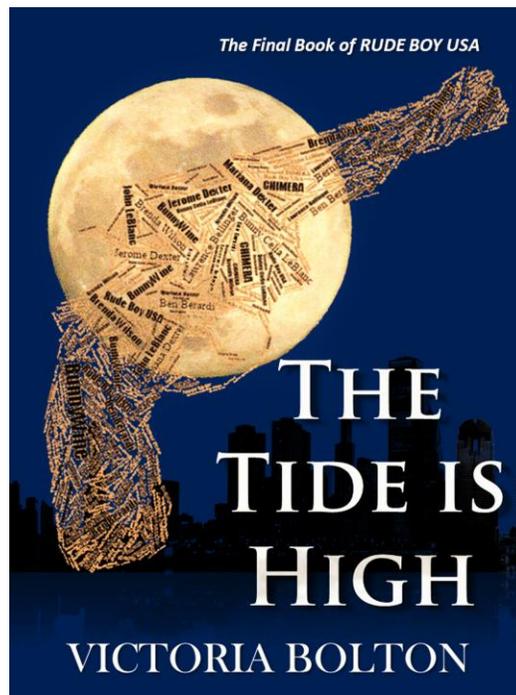


The Tide is High

(Website Sample Chapter)



VICTORIA BOLTON

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Thank you to everyone who has stuck around long enough to read the third book in the series. I am eternally grateful that what you have read hasn't pissed you off to the point where you quit reading.

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PROLOGUE

An attractive, close to middle-age woman walks down the street in Manhattan. Her dress fits her curves perfectly. It is straightforward and classic. Her blue high heels hit the ground with purpose. Her lips are classic red and every hair on her head is in its place, while her clutch is tasteful. That is the story of many women who work and live here. It takes a particular lady to be able to present herself with confidence on the streets of New York City. It was not as it was in the nineteen-sixties when each citizen took pride in their appearance or their neighborhood. The protests were against social injustices instead of an excuse to be disorderly. Women were feminine, and men were dapper across the board, no matter what race or economic situation they belonged to. Now it was everyone for themselves and do whatever you want. This woman was old-school and was not prepared to change with the times.

The early nineteen-nineties brought social change to the city and the country. Urban styles and dress took over the cultural landscape. Rap music had become mainstream, and many of the youth adopted the style as a symbol of their expression. This often clashed with what the citizens who grew up decades earlier thought was an appropriate way to live. The change in culture brought a new wave of violence and drug abuse which was a spillover from the policies that were introduced in the seventies and early eighties. The youth did not invent the game; they changed it for the worse. There was no sophistication attached to it as with the gangsters of decades earlier. Many of those men fell to changing the laws of the country which no longer suited them favorably. These were hard and bitter adolescents using the medium to survive or get back at whatever life had thrown at them. The gun was their clutch, and they held it every opportunity they could.

No one is safe from them, especially if they are a target. None of the gunmen are sharpshooters and if you are on the street at the same time as one of their marks, watch out. You could be wounded, or even worse, lose your life. Some do hit their marks, but not without an array of bullets spreading themselves around the area. If such a target is hit, the perpetrators get temporary satisfaction, but it never lasts, and the hurt that it caused goes beyond the victim, which causes a circle of tension.

One such woman learned this lesson the hard way; her name is Bunny LeBlanc.

Bunny was leaving a business meeting at Bentley, a hip and popular club on 40 East 40th Street in Manhattan. She was getting ready to host a fundraiser there which was guaranteed to attract high-profile and wealthy supporters for her husband. The funds would also go to help community projects for the Dixon-Rhodos Foundation.

The street was semi-busy with regular traffic. Nothing out of the ordinary was happening besides the usual mid-day lunch crowd out to get their meals. A gentleman standing near a parking meter smoking a cigarette eyed her as she walked past him and a disabled van sat across the street. These scenes were as commonplace as the blowing horns.

As she strolled the pavement to head to Brooklyn via the train, she heard popping noises that sounded like firecrackers. Bunny did not think anything of it. Being in the city, she eventually became used to hearing certain sounds. Firetrucks, cop sirens, cars backfiring, and random popping sounds blast all year around. She heard a loud pop close to her ear. Seconds later she felt sharp pains in her body. She dropped her purse and clutched her shoulder. She looked over and saw blood on her shirt and hand and fell to the ground. She began to scream in pain. The people who were walking around her stopped to see what was going on.

“It hurts! Help me please, oh God, I have children!”

Several people stopped and tried to help her. Others ran away from the scene. The blood was leaving her body at a quick pace. She eventually passed out, and everyone around her was concerned. One ran into a bodega to call the police. Several teenagers darted away from across the street. No one was able to catch them.

