

The Greatest Risk

By Kristen Ashley

Prologue

Opposites Attract

Sixx

Two years ago...

Sixx sat in the booth at the Bee's Honey and watched.

She watched what she'd seen time and again.

She watched what set a heavy weight to taking residence in her stomach.

Mistress Amélie had selected her toy for the evening and was going back to the playrooms.

And Master Stellan was sitting in his booth, watching her go, a look of disappointment on his usually remote, but always extortionately handsome face that he did not hide fast enough.

Thus Sixx caught it.

"Not gonna go anywhere, sweetheart."

She turned her eyes to the man sitting across the semi-circular booth with her. A booth he owned because he owned the Honey, a luxurious, exclusive BDSM sex club in Phoenix that had sister clubs in cities across the west.

Aryas Weathers was a very large black man with a bald head, a thick beard and a beautiful soul.

"Pardon?" Sixx asked.

"Leigh and Stellan," he answered. "It's not gonna happen."

"I don't know what—" she began.

"Yes you do," he said softly.

She spoke no more because Aryas was a handsome black man with a beautiful soul and a number of sex clubs he owned and operated. He was also a Dom, and a good one, thus keenly observant and empathic. Last, he was a friend and an excellent one.

In other words, with his friends that empathy hit extremes.

"She's into him and he's into her," Sixx replied.

"They'd never make it. He needs a challenge and so does she," Aryas told her.

Sixx looked down at her glass of red wine, something she ordered wishing it was a cocktail with gin involved, but that wouldn't work with the rep she had going at the Honey, doing this thinking that two Doms finding their way together in life when sexually they didn't quite fit would be one hell of a challenge.

"Opposites attract."

Those quiet words from Aryas had her head coming up again and her eyes finding his.

"Can't say how I know, outside what you know only I know, just will say that I know, you wanted in there, you could turn his eye," Aryas shared.

She was not going to put herself out there like that.

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She couldn't.

She was strong. A female Goliath, a superhero with a vagina in a five seven, trim-but-nice-ass, though not-so-much-in-the-breast-department, long-legged frame.

Straight up.

Fuckin' A.

But not with something like that.

Not that.

"I've got an assignment taking me out of town," she reminded him, and watched his lips form into a frown. "I don't know when I'll return."

Or...*if*.

Phoenix was awesome. There were good restaurants. There were palm trees. There were hiking trails. Sedona and Prescott were just hours away if you wanted spiritual enlightenment in a place that proved God existed or a break from the pounding sun in a place that proved God didn't mind flexing his creativity over a matter of mere miles. There was every sport you could want including hockey even though you could usually count the overnight freezes of a year on one hand. And everyone was so damned happy that the summer heat had broken that from October to June it was one huge-ass party, people taking to the streets, malls, outdoor dining, hiking trails and city-wide events like it was a slow roll Mardi Gras.

And if it snowed, the residents acted like the world was coming to an end because it seemed like it was, but the panic didn't last because what would only amount to a dusting of that white shit was gone by noon.

But it also had Stellan.

Stellan who got what he wanted.

Always.

And he wanted Amélie.

And Stellan was what Sixx wanted.

But she rarely got what she wanted (as in, *never*).

Thus Stellan would end up with Amélie.

"You gotta quit that shit," Aryas replied, his sweet soft tone turning biting.

Sixx pulled herself out of dismal thoughts and reacted to his tone, shooting back, "And how would I pay for my leather if I stopped that shit?"

"You'll not have a body to put that leather on if it's buried in the ground," he retorted.

"I know what I'm doing and I'm good at it," she returned.

"You've done work for me, that's how I met you, you settled that shit like the pro you are, so that's not in question. But now you're not a contractor, you're a friend, and I'm not feelin' as cheery about your present occupation."

Sixx quirked a brow. "So, say, a friend of yours who's in my business is sitting opposite you in this booth and he happens to have a dick, would this conversation have taken this turn?"

