

## Chapter 1

### London

It starts after midnight, when most harrowing and horrifying things seem to take place.

Emily Rotenberg has been in bed for about an hour but is still awake. It takes her hours to fall asleep these days, no matter how hard she tries. And she has tried everything to fix the situation, but nothing works—not a dreary book, not prescription pills. Not even a couple glasses of wine.

Emily had no reason to believe that anything was different about this night. After all, she lives at the most desirable address in London. That's what the newspapers say, anyway: the way the media fusses over The Bishops Avenue you'd think God himself lived there. She read about the mile-long stretch just north of Hampstead Heath years before she met her husband Mikhail, breathless stories in the color Sunday magazines when she was a little girl. It all sounded so grand, like something out of a fairy tale, and she would wonder what it would be like to live there.

She doesn't have to wonder anymore. A huge mansion on Billionaires Row is one of the things her husband, a Russian oligarch, has given her. Though she would say that the only thing of worth he's given her are the twins, Kit and Tatiana, asleep in the adjacent wing.

Mikhail is home. She knows this, even though he is not in bed with her. The fact that he's home is by no means a given: as often as not he spends the night without her at the Knightsbridge apartment, his in-town residence closer to business associates, but that night he is at the house they share. He is downstairs somewhere in the rambling mansion, still awake. The man is famous for never sleeping. When they were dating, Emily used to joke that he was secretly Count Dracula, that he slept during the day and rose refreshed and ready for an evening of wining, dining, and dancing. Though she knew that he'd been working because she saw the evidence of it in the news. He seemed to have a finger in every pie in Russia, not to mention his international interests. Mikhail Rotenberg is a machine for making money.

She hears a muffled noise toward the back of the property. That in itself is a rarity worth noting, but they do live in London, albeit a quieter, sleepier area to the north. It is a Saturday

evening—technically, Sunday morning—so you can't rule out the occasional odd bit of noise. Only a curmudgeon would complain on a Saturday night.

What happens next, however, never happens.

There is a burst of gunfire.

She bolts upright in bed. It's just a couple shots but that sound is unmistakable. *Pop pop pop*. While Emily was not wealthy growing up, she came from an upper class family. She has been to her share of hunting parties, spent many an autumn weekend slogging through the woods of a family friend's Scottish estate, a rifle in her hands, once she was old enough to participate. She wasn't a bad shot. The father had proclaimed her a natural, marked her forehead with the bright vermillion blood of the deer she'd taken down.

The gunfire tonight is nothing like the quaint old hunting rifles she'd used for pheasant or grouse. These first shots are deceptively quiet, however. Nothing like what will happen next.

She's reminded immediately of a murder on Billionaires Row she'd read about. It took place three decades ago, a foreign businessman shot dead in his home on New Year's Eve. What made the case so fascinating is that it didn't fit the usual pattern for home robberies. The robbers locked the wife in an upstairs bathroom instead of killing her alongside the husband. The gun used to kill the man was one of those tiny ladies' pistols, the kind that was designed to fit in an evening bag, and—curiouser still—the bullets were made of silver. This last bit makes the whole thing ludicrous, as far as Emily is concerned. They had to be decorative or a conversation piece, unless the man was suspected of being a werewolf. Somehow, the wife managed to escape from the bathroom and ran for help, but the assailants were never found.

Because the wife survived, there were rumors that she was involved—of course. Even when a woman is the victim, she can't escape suspicion.

That infamous house is a few doors down. It was eventually sold and now, predictably, stands empty, another of these absentee owners who only comes to London once or twice a year. It's the peculiar sound of the gunshots that make Emily think of the unsolved case she'd read about. Is that what the ladies' handgun sounded like, soft and dainty? Emily can't help but wonder.

Her first, wishful thought is that it has to do with one of the neighbors. Some have their own security, just as they do—though unlike the Rotenbergs, the neighbors' security tends to amount to nothing more than one or two personal security guards. One for the husband, maybe one for the wife and children. The bodyguards are discrete and professional, almost always

former military. Many are Israeli, the preferred source for security at the moment—though Mikhail uses Russians, of course. The Rotenbergs have more security than most of their neighbors, but that's only to be expected, given who Mikhail is and his special circumstances. Igor Volkov, their chief of security, lives with them. I like to keep my important people close, is how Mikhail explained it to Emily when they first started dating. She'd never known anyone as wealthy as Mikhail, so she took the otherwise bizarre situation as a given, assumed that all rich people had a clutch of people following behind them like a comet's tail. Volkov is an old family friend, to hear Mikhail tell it, and he has been with Mikhail from the very beginning. He is only a few years older than Mikhail but looks a hundred times tougher. Tall and wiry, and covered with scars. One circles his left eye, the circumference of a beer bottle. Like most Russian males, Volkov went right into the Army after school. In contrast, Mikhail, due to family connections, avoided conscription and went to college, where he started to build his business empire.