When the police and ambulance arrived, there was chatter. One woman who saw Bunny fall was hysterical.

“Someone has to do something about this! This innocent lady just got hit by a random bullet. That could have been any one of us.”

A concerned man added, “If Pasquale were Mayor, we wouldn’t have any of this.”

“I don’t like him. I don’t like him at all, but we can’t live in a city like this. I don’t care who gets in as long as this stops!” the hysterical woman replied.

“Isn’t that Bunny LeBlanc?” a passerby asked.

“It looks like her,” another one answered.

Bunny’s cell phone began to ring, but she could not pick it up.

She was rushed to the hospital in unknown condition.

CHAPTER 1

Paul Aaron, a self-employed journalist, was about to pitch the story of his life. The tall, lanky man with a standard haircut and thick-rimmed eyeglasses was tired of wasting his journalism talents at local hometown newspapers. He wanted to hit the big time. He was tired of his one-bedroom flat in an aging building that often had problems with its elevators. Many tired evenings after his long days he returned to his building only to find the elevators out of order, and he had to walk up nine flights. He hated his non-existent social life and was ready to move up in the world.

His news articles consisted of local happenings like the occasional fire or animal stuck in power lines. A murder case counted as an exciting story for him, no matter how many times it happened in the city. The best plan he had to get his career to the next level was to take a leap and pitch to a high-profile publication. If the article was successful, he could get a big payday from it and have other opportunities open up for him, perhaps a book deal. He knew his ideas were great, but part of the challenge was to convince the editors at Lifetime Magazine that his vision fit their periodical. Lifetime was at the top of the magazine and publishing world. Some of the articles qualified for Pulitzers and the quality of their photographs was standard in the industry. To work there meant that you were one of the best, perhaps in the world.

A blockbuster article there would put Paul on the map for good. He received word that they were doing a double issue about the mob and he wanted in. This issue would be bigger and better than their last one on the subject two decades earlier. Since the original publication, the majority of the mob that had once held New York and other cities hostage had all but fallen after Mario Pasquale came into power as State's Prosecutor. There were few survivors left in the aftermath, and Paul felt that he had the perfect subjects for his project. He was always a fan of the Mafia world, and he followed every family that was known in the city right until each head of the Cosa Nostra fell like dominoes to the feds.

He managed to land a meeting with one of the editors at Lifetime. Paul sat down and waited for the editor to enter the office. A tall, bald, heavysset man walked in and sat down at the desk where Paul waited. "Okay, I have only a few minutes. Tell me what you got. By the way, my name is Frank Kelly, editor here at Lifetime." Frank extended his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Frank. My name is Paul Aaron. I am a freelance reporter. I have contributed articles to the New York Daily, the Times and other small local papers and quarterlies. I heard that you were doing this big issue about organized crime. I am pitching a story to you about the LeBlanc family, John and his wife, Bunny. You know them, they were the head of the infamous Chimera crime family from back in the day. It's an article that also talks about the members of that group individually. They are rock stars around here and in Jamaica. There are kids right now in the public housing buildings calling themselves Junior Mafia, dressing and carrying themselves like those two. You know as much about them as you do about the Colombos, the Gambinos, and the Ambrosinos, except they are different. They look different, talk different, and they are not Italian or Irish. They resemble the other population of New Yorkers that doesn't get the glamor treatment or the same pass as the others, and that is partly why they are loved so much here. They are wealthy, good-looking and have one hell of a backstory. You know a lot about them already, but I am sure that if you dig deeper, you will find many more layers.

"When I first saw them, John and his wife after the verdict, I was excited. I've only heard about them through the newspapers and the evening broadcasts. Back in the day, the stories about John and his crew were folklore. I admit I am a fan, and I just had to get close to them. I waited for

hours on the day John was released for them to return to the residence they were staying in uptown. I believe the place belonged to a family member. He seemed to be in a rush, but I had to get just one question in before he left. I didn't know if he would ever return and I would have missed my opportunity with them. Pasquale was hell-bent on destroying him, so I understood why he wanted out of there at that moment. When I asked John if he was done with the life, he did not give me a full answer; he just grinned, like he usually does. I didn't get it, so I have to investigate more. He's up to something, and I am sure it's interesting. Sir, there are rumblings around Brooklyn that he may return and run for office here. I need to find out what made Chimera tick and what really happened to the rest of them. There had to be more to the story. None of the others who used to run with him were at the trial, and since this has a possible political connection, I know that people will eat this up.