Aryas's full lips thinned as he looked to the hunting ground, the expanse of space situated in the middle of the room surrounded by a classed-up bar, the other three walls lined with posh horseshoe booths in order that the Doms in those booths could look over the subs in the hunting ground.

She gave it time and he did not answer.

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So she had her answer.
Eventually, Aryas broke the silence, looked back to Sixx and said, "Leigh will find someone."
"Or they'll find each other," she rejoined.
Aryas kept going like she said nothing. "And if you take off, he'll find someone too."
"Yes," she agreed. "When one or the other of them quit circling and go in for the kill, that will happen for both of them."
"Is there a reason you're allergic to happy?" he asked irritably.
That had Sixx snapping her mouth shut and looking at the hunting ground.
"You think he's too good for you?" Aryas pressed.
She stared at a male sub who she had not yet had.
He was not her type.
Her type was a tall, lean, lethal, sexy, rich-as-fuck, handsome-as-all-hell Dom who, she flicked her glance his way, was right then calling over a beautiful, willowy sub to his booth.
She was not beautiful.
Though she could be described as willowy, at a push.
Damn.
"You think he's got it all together and won't want to put up with a mess like you?" Aryas kept pushing.
Her eyes slanted back to him and they were slits.
But she couldn't argue the fact she was a mess. A big one.
And Aryas knew that.
He did not know because she'd told him anything.
She hadn't told him anything.
Not a thing.
But he was Aryas, he read it on her like she had her story tattooed all over her skin.
Which, with how much that story didn't feel too good living, it was a wonder she didn't.
"You haven't cornered the market on demons, Sixx. Stellan's got his own, just like you. And he might also want someone in his life to help him beat them back."
"I suddenly feel the need to crack a whip," she retorted.
"Of course you do," he muttered, looking frustrated.
"I leave in a few weeks," she declared.
His eyes narrowed angrily.
"Of course you do," he repeated.
"I might not be back," she spoke the decision she'd right then made.
"You'll be missed and not only by me. You might not have taken this in, but your prolonged stay here, my sweet, means I'm not the only one in Phoenix who's pleased he can call you a friend."
She couldn't handle that so she didn't.
She slid her tight, black-leather-pants-covered ass out of the booth and took her feet on the stiletto heels of her black boots.
"He'll go all in for you."
Aryas throwing that out there got her attention again and she twisted toward him.
He kept at her.

“Stellan finds the one that’s worth it, he’ll break his back, sell his soul, work his fingers to the bone to win her and keep her.”

“And you can’t tell me why you know that about him, of course,” she remarked.

“I can tell you you’re gold in one of my playrooms and the amount of subs out there whose mouths just set to drooling just ’cause you slid your ass out of a booth lays testimony to that. But you got a long way to go to earn the premiere status of Domme that everyone thinks you have. You rock at the practical, but if you can’t read that on Lange, you might have it all in practice, Sixx, but you’re not hiding from me you don’t have a lock on the most important part of the scene. Theory.”

“How disappointing that I have to strike off my to-do list starting my Dominatrix Academy,” she returned sarcastically. “And here I was, had the curriculum all set and everything.”

She knew she’d pushed Aryas too far when he spoke again.

“Lived most my life watching the two most important people in it, my mother and my brother, do without,” he fired back. “She did the best she could for her boys. Gave it her all. And we still had dick. Think it was daily growing up I told myself I’d do something about that. And I did. So now she’s good. He’s good. But if you got that in you from the moment you learned how to breathe, wanting the best for the people in your heart, you can’t get away from it. So get pissed. Put up your shields. Go play with some sub who means dick to you when the man who’s taken hold of a piece of your heart is sitting thirty feet away. But don’t expect me to like it. And don’t expect me to keep my mouth shut about it.”

“You know, you’re intensely annoying when you’re being all that’s you, especially the good parts,” she retorted sharply.

He shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“Can I go force some orgasms now?” she requested. “Or are you still feeling the lecture?”

