***D****ean trudged* *up* Battery Place to his next assignment. He turned up his collar, shielding him from the cold wind whipping off the water snaking down the narrow alleys. As he rounded the corner to the back of the building, delivery men were off loading the high-end bikes. He was going undercover playing co-host while the photographer snapped away. He bristled at Mac’s suggestion of babysitting some starter photographer whose apartment got tossed. Boo-hoo, poor baby.

He’d been read in on the case. The photographer wannabe needed protection from her ex-lover, Sydney Polcheck, a CIA agent that had gone dark and disappeared. Their case involved Mara’s late husband, Brock, who was tech savvy, stealing millions from the Russians and came across some of their secrets. Many questions went unanswered about the Russians’ play in several illegal worldwide operations. Shadowing Mara’s sister was the only way to get a lead in the case. Sometimes being in private security sucked, but he had no choice. His native country of Australia wasn’t welcoming him anymore.

Mac went over the details and mentioned he thought Leigha experimented sexually and may not be a lesbian. It didn’t matter. He wouldn’t be interested. This wasn’t real undercover work. But Mac convinced him the break-in was part of a bigger picture. He fumed over the fact his previous modeling experience, the curse, got him this assignment. Posing irritated him, but he had been told he was a natural.

He imagined her to be like many other female photographer he had came across, plain and mousey. It might be a relief. His jaw locked as he gritted his teeth thinking of the high-maintenance women with their straightened hair, painted nails, collagen filled lips, and Botox foreheads. They had a right to look their best, but the phony entitled attitude some of them had grated on his last friggin’ nerve. The Devil had sent them all to this godforsaken city. He couldn’t wait to go back to Australia, but his timeline stretched ahead of him with no end in sight.

He came to a stop, admiring the three polished artworks created by his good friend Keir O’Shea. The gas tank and back fender were done in flat black paint with an overspray of mica blue, apple red, and plume crazy purple flake. A chrome dragon stretching from front to back served as an accent. The combination of elements allowed each bike to project its own image. They garnered attention from people walking along the river who stopped to take notice of the unique designs. He would definitely be ordering one these babies soon.

His hands balled inside his jacket pockets. As he breathed out through his nose, his hot breath clouded in the cold air, taking a moment to put on his professional face. There were worse gigs than this one. He let his fingers curl around the handlebars. They felt good in his hands. He leaned the bike away from him, nudging the kickstand up, and rolled the bike forward to the open freight elevator. Older buildings had freight elevators known for stalling out. That was fine by him. He might be able to escape this assignment for a while. The elevator grinded its way up the shaft, struggling to continue to the top floor. He lifted the grate and rolled the bike into the stark studio.

The clip sound of heels approached him. “Hi, you must be Dean Andersen. I’m Chloe. Thanks for bringing the bike up. You can set it up over there. We’ll be with you in a moment.” Her lips tweaked up as she winked at him.

He nodded, acknowledging his contact for this job. She was a short woman with black hair and big, black-rimmed glasses walking gracefully in her towering heels. Mac had to find an in because the photographer didn’t want a detail.

She made her way across the studio to a woman concentrating on her clipboard. His eyes lingered on her as curiosity bit him. He smirked. The photographer was exactly what he pictured, a mousey dreamer. Putty in his hands. His body relaxed at the notion he would have everything under control. He could be out of here sooner than expected. He bent over and put the kickstand in place, securing the bike, and sat down.

Chloe glanced over her shoulder at him before turning her attention to the blonde. She spoke to her in a low voice just out of earshot. Whatever she said didn’t seem to move the listener. She finally tugged on her arm, moving her in his direction.

“Mr. Andersen, I’d like you to meet the photographer, Leigha Luccenzo. Leigha, this is Dean Andersen. He’ll be modeling with the bikes from Dragon Road Rides.”

He stood to his full height. She tilted her head back with a cool look in her eye as she sized him up. His guard went up. He took note of the beauty standing before him. She was a breath of fresh air from her glossy flaxen hair to her flawless skin. Her red wire glasses accented her hazel eyes. He held his breath in surprise. The encounter was unexpected.

She automatically extended her hand, unaffected by his presence. “Hi, nice to meet you. Please let us know if we can get you anything while you’re here. I need a couple of minutes to set up for some initial shots and then we might decide to take the shoot outside.” She pivoted on her heels as sharp clicks receded in the space.

His jaw flexed. She didn’t even blink, completely disregarding him. Something unfamiliar flared in him. In that one moment she drew her line in the sand, challenging him, and stirring his senses. Things were about to get interesting.