"If you would give me a chance and the resources, I think this would make a blockbuster story for Lifetime Magazine, and I think I am the guy to bring you the goods. I know you are working on another piece about the mob being involved in politics, and I believe this will be a great addition to the issue. You can concentrate on those who are in the Midwest and the regulars here, and I can give you the good unknown story. If my plan works, I can see if I can get great photos and some new information. Trust me. This piece will be a hit. What do you think?" Paul was sure his presentation would spark Frank's interest.

"From previous experience, those types of people do not like the attention. They are not Gotti or even Mario Pasquale. I am not sure how you are going to pull this off. We are on a deadline here, and I can't rely on a promise."

"I have ways. I can get the people they worked with to talk. Who doesn't want to be in Lifetime Magazine?"

"What about the main two? 'I have ways' isn't enough assurance for me. We already have reporters on this story. Why would I need an extra one?"

"Because I will give you an angle that your national readers are not used to seeing. The magazine is falling off in readership. I don't mean that in a bad way, but I think this will make the news and give it the boost it needs. I believe that these people represent what the current times are, a more diverse view on what's happening. It's a new look, don't you think?"

Frank sat silent for a moment and clutched his hands. "I will think about it. You are a good salesman."

"Come on, help the little guy here. I hear that they are returning to the city soon, and I think that there is some truth to that, so as soon as they arrive, I will be on it. I already have everything else laid out."

"I said I will think about it. Put something together for me and submit it. If it's as good as you say it is, we will use it in the issue. Now get out of here before I change my mind," Frank replied. He said it in a joking yet serious way.

"Thank you, sir," Paul replied.

Paul left the office and went back to his apartment. He found a notebook and a pencil and began to outline his plan. He knew whom he needed to speak to; it was a matter of locating them. The hardest part was getting Bunny or John to agree to talk to him. On Paul's list was to get into the psychology of a group like this. What made them tick, why choose this life? He had already compiled a list of people to talk to about John and Bunny, and he had to get to work. He also had a big interest in Ben and a smaller interest in Jerome. Bernie Rhodos had already been profiled in the previous mob issue of Lifetime Magazine, so Paul felt that his story had already been told in detail. He heard that Ben was deceased, but information about his death was scanty at best. The

best way to find out about Ben was to go through public records and see if he could locate his family for an interview.

Bunny LeBlanc lay down on the chair. Her feet were crisscrossed and decked out in the latest pair of fashionable high heels. Her dress spilled over to the sides. Her head was positioned comfortably, and her hands were folded. Her nerves were uneasy, but she was ready to let out what was inside of her.

“Your relationships, your life, tell me what’s on your mind. Tell me about your home,” a calming male voice said to her.

“You want to know what’s on my mind when I am at home?” Bunny asked.

“Yes. Feel free to say anything. When you are around your husband, what goes through your mind?” The man began taking notes.

“Anything? Well, okay, at home often I just sit and stare at him. I have to pinch myself. I see him every day, and yet I still watch him in awe. I am his biggest supporter. I look at him, the man of my dreams. He is just sitting there watching the game and enjoying his time with his friends. He’s laid back in his chair with his ankles crossed and his arms folded. He has his favorite drink by his side. That is the sexiest part of him. I’ve had a twenty-year crush on this man even though I am with him. Why? The swagger just oozes out of him with no effort, and I just want to walk over there and sit on his dick sometimes,” Bunny said.

The man stopped writing and looked up. “That’s interesting. What about your feelings, as opposed to just your thoughts?” he said.

“You said, say anything. I like talking about my husband,” Bunny responded.

“You’re correct, I did. I want you to go all the way back. What has shaped your train of thought?” the man asked.

“All the way back, let’s see. You know when I was little; I never thought I would get a guy like him. I never felt beautiful even when other people told me I was. I was not traditionally pretty, like the light girls when I was a kid and was told by family and friends that those kinds of guys I had crushes on only went for model types or blondes, even the black guys, so I didn’t stand a chance. This affected my self-esteem for a bit, and it made it hard for me to approach men. Those words stuck with me, and it was hard to build confidence. All it did was leave me with the guys who were buoyant enough to come to me, and ninety-nine percent of the time, I did not like them at all. I liked nothing about them. This led me to waste a lot of time trying to get rid of them. I would get hit on by various men, but for some reason, I was never intrigued by them. I’m pretty sure they were nice guys, and that is what we are supposed to look for, right? I guess being nice isn’t enough for me. I needed someone who lit my fire, kept my attention, and had the very beauty I admired.

“Thank goodness I was a late bloomer and body parts started growing in the right places. I learned how to be beautiful and personable, and that is when my confidence came in. It took years for me to shake off the church shame that my mother forced on me.