“You can if you promise to think about it,” he replied.

“Think about what?” she asked.

“Being happy.”

Sixx stared at Aryas Weathers’s face.

Years ago, he’d had a nasty problem and she’d been referred to him to assist in solving it.

When she had, she’d found out what he did and he found out who she was and guided her to being all she could be with that. During that time, she’d kept taking jobs, but she’d made Phoenix her base, coming home there.

Coming home to him.

Because he was her friend.

The only one she had.

Also because she owed him huge chunks of her sanity.

And right then, she owed him reining in her smart mouth as well as giving him that promise.

Just doing that her way.

“How about I won’t actively avoid it?”

He shook his head but did it with his lips curling up.

“Go,” he ordered. “Play.”

Sixx turned from him, took a step away, and turned back.

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“I love everything about you,” she whispered. “I’d break my back, sell my soul, work my fingers to the bone for you. There is precisely one human being on this planet that has that from me. You.”

With that, in order not to give him a shot at replying the way the beauty of his face told her he was going to, she immediately strolled away on her four-and-a-half-inch, pencil-slim heels, pointing at two male subs as she went but not breaking stride to the door that led to the playrooms, knowing with no doubts they’d follow her.

They did.

And she did this also knowing she had one pair of male eyes on her and only one.

Aryas’s.

But Sixx’s awareness was unusually incorrect.

She had two pairs of male eyes on her.

And that second set stayed on her all the way through the room and didn’t move, even after she disappeared behind the door.



Seven months later...

It was like a whisper of wind against her skin when the door opened and Sixx knew to turn and look, not because she’d do that as a matter of course just to be aware of her surroundings and who was occupying them (something she would do).

But because something told her what was coming she could not miss.

And she was right as she sat at the bar at the swank restaurant in Washington DC and watched with some surprise as Stellan Lange walked in the front door.

He looked magnificent, as he always did. Though she’d never seen him in the way she was seeing him now, with the black, cashmere overcoat covering his sleek, bespoke, dark-gray suit.

The suit was *de rigueur* for Stellan.

But he lived in Phoenix where overcoats were entirely unnecessary.

Sleek, she thought, her eyes roaming him, consuming him, *devouring* him.

That was Stellan. Not slick, *sleek*.

From the top of his head that was covered in thick, dark-brown, perfectly-styled hair all the way down the six plus feet that made him to the tips of his shining, custom-made, Italian leather shoes.

He was an Aquascutum ad. Cary Grant with a kick, all the polish, good looks and sophistication with a rugged, dangerous edge.

He was perfect.

She wasn’t on the job at that very moment, so considering her heart started tripping a faster beat, her first inclination was to lift her hand, call his attention to her, take this surprising circumstance away from Phoenix, from the Honey, and turn it into a drink among friends all the way across a continent.

Turn it into time with Stellan.

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Just time...with Stellan.

She didn't care what they did. She didn't care if he could only be in her presence for thirty seconds to give her one of his charming smiles, one of his head-to-toes that took every minute detail in and made her clit pulse, then touch his smooth cheek to hers and whisper a hello in his deep, silk voice as she smelled his amazing cologne.

Without bidding them to come, the words filled her head.

Think about what?

Being happy.

Yes, even if it was just thirty seconds with Stellan that would make her happy.

But then he swung his head from the hostess he was looking at to sweep his gaze across the space toward the dining area and she caught sight of the expression on his face.

A chill slid down her spine and Sixx was not used to that kind of chill.

Murderous.

He looked like he wanted to kill somebody.

Perhaps not the time to ask him if he'd like to take this surprising opportunity to have a chat over a noontime Scotch with a friend from home.

He was nodding peremptorily, seeming impatient as well as homicidal, as the hostess spoke to him and moved from behind her station with a menu clutched under her arm.

"Ready to order?"

Sixx tore her eyes from Stellan prowling behind the hostess toward the dining room to look at the bartender.