Who else is on duty? She wonders. There's always three or four twitchy young Russian men at the mansion. Emily is never told their full names and refers to them by Anglicized nicknames she gives them. That night, it is Leo, Max, and Mikey.

Then come the second round of shots, much closer to the house, and altogether different in character. They must be automatic—something the police will confirm later. Short bursts of fire—*bang bang bang bang*—much louder now.

Emily trembles. *What is going on*, she asks even though deep inside, she knows. Has always been expecting this, if she is honest with herself.

Her first thought is of her babies in the children's wing. Alice Wilkinson is with them, of course, her bedroom next door to the nursery. It is her responsible to get up in the middle of the night when one of the children cough or cry or is wakened by a bad dream. But, in a moment like this, it doesn't matter that help is in the same room with them. A nanny isn't enough: Emily had to be with them, to make sure they are alright.

It's funny, the stupid things one does in a moment like that. She takes a few precious seconds to put on a dressing gown. In her defense, what is she wearing is rather sheer and hardly the kind of thing you want to be caught in when armed gunmen descend on your home. She hopes, as she yanks on the dressing gown and ties the belt, that she will be locked in one of the bathrooms. Maybe it is only Mikhail they want.

The house is dark. Why hasn't anyone turned on the lights? Have the burglars they cut the power? You hear of robbers doing that sort of thing. Where is everyone? Igor, undoubtedly,

has gone to check with his men. Two are supposed to be posted at the back of the estate, but it is ominously quiet back there. Perhaps Igor is taking Mikhail somewhere safe. Where is Mikhail? You'd think he'd be on his way to check on his wife and children but there is no sign of him. Still, she tells herself that he is coming for them and pictures him running down the hall, running toward them, as though she could will it into being. She thinks too of Westie—Arthur Westover, Mikhail's funds manager—arguably more important to Mikhail than his wife. Maybe her husband is taking a moment to make sure he is safe.

As she stumbles down the dark hallways, she curses Igor. Isn't it his job to make sure there plans for exigencies like this, for exactly this sort of thing? They have active shooter drills in primary schools, for God's sake, but since moving in she cannot remember being told what to do in the case of emergency. This seemed like a huge oversight on the security chief's part.

It is then Emily remembers the panic room. *Of course* there is a panic room in this giant, sprawling behemoth of a house; with his typical foresight, Mikhail had had it installed when he'd acquired the place over a decade ago.

Emily hurries through the halls, her dressing gown fluttering around her like a shroud, as she makes her way to the next wing. Noises drift up from the great open foyer in the middle of the ground floor, commands issued in Russian (naturally: it is always Russian) that she doesn't understand. Still, she recognizes the voices. Igor's mostly. Strangely, Mikhail is silent and he is never silent. Where is he?

She has just crossed the main hall when she hears breaking glass below, high and bright and jangly. To Emily, the sound of breaking glass is one of the scariest in the world. It means that they—whoever “they” are, though she has a good idea—have reached the house and successfully breached the outer defenses. The invaders are about to come inside.

*Surely, we'll hear sirens soon.* This is London, after all. Even though the houses here sit on several acres, sound travels, especially loud, angry sounds like gunshots. Their neighbors will have heard and called the police immediately. That is, if the guards hadn't alerted the police already. (But would they, given that their damnable Russian pride is on the line?) Either way, the police should arrive any minute. All Emily had to do is get the children to the panic room.

She arrives at the unlit nursery to see Miss Wilkinson standing between Kit's and Tatiana's tiny beds. She looks utterly distraught, unraveling from indecision.

The children seem to still be asleep. Emily doesn't want to jump to conclusions about Miss Wilkinson's grasp of the situation. Children can be such heavy sleepers at that age.

“What in the world is going on?” the nanny asks in a loud, frightened whisper.