“Everything changed when I laid eyes on him. That’s right, even covered in blood I saw that he was good looking. He was everything I ever wanted. Even when he lay there in pain, he still acknowledged me. From that moment, I knew it was real, whatever it was I was feeling, the fairytale. Of course, the shyness came back in an instant, and I never got his name. Thank goodness fate decided it had other plans.

“Later on, some people told me that he was just okay but not great; he was not like the other guys. They said he was moody and didn’t like people running up to him. I didn’t care. I thought that it

added to his mystique. I find his arrogance and elusiveness incredibly attractive, maybe because it fits him. Most guys can't pull that off, be believable and loved as he is.

"When I learned that he was married, I was devastated, but on the inside, I did not care. I wanted him anyway. My feelings for him were the catalyst for all of my future decisions, no matter how much disdain I received from my friends and family. I did not live for them, I live for myself, and even if I would have to explain things to God later on, I felt that if I didn't at least try, I would spend the rest of my life full of regrets. A try is always better than a fail, right? I would have met someone else, but the poor guy would forever be compared to John and forever fall short, like Ben did..."

Bunny paused for a moment. The very sound of Ben's name shook her. She quickly returned to the subject of John.

"I like the fire, I like the crazy, and I love the heart and the person who houses these qualities. I knew what I wanted and which direction I wanted to go in my life. I wanted to be in his world, be the same kind of person he is. I wanted to be beautiful and arrogant like him. He was unattainable, and I wanted it.

"When I left John, in the beginning I didn't want to leave him but how could I compete with a woman he was legally bound to? I didn't know her, but I didn't like her. She had everything I wanted, and it just didn't seem fair. Why did life present him to me if it wasn't meant to be? That is just a cruel tease. I felt that I was supposed to be there because he needed me at first, but then the pressure of her being a factor became too much, and I just didn't know how to handle it. I never got over him while I was away. Had we never fought, I would still be there, and who knows how she would have tried to destroy me one way or another?"

"I think Jerome's passing brought us back together, I really do. I miss Jerome so much. He was as close to a brother as one could get. He was the only male in my family who was consistent. He was the only one who told me that I mattered when I was down. My father was not around; he had another family, and his wife didn't want him around me and my mom. Jerome was the one who helped me. When he died, the rage and the guilt of not being around in the last months ate at me. I felt that I needed to make it up to him and avenge his death."

"Avenge his death? Can you expound further?" the psychiatrist said while adjusting his glasses.

Bunny knew that she had said too much. She had to clean up and fast.

"I didn't mean anything by it. I was just saying that I needed to live so he didn't die in vain. I know what you are thinking. 'What's wrong with this girl and why was she so hell-bent on this life with John? Why is she this way?'"

"When you see the life of your dreams in jeopardy, what else would you do to make sure that nothing bad happens to it? You do everything you can to make sure that the vision stays on course, even if in the end you fail.

"Does any of this make sense to you? I know I am rambling. I'm not good with this counseling stuff," Bunny said.

The psychiatrist sat there, stunned into silence. He had stopped taking notes minutes ago. He did not know what to say to Bunny about her long-winded speech. He did tell her to say anything, and she did. He finally collected his thoughts and said something. He took off his glasses.

"It does make sense. You have an obsession with your husband. That is a good thing. You have essentially morphed into your husband and at this point, it would be difficult to distinguish one from the other."

"I guess you are right. That's a good thing, right?" Bunny asked.

“It could be. It can also be detrimental to your well-being. Water seeks its own level it seems. Are you worried about the responsibility of trying to emulate your husband?” he asked.

“I don’t know yet. That is something I have to think about. I wasn’t worried before,” Bunny answered.

“What about this Ben person? You briefly brought him up. Was he someone important?”

“What about him? He’s dead.”

“Where does he fit in this scenario? He was important enough for you to bring his name into your thoughts.”

“I don’t know where he fits; he’s part of the past.”

“Yet, it seems like you have some guilt. Your voice pattern indicates some culpability. Where did Ben fall short?” the psychiatrist asked.

“I can’t answer that, and I think you are misinterpreting. I did what I thought was right by letting him go. I’m done for today. I have to come back later.” Bunny was getting agitated.

The answer confused the doctor. Bunny got up and straightened her dress. “I have to go. I’m paying you by the hour, and you are expensive. I will see you next week.”