He took in the sight of her. She hid under clothes that hung on her. Her outward appearance didn’t match the woman she presented to him. She exuded strength and confidence. A wolf in shar-pei’s clothing.

He always got his pick when it came to women. They easily submitted to his charms. But she barely acknowledged him. God knows he loved a good challenge. This beauty needed a lesson in who was pack leader. She wouldn’t be controlling the show.

His eyes never left her as she worked around the bike setting lights, diffusers, and light meters. She operated with all the professionalism and knowledge of someone who knew her craft. He had a hard time keeping his eyes off of her, but he needed to stay focused. The assignment required him to gather intel and keep track of her.

He scanned the studio, taking note of its cleanliness, from the small kitchen to the floors and windows. Nothing out of place, a sure sign of OCD. The space showcased everything from exposed beams to spotless hardwood floors, yet she hid behind her monochrome pants suit, exposing nothing. Her dichotomy piqued his interest even more.

She was hiding something.

His eyes landed on the spotless shelf filled with pigs of all varieties except for one. Smashed to pieces, it lay in a careful pile at the end of the shelf. Why would anyone keep broken pieces? The homage to pigs seemed the total opposite to the gazelle of a woman in front of him.

He snapped out of his recon and caught her struggling to adjust a light high up. “Let me get that for you,” his voice softened.

“I got it. I’m fine.” Her eyes stayed focused on the light she tried to reach. As she failed to get to it, her arms fell to her sides. “A little to the left.”

He stood to the side and adjusted the light as requested. “Do you need help with anything else? Do you want me to move the bike?” He invited her to look at him.

She denied his request when she simply said, “No, thank you,” answering him as if declining the offer of another piece of bread from a waiter.

“Chloe, would you be so kind as to get me a coffee down the street? I’m craving some caffeine.” He laid his charm on thick, needing some alone time with the intriguing creature before him. All in the name of intel.

Chloe’s head snapped up as uneasiness crossed her face. “We have coffee here if you want some.”

“Would you be a love and please get me some Starbucks? It’s the only coffee that agrees with my system.” He emphasized it with a megawatt smile.

“It’ll be fine. We have plenty of light. Go ahead and get him some coffee. There’s nothing worse than a cranky model.” Leigha smiled for the first time.

Oh, good. She was a smartass too.

Chloe grabbed her by the arm, moving her out of earshot. They huddled together. After Chloe whispered something in her ear, her body stiffened. Chloe looked over her shoulder and smiled while continuing to the door.

He smirked, “I see you’re a seasoned professional when it comes to working with models.”

“Yes, especially the diva variety.” She turned and looked at him with hard eyes, her resting bitch face firmly in place.

He’d never met anyone so immune to his charm. “Oh, so you have already sized me up as a diva. It doesn’t look like you and I are getting off to a very good start.” He stepped closer into her personal space. “Truth, Dare or Care?”

She stood up straight, meeting him face to face. Her ringless fingers curled around the edge of the clipboard. “What?”

“It’s my game to get to know you. The responder gets to pick one.”

“Care?” Her fingers tightened on the clipboard as sadness flashed across her eyes.

“I get to ask you about something you might have feelings for. You have to tell me the truth.” He searched her face for anxiety but found none.

Without missing a beat she said, “Wouldn’t that fall under Truth?”

“No. A truth can be lied about, but a care is written on your face.” He reached out to touch a piece of hair that had fallen from her bun. She stepped away from him as expected. “The question is, are you game?”

“Truth.” Her words held defiance.

“Why was Chloe so reluctant to leave you alone with me?” He stuffed his hands in his front pockets.

Her face went blank. “Well, aren’t you observant? We’re single women living in a big city. We have each other’s backs so to speak.”

“That makes sense and very smart.” He liked the fact that she understood the dangers of the city.

She gave him a small smile. Silence hung in the air as his eyes locked on hers.

“Aren’t you going to ask me anything?” His chest tightened. There were so many questions he couldn’t answer.

“No. I’m too busy taking care of those around me to play games, Mr. Andersen.” She gave him a stand down soldier look. She thought she would be calling the shots. “We have work to do and we’re wasting precious light.” Ending the conversation, she turned away, giving her full attention to her light meter.

“It’s Dean. Mr. Andersen is my father.”

Her head popped up and she turned back around.

“If we’re going to be working together, you should probably call me Dean, Leigha.”

She swallowed hard as if she were digesting the information. Nodding, a faint smile graced her lips as she turned to continue to work.

His eyes followed her, resigned to the tough uphill battle to convince her he was one of the good guys. His curiosity about her should have been his first clue to hit the road. The feeling wasn’t foreign. His ex-lover captured him with the same look, daring him to come and get her. Come he did only to lose in the end.