What does the silly girl think is going on? Surely, she can’t be that naïve. She knows whom she works for. “I’ll take Tatiana, you take Kit and follow me,” Emily says, not bothering to answer the question. Had either she or Mikhail told the nanny that there is a panic room in the house? Probably not. No sense scaring the girl.

Emily picks up her daughter. She snuggles instinctively against Emily’s chest in a drowsy half-sleep, burying her face to her mother’s clavicle. Drinking in the warm, soft baby smell of her daughter, Emily nearly breaks into tears. To think bad men with weapons are converging on the house at that very minute... Coming for *them*... The children are innocent. She’s innocent, for that matter. Isn’t she? Emily thinks again of the dead businessman’s wife, locked in a bathroom, forced to shimmy down a drainpipe. There had been no mention of children in the newspaper stories.

She runs through the hall, Tatiana clutched to her chest. Two-year olds are heavier than you might think. Kit is even heavier than his sister and Miss Wilkinson, a slight thing, struggles to keep up. Emily probably should’ve taken Kit, she realizes in hindsight, and left the smaller Tatiana to the nanny, but she’d acted on instinct. She always worries more about Tatiana because she is the girl. Emily knows how hard the world can be on the fairer sex.

The panic room sits on the ground floor next to the kitchen. It is not a family kitchen, not the sort of well-decorated, lived-in room you see in magazines. It’s a big industrial place, more the domain of staff, like a modern Downton Abbey. They’d put the panic room there, she supposes, because it was easiest for the builders. She’d been in it once: Mikhail had shown it to her shortly after they were married. He had been leading her around the huge mansion that had become her home. Showing her all the nooks and crannies that he didn’t show most people: his second office, the real one with its documents safe, and the armory in the basement where his bodyguards kept their auxiliary weapons. “God willing, we’ll never have to use it,” he’d said as they stood in the panic room that night.

There was no panic room in Downton Abbey, she is certain.

Now here she is in the dark with her daughter in her arms, ready to activate the heavy steel doors for the first time, with only the nanny for company. Where is Mikhail?

“Let’s go in,” Emily says to Miss Wilkinson, whose teeth chatter like she’d seen a ghost. It’s understandable, under the circumstances, but a bit surprising, nonetheless. She’d struck Emily as quite no-nonsense when she’d interviewed her.

Wilkinson reads her employer's mind. "What about your husband? Shouldn't we wait until—"

"I'm sure he'd prefer that his children be made safe," Emily says, snapping a little. She is more desperate than she first thought to get behind those bulletproof walls and seal the door behind them. Hand hovering over the keypad, she notices that the gunfire has stopped—for the moment, anyway.

"Would you really close the door without me?" Mikhail's deep voice is beside her, crackling in the darkness. Suddenly, he is standing next to her with Igor behind him holding a gun high, cradled in two hands. Surprisingly, in that moment, Igor seems very nervous. She's never seen him betray even a hint of nerves, and her stomach drops to her feet. It must mean they are in real trouble.

"Thank god you're safe." Emily presses her face to her husband's chest as best she can while holding a child in her arms. She wants to shout at him, *where were you*, because she is afraid and it would be an easy way to vent her fear, but she knows it's better to look like she'd been worried and frightened without him. Tatiana mewls slightly, like a kitten fighting to remain asleep.

A radio crackles to life somewhere on Igor and he steps away, the better to hear. Mikhail begins to shepherd her and Miss Wilkinson into the safe room. His demeanor hits Emily as all wrong. He is angry rather than seriously frightened. Whatever is bothering him, however, he clearly is not about to discuss it in front of the nanny. Emily knows that much about her husband. Mikhail looks from Kit, now awake and blinking owlily at his father, to the sleeping Tatiana, and then to his wife, and Emily is grateful for that rare, tender moment. She trusts that means everything will be okay. Then he steps over to a control panel, a large, awkward thing affixed to the wall, incongruous among the bookcases and tufted leather armchairs. He presses the touch screen once to light it up, then holds a finger above a prominent red circle on the screen, the button that would send the room into lockdown.

She realizes in that second that he never taught her how to use the control pad. Perhaps he'd assumed she'd never need to use it—or was it because he didn't want her using it on her own? Maybe he considers it *his* panic room, which she and the twins are welcome to occupy only *with him*.

Where does this strange, uncharitable thought come from?

Mikhail is ashen and grim. He is shaken up. His house—which is definitely his castle,

Englishman or no—has been breached. They both understand that, considering his position, this violation can mean many things. The implications must be running through his head.