Bunny hurried out of the office. She wanted to leave before she said too much. The point of the therapy was to clear her mind. The sound of gunfire, the splash of tiny, warm blood droplets hitting her face and clothing were coming up in her dreams, which were turning into a recurring nightmare. She knew that the incident with Ben had not left her conscience. She needed the shrink to interpret what it meant. She had to do this and figure things out quickly. They were moving back to the States in Brooklyn from Jamaica and her mind needed to be clear so she could concentrate on the future. This was necessary not only for their business but for her children. If the press caught her off her game, they would have a field day with them, and that was something that Bunny did not want to happen. Going to the States was something new for the kids and getting acquainted with a new country would be hard enough without the public scrutiny. Getting everything back in order was important to John and keeping him happy was her first priority.

A common color in the mob is black. In clothing, it represents a constant mourning, the mourning of a fallen comrade, the mourning of innocence. It also represents the color of the hearts of some of its members, whether they realize it or not. Black clothes were slimming, and Bunny wore the color a lot these days. John also adapted the color into his wardrobe for the same reasons. It was quite the change from her younger years, where reds, yellows, and blues dominated her wardrobe. She was older, and she felt that anything that slimmed her body worked. Each child had widened her hips and her behind a little. Nevertheless, her intense workout sessions kept her in shape and her tummy flat, much to John’s delight. Despite planning for a very large family, they stopped at four children, two girls and two boys. The girls were Sophie and Sandra, and the boys were John Jr. and Jaden; they completed the LeBlanc family. The numbers just seemed right. She got what she wanted, and so did he.

Bunny looked lovely, not a wrinkle in sight thanks to her rich melanin. It was getting harder for her to maintain since she was now in her forties and the two girls were now entering their teenage years. They reminded Bunny of her early years at the Playboy Club. She needed her energy to watch after them. The boys were still in grade school, and John had a good handle on them. The girls, however, took after her for the most part, especially in personality. They were facially beautiful, and their bodies were developing quickly, which brought a lot of attention from boys and much disdain from John. He found himself threatening any little knucklehead boy who

attempted to put their hands on his princesses. Their Jamaican accents did not help matters. It was quite different from their parents since the girls and boys were natives of the island. John's southern accent never wavered despite him being a resident of New York and Jamaica for many years. It was a magnet for the schoolboys the moment these girls opened their mouths. John Jr. and Jaden were not a problem. They spent a lot of their time at basketball camp, as they seem to have inherited their father's height and love of sports. He hoped to teach them the ropes of the business once they were old enough but felt that their education and possible scholarship for sports could also benefit their futures.

John remained on track but after the trial, a few things began to change. In his heart, he was sure that he was done with the life of organized crime before things took a turn for the worse. However, the acquittal seemed to breathe new life into him. His fire returned, and he wanted to make a mark, but this time be a little smarter about how he proceeded. He had this brand-new reputation and wanted to retain the trust of the people who had supported him throughout his troubles. Being good was now embedded in him, but he missed the action and excitement of being a head of an organization. The mob in New York City had been decimated due to the disloyalty of some former members of various families and Camorra, including Ben. John held a lot of resentment towards Ben, more so than usual. As far as he was concerned, Ben was shit, a punk and deserved everything that happened to him.

Part of John's plan was to rebuild. He loved Jamaica, but it was time to leave. John and Bunny had made a significant impact on parts of the island. The economy there was beginning to recover as more corporations returned, so he felt that their work in Kingston was done. Returning to New York City was the only plan for him and the family despite the issues they had encountered before. He was in the clear as far as the courts were concerned and on good terms with the public. John and Bunny had now become celebrities and fodder for local tabloid newspapers. The public had become enamored with the couple. Everything about their relationship was something that held interest with the residents, right down to Bunny's fashion choices. Some had even gone as far as trying to dig up information on both of them, but John has taken steps to make sure none of the major publications ran the stories. He wasn't always successful.

Doing that had cost him a pretty penny, but he felt it was necessary to protect his kids, who would be in the city soon enough. To get back on track, John decided to partner up with his longtime lawyer, Yannay Kohn. Yannay has been with John and Bunny since the early days of Chimera, and they had developed a great friendship. Yannay was the house counsel, and John loved that Yannay knew the importance of taking secrets to the grave, which was a requirement for being a great lawyer in this business. It was one of the requirements that Bernie wanted in his circle of associates. Yannay's loyalty had been tried and tested, and John felt that his connections to New York City politicians were just the right fit for his plans. They agreed to become partners and began to buy available real estate and lots that were located around New York City for pennies on the dollar. The plan was to take them and put new buildings and businesses on those lots.

It was time to start planning. John and Bunny sat down at the table in their Kingston home office with their notepad and began brainstorming plans for the next few months. This was big; John was ready to return to his former glory.