"Filet, medium rare and err on the side of rare. French fries," she ordered, beginning to turn her attention back to Stellan.

But the bartender said, "All we have are *pommes frites*."

Was he serious?

She held his gaze probably looking a little like Stellan did as he'd walked in and replied slowly, "As I said. Filet, medium rare, and *French fries*."

"Right," he muttered.

She glanced quickly to her left and then to the back of the bar to see the shelves holding liquor were framed in mirrors.

Mirrors she could now see Stellan through as he stood tall and straight, proud and arrogant in that oh-so-special way of his at a table in the middle of the dining room with the hostess standing at his side.

"I'll be moving down to the end," she told the bartender. "Cool?"

"Sure," he replied. "I'll nab your Pellegrino."

Sixx grabbed her bag, he got her sparkling water, and with her gaze fixed to the mirror, she moved down six stools to the one at the end of the bar against the wall. A darker space, more removed, not as easy to see her.

But with that mirror, she had a view of the whole dining room.

She sat with her eyes glued to what was happening with Stellan in that room.

The hostess had disappeared and an older man was standing with Stellan. Stellan who had not taken off his overcoat and also appeared like he had no intention to do so.

Sixx felt the fissures of tension opening up all the way across the space.

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Stellan was regarding the man standing with him like he'd rather be dipped naked in a vat of slime with his eyes and mouth forced open than be in that man's presence.

And the man had to be a relative. The age difference was definite, as was the resemblance.

A close relative.

Uncle at least.

Or father.

The man was holding himself awkwardly, like he wanted to go in for a handshake, or even a hug, but Stellan's body language and facial expression was not only not inviting that, it was actively warning against it.

And then Stellan shifted, turning his back on Sixx.

That was when Sixx saw her.

A woman sitting at the table facing them, her eyes lifted, trained on Stellan, a look of astonishment and something else suffusing her features.

She was blonde. Very beautiful. Put together perfectly from head to waist, which was as far as Sixx could see, but that meant it went down further. Perfect hair. Perfect makeup. Perfect accessories. Perfect blouse. And all that perfect was the best money could buy.

She was either a professional stylist, a model or *had* a professional stylist because she was a model. She looked like she'd walked right off the location of a photo shoot to come have lunch.

She also looked like she wanted to eat every inch of Stellan up with a spoon.

Sixx's heart started tripping even faster.

And then it happened.

The blonde beauty's mouth went slack and the fissure of tension splintering through the dining room split wide open.

Sixx stopped messing around with the mirror and turned on her stool to watch it full view.

Scanning the scene with skilled attention, thus taking it all in within seconds, Sixx saw the older man now looked infuriated, his face flushed, his brows snapped taut, his slightly-jowly jaw having tightened up.

The blonde appeared wounded.

And Stellan looked done.

He proved her assessment correct by turning on his expensive shoe and sauntering away.

Sixx watched him go, all the way out the door, noting that he no longer looked murderous.

He looked his usual.

Aloof.

What he'd come there to do, he'd done.

And now he was moving on.

She turned her attention back to the couple and that was when she spotted the huge rock on the blonde's left ring finger. Massive. Ostentatious.

Sixx could see it now because the woman's hands were covering her face like she was hiding tears.

The older man sat and leaned immediately to her, putting a hand on her back to soothe her not in a fatherly way.

In a lovely way.

If Sixx had to call it, that man had to be at least in his sixties, the blonde in her twenties.

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She looked to the door to the restaurant Stellan just disappeared through for a fleeting instant before she turned to her bag.

She pulled out her slim-line laptop and got the attention of the bartender.

When he jerked up his chin, she asked, “Do you have Wi-Fi?”

He nodded. “Password is BookerTMG. The ‘TMG’ in caps.”

Well, whoever thought that up had good taste in music.

She thanked him, opened the laptop, started it up, hooked into the Wi-Fi, and as she sipped Pellegrino then when it arrived she ate her filet and frigging *pommes frites*, it didn’t take long for her to find it.