*Someone wants you dead, Mikhail.*

Before he can press the button, however, Igor is back and at Mikhail's elbow, walkie talkie in hand. "I was just informed that the police have arrived. The intruders left when they heard the sirens." Mikhail and his chief of security step aside to confer before he releases Igor to go speak to the police, who are ostensibly rustling around on the floor above them. When he turns to Emily, he looks greatly—but not completely—relieved.

She starts toward the hall. She wants to get the children to the nursery. Tatiana is heavy in her arms; the twins are awake now and fussing to be let down.

He draws her aside. "Let the nanny take them upstairs. You and I must talk."

Emily resists. "They'll be upset. They'll have questions. I need to be with them."

"That's the nanny's job. You can go up in a minute, but right *now* we need to talk."

She does as he asks. She always does. A lump forms in her throat as she watches Miss Wilkinson lead her children away. The sight of another woman caring for her children in that moment tears her heart in two. *Never again.*

Mikhail steps close so he can whisper, even though it is unnecessary. There is no one else around. They are alone.

"Igor told me that two of the guards are dead. They've taken the third one to the hospital." Mikhail says this without emotion, as though he's rattling off sports scores he's heard on the radio. The news stuns her like a blow to the head and she thinks of the young men she saw earlier that evening, heading out to take their places behind the house. Which ones would she never see again?

"Who attacked us tonight?" Emily asks, tearfully. It hits her all in that moment, what almost happened. *The wife locked in the bathroom, shimmying down a drainpipe to escape.*

"I don't know. We'll find out."

"The police—"

"The police are useless in this sort of thing. Igor will find out. He has—resources."

"This sort of thing?" That confirms it, as far as she is concerned: this is no ordinary robbery or home invasion. This is Mikhail's chickens coming home to roost. His very particular, high-stakes, deadly chickens.

Tonight was supposed to be a reckoning. They are being called to account for their sins

and misdeeds. Mikhail's are so much worse than hers, even if you only count the ones she knows about. There are more, she is sure, and much worse. But whatever Mikhail is guilty of, he went into it with his eyes open, knowing full well what he was doing. He knew the world he was becoming part of. He knew its peculiar rules, its unforgiving players.

But she did not have that benefit.

Oh, she may have had an inkling. She had her suspicions, Mikhail being who he is. But she let them remain suspicions. The things that remained unspoken between them could fill a canyon.

Would he have told her, if she'd asked?

Does it matter? She didn't.

All she had known was that she was deliberately choosing evil. How evil, how bad it really was, she didn't want to know.

That didn't mean it wouldn't catch up to her at some point. There had to be a price for all this luxury, all this ease.

Mikhail breaks into her self-pitying thoughts. "Don't speak to the police. They'll want to talk to you, but just tell them you need to see to the children."

Emily feels a spasm of anger pass through her, but she knows she won't act on it, no matter how tired she is. "You don't have to tell me, I'm not an idiot—"

"They would've stopped you and you would've spoken to them. I know you, Emily: so eager to please." He says the last part with an amused bitterness. Funny, that's what she thought he liked about her, her eagerness to make him happy. "I'm telling you not to tell them anything. I'll be right behind you, and I'll make it clear to them that you're not to be bothered. This is my affair."

His words are numbing, like taking a pill. They take the fight right out of her. "Of course."

They can hear the police on the floor above, the crackle of their walkie-talkies, unfamiliar voices mingled with Igor's. The children will be terrified. She needs to get to them.

As they start up the stairs, she cannot resist asking. Even though she knows he doesn't want to be confronted, not yet. She whispers, "*He's* behind it, isn't he?"

Mikhail stops in his tracks. He gives his wife a hard and incredulous look, as though he can't believe she's asking him this. That she has the nerve.

Yet, behind it, in his ice-blue eyes, there is a hint of fear. Emily has never known Mikhail



to be afraid—why should he? He's always been the one to hold all the cards. But tonight, he is afraid. Viktor Kosygin, the new president of Russia and arguably most powerful man in the world, is behind this and, if that is the case, it is all over. They aren't safe and they will never be safe. There is no running, no hiding. No panic room will be sufficient to protect them.

Tonight, they've been lucky. He's gotten a reprieve, Mikhail seems to understand. But what happened tonight is just the beginning.

The worst, they both understand with absolute clarity, is yet to come.