"Okay, so this is it. We are going back home to New York for good. We will be back in business there. Dixon Rhodos will continue operations, and the Chimera name stays. We were wounded, but we have bounced back. It's part of us so we can't let that go. Chimera will take a stake in a

few available buildings in the city. Our focus will be on food programs, day-care leases, waterfront development, urban renewal projects and minority enterprise businesses. We want to work our way into the machine. Yannay is now a financial partner. I hope you are okay with that because the plans have already started,” John said.

“I’m all right,” Bunny replied.

“They are selling lots around the city for a good price, and I think this is a prime time to rebuild. I’m interested in putting luxury apartments in some of those spots and others will be zoned for business. In Harlem and Brooklyn, there are plenty of available brownstones that I think we can take and flip. The city is pushing hard for companies to come back and perhaps get a few white people to move in so we might as well take advantage of this now. Operation gentrification is already in full effect,” John said.

“You know what’s funny about that? There used to be tour buses that would go through the old neighborhood, and you could hear them sometimes through their bullhorns. They would never stop in Harlem, even to the point of running red lights. Those tourists wanted to see us but not be around us. They used to tell them that this area was for the black people and that it was dangerous. Now they are breaking their necks to move in here. I just think that it’s funny,” she said.

John looked at her in agreement.

“What about here?” Bunny added.

“Kingston is our home on the island, but I think it is time for us to run the islands of New York once again. Things will be different this time. BunnyWine stays here. I’ve hired managers, and Lawrence is already in NYC helping with Mariana. It’s time for them to get out of that small space they are in. We can run everything from New York. Headquarter it in Midtown, and keep the factory and winery here. The people and their jobs will be all right,” John said.

“This sounds like a plan. I’m just worried about the kids transitioning. They have never been to New York before. Can you imagine how they are going to act once they get there? How are we going to watch them? It’s a mess and, John, it’s not like what it was when we were really young. Bullets are flying around like the birds out there,” Bunny said.

“We will watch them just fine. We are their parents. If we are working, that is what your mother is for. She can look after them,” John said.

“You know Momma has issues now. You’ve seen it. She is starting to forget things. She won’t acknowledge it but...”

“Agnes is just fine. They listen to her. Stop worrying. If things get out of hand, then I can have some of my family come up from Louisiana or Oklahoma. We’re good,” John assured her.

“Alright,” Bunny said and paused. She wanted to change the subject from her ailing mother. She was showing early signs of Alzheimer’s. “I think Bernie would be so proud of you right now. He’s probably looking down from heaven and shaking his head in approval,” Bunny said.

“You think? I mean, look what has happened to all of his work since he passed. I’m pretty sure he’s a bit pissed at some of the developments,” John said.

“Yeah, but you keep bouncing back. How many times did he fail before he got the right people helping him? He took hits; he’s even been to jail. I don’t know if you realize it, but you, right now, *are* Bernie. It’s come full circle. You saw the papers when you were acquitted. They called you Teflon John, nothing sticks,” Bunny said with a grin. “That is what everyone back home calls you now.”

“I guess if you look at it that way it makes sense. I knew it was rough, but fuck; I didn’t know it was going to be like this,” John said.

“All I know is that we are fine right now and will be better than ever, trust me. I believe in you,” Bunny assured.

“I trust you too,” John said, and he looked at her.

“Anyway, I think we have to get a move on. When the school year is up, we will all move back. The kids can return here and visit friends in Jamaica in the summers and the house stays. It will serve as our vacation home. We now own a brownstone in Brooklyn, and that is where we will reside. The Jamaican population there runs deep, so we are good. We have lots of support there. The kids will have the entire summer to adjust and then they start back in a school there in the fall. You can have full control over the décor, and I have someone commissioned for renovations if you want to do any. Sound good?” John continued.

“Sounds good. Décor, whoopee,” she said in a sarcastic tone.

She continued. “I guess this will be new to me too. I haven’t spent that much time in Brooklyn either.” She paused. She was always in awe of John’s ability to take charge of things. “Should I ask how you were able to get these deals on the lots? This sounds fantastic.”

John looked up at her. “Well, our super partner, super lawyer Yannay, has lots of friends in office. He managed to get us a few deals. For our generous campaign contributions, they gave us prime lots and space for a decent price. Those same politicians have deals with certain people who will work on the projects for us. We were lucky; there were a bunch of real estate firms with the same ideas. It pays to know the right people,” John said.

Bunny looked at him. She knew where this was going, and she did not like it. The enthusiasm she had moments ago began to wane. “I guess we really are full circle. I wasn’t trying to be that specific when I said it.”

“It’s not like that. Our hands won’t get dirty,” John said.

“Can you guarantee that? I’m sorry if I seem like downer right now, but it was very hard for me when you were going through a trial. I don’t want to go through that again. I don’t want to have to do the things I did before,” Bunny said.

John looked at her. “You won’t. I promise. We will be okay. All I ask is that this time, just lay low.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Bunny asked.

“I’m not in the hole anymore. You don’t have to worry about the big stuff. You don’t have to worry about doing anything that’s beyond your range or understanding,” John said.

John was hinting at Bunny’s participating in Ben’s disappearance. They had never openly discussed it before now. It had been an undercurrent of their relationship for the last five years. The birth of two sons after his acquittal took their minds off the chaos of those months John was incarcerated. John knew Ben was deceased, but the full explanation for his death was never explained to him. John had a hit out on Ben that was supposed to be carried out by his people. Ben was a rat who went against the family he took an oath for. It’s one thing to have a personal beef, but it’s another to sell your brothers out to the government. It was considered treason of the highest order. John’s people never got to him. All he knew was that Ben was buried in a pauper’s grave because no one came to claim his body and Bunny knew something about those circumstances.

“Out of my range? So you think that home décor and picking schools for the kids is in my range?” Bunny asked.

“Oh God, you know I didn’t mean it that way,” John sighed.

“I’m not whining; I am just asking. I don’t want you to feel like I can’t do things. I think I did pretty well for us. Was it stressful? Yes. But I held us up just fine.”

“And you did well, but look at you. Whatever it is that you know, it has been bothering you ever since, and I don’t like seeing you being bothered. You have nightmares and just because you don’t tell me doesn’t mean I do not know it’s happening,” John said.

Bunny looked at him.

“What else am I supposed to say to you when I see that?” John added.

“A ‘thank you’ would suffice,” Bunny said.

“Thanks, but it would be nice if you were upfront with me. You know what? Let’s do this right now.” John pushed the notepad and pen aside to clear the path between him and Bunny. “I demand to know what happened. Did you hire somebody to off him or did you give him to the feds or something?”

Bunny cut right to the chase. “You want to know what happened? Okay, fine, I shot him.”

“*You* killed him?” John said, surprised. His mouth was slightly agape. He did not know what to think of the revelation. John was under the impression that she had hired some people to take care of Ben. He had no idea that she had done the work. From the rumors John had heard about Ben’s demise, the shooter had great precision, something that was never a high point for Bunny. Her actions were a far cry from the stereotype that women who were married to the mob were unable to commit crimes autonomously.

“How? I mean, you’re a terrible shooter, let’s just be honest here,” John said.

“Practice, and I had to get close. I kind of knew what made Ben tick. I didn’t do anything out of order, but I had to find him and get in his face. I did what I had to do to get you out of there. He was their star witness. I just couldn’t let him talk,” she said.

“How close? I know him, and if you were within ten feet of him, he would have been all over you like a disease,” John said.

“I had him on the floor. Nothing was going on. I didn’t let him get far. When he tried, I took out my pistol and shot him. That was the only way I could get him to let up his guard. I used only one bullet,” she said.

“How far?” John asked,

“If you are that concerned, he did not get to touch anything,” she replied.

John was stunned. “Where did you get a pistol?” he asked.

“I got a small one from the gun range. It was the size of my hand,” she said while holding up her palm. “I practiced, and I am pretty good with it. I had it destroyed not long after. I know not to keep a gun. You taught me well,” Bunny said.

“What happened after that?” John asked.

“Before I did it, I told his girlfriend to let him go when we gave her the help. The agreement was that she was to never contact him again. She wanted her son back. We had the pull at the time to get her the help she needed to regain custody, and she took the deal,” Bunny said.

“And she did it, just like that?” John asked.

“I think so. Brenda is a street girl, and seems like a good mother.”

“She’s around because you gave her a guilt job?”

“Yeah, I’ve kept an eye on her,” she answered.

“And she doesn’t know how he got there?” John asked.

“No.”

“I can distinctly remember when you got angry at me for bringing Ben around, and I told you that it is better to watch him than to have him unsupervised. Is this what you are doing?”

Bunny stayed quiet.

“I understand why you did it, but she lingers around. Her name is Brenda, right? I’ve heard things about her, and although I am not terribly familiar with her, you know more than me, I can’t help but think she has some of Ben in her. They have a kid, and you can’t tell me that she isn’t still emotionally attached to him in some way. Her son looks just like him. I know how you women are.”

“You women? Okay watch your mouth,” Bunny said in joking way, although she was a bit serious about that.

John continued to talk. “What I can tell you just from life experience is that she took the deal because it put her in a better place financially than she was at the moment. I am not saying to get rid of her altogether, because she was great PR for us, but I am saying that you made a deal with her, and we need to keep her neutralized. Be careful. Whatever Ben had going on in the head that was making him into such a fuckup is generational; that kind of fucked-up shit spreads,” John said. “I will be careful. Any conversations with Brenda have and will stay professional and relate only to her. I just don’t see her as a big problem. The evil influence has been long gone,” Bunny replied. “I don’t want you to think that I am jumping on you. I get it, everything you did is why he is in a box someplace, and that is some impressive shit, I admit. I’m just saying be careful. If I see something that doesn’t look right about her, I will step in. It’s my job to protect you, the same way you felt you had to do for me. Remember that conversation?”

“I do,” Bunny responded.

“One more question. This surprise hit, it was a one-time thing though, right? Because you on top just took another dimension. I have to make sure your hands are visible while you are sitting on me at all times now. I may piss you off one day, and I don’t want to be fucked up in that manner,” John asked with a grin.

“Yes, it... oh my god, John!” Bunny replied and playfully hit him on the arm.

John had to lighten up the moment. He knew Bunny wasn’t built for killing and that this time of confession was hard for her. It was the guilt of taking a life that was bothering her. The matter was complicated because Ben had expressed his love for her right before she put a bullet in his head. That information she decided not to tell John. She was not sure how he would react to it. John had been in that space many times, and after the initial shock of the first bloodshed leaves, it gets easier to repeat. The trick is to not let it linger in your head and to use it only when necessary. The requisite to kill was only to protect the family and in that she had succeeded.

John put his arm around her and pulled her close. He kissed her on her head. “Thank you. I mean it. You did well, but that’s enough. Do we agree on that?” John asked.

“I agree. I’m dealing with it, and the nightmares will stop,” Bunny replied.

“Now that we have that out of the way, let’s get back to business. We don’t have to ever speak of this again if you don’t want to,” he said.

“Good because I don’t want to.”

“Great, so who do we have?” he asked.

Bunny grabbed the notepad they were working on and began reading off it. “We have us, Lawrence, Mariana, and Yannay, the super lawyer,” she said.

“That’s great, that’s our crew.”

“I can hire people if we need to,” Bunny said.

“We don’t need that right now, but we may do it later. It depends on how much we grow; that’s if we really need to get bigger. It’s going to be hard, so I can’t really afford to babysit. I only need people around who know how we already operate,” John said.

“Where is our office? It won’t be at our home, will it?” she asked.

“No. I am in the process of buying Nineteen West Forty-Sixth Street.”

Bunny gasped. “John, you bought back Chimera. You told me before that you didn’t want the building, it hurt too much to see it.”

“I pulled some strings and got a good agreement. It was part of the deal that Yannay and I made with the Mayor. It cost us, but I thought it was worth it to get it back. It will be worth millions in a few years,” John said.

“The restaurant at the bottom?”

“That’s ours, well, we rent it to the operators, but the entire property is now in our name. We own sixty-six percent, Yannay has a thirty-four percent share. That will do for now until we get well off enough to buy his share,” John said.

“I’m stunned. I really miss the place, John. Sometimes I wish things remained the same and that Bernie was still here,” she said.

“I do too, but Bernie would be about ninety years old right now. Not sure how much he could do,” John said.

“You would be running the place, I know. What is the endgame here? Are we real estate people now?” Bunny asked.

“No. This is just to secure our future; our kids will have something. The real estate is just for investment purposes. No babe, my connections are going to get us into higher places, in office. The endgame is the Mayor’s office.”

“You’re kidding, right? What about Pasquale? He is running to replace the sitting Mayor. How are you going to go against him and win? He would run you over in the street if he were permitted to do so.”

“I, I mean we beat him once before. We can do it again,” John said.

“I can’t believe it. You are really going for it. You know this puts a bullseye on us. Are you ready for this?” she asked.

“I’m ready. Pass the kouchie,” John said.

Bunny handed him a joint that was sitting in a cigar box at the end of the table, and she grabbed one for herself. She took the lighter and lit the joints in celebration.

“Why are we smoking right now?” Bunny asked.

“We’re celebrating. My love, we are back in business,” John said.

The old John was reemerging. The pushback of his old habits had been a way of getting into Bunny’s good graces in the beginning, but some things were embedded in him. He could not let that part of his life go. He was ready to return to his boss status, and the best way to do so was to go back to where he started.