Andreas Lange, multi-millionaire hotelier, father of multi-millionaire developer, Stellan Lange, had just last week announced his engagement to what would become his fifth wife, Priscilla Newton.

Andreas Lange was sixty-nine years old.

Priscilla Newton was twenty-two.

Sixx didn’t dig any deeper because she wasn’t on the job then, but she was on a job, and she needed to eat and get back to business.

It wouldn’t be until she was bone-weary but unable to sleep in her hotel room late that night (or more aptly, very early the next morning) that she’d go back to her laptop.

It didn’t take long before she wished she hadn’t.

She snapped the laptop closed and looked out the window across the night landscape of the purposefully-built-to-impress-and-intimidate capital of the nation.

“This is why I never do a deep dive into people I know,” she told the window.

She said it but her heart was far heavier than it should have been, or than she’d want it to be after doing a deep dive and discovering all she’d discovered about Stellan.

Sixx left her laptop to slide between the sheets (in a hotel, incidentally, that Andreas Lange owned, which meant she’d be moving to another one the next day), but she did not go to sleep.

She stared at the dark ceiling and did it until it lit with dawn, pissed as hell that Aryas had been right.

Everyone has demons.

Including Stellan Lange.

But not everyone knew the name of their demon.

But Stellan did.

Just like Sixx knew the name of every single one of hers.



Six months later...

Sixx was sucking in breath to handle the pain, driving, and hoping with everything she had she could make it to the doc Carlo had told her he had waiting for her without passing out when her phone rang.

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When she saw in the dash who was calling, not thinking straight, she hit the button on the steering wheel to take the call.

"You've got impeccable timing," she said into the car, hearing that her voice sounded strung tight and hoping the caller wouldn't hear it too.

"How's that?" Aryas asked.

Just that, if I'm going to die, the last voice I want to hear is yours, she thought.

"I'm dead tired but completely unable to stop myself answering when you call," she answered, and all of that was true, she'd just left some things out.

Like a couple of fresh bullet wounds.

God, if she lived, it was going to be hell getting the blood out of the cognac leather of her beloved Cayenne.

Though, right then, that was the least of her worries.

"Just thought you'd want to know, that stallion I approved for Leigh..." He made her wait for it, but not long. "That shit took. He's the one and if I'm not sittin' in a pew watching them walk down the aisle in twelve months or less, I'll let you spank me," Aryas told her.

At these words, but not entirely because of them, Sixx swerved, righted the car and drew in another deep breath that wasn't exactly cutting it to dull the pain.

When she didn't answer, Aryas said, "So, what I'm sayin' is, clear shot for you."

"How'd Stellan take it?" she asked.

"He doesn't usually Oprah it up with me," Aryas answered.

Focusing on the conversation as well as the road, both doing wonders with keeping her conscious, she returned, "Come on. You've got your finger on every pulse of every player in every club you own. How'd he take it?"

"He's not speaking with Leigh right now."

Translation: He'd failed to make a play. Screwed the pooch.

Now he was licking his wounds.

God, but she'd love to lick Stellan Lange's wounds.

Kiss all his hurts away.

Including the ones she laid on him with him begging her for more.

"You know I want all my babies happy, Sixx. Come home. Get some happy and give some to my boy," Aryas urged. "Stellan is due and it goes without saying you are too."

Damn, it was starting to snow.

Just what she needed.

Driving, listening, talking, watching it come down and trying to stay lucid, Sixx realized how much she hated snow.

Phoenix didn't have snow.

"Sixx?" Aryas called.

"I'm here but I gotta go."

"You cool?" he asked.

"Peachy," she lied.

There was silence before, far more alertly, she got, "Sixx, are you cool?"

"Awesome," she puffed out as an unexpected wave of pain hit her when she made a right turn and the movement didn't suit her gunshot wounds too much.

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“What the fuck is going down?” Aryas rapped out.

“It’s snowing,” she said.

“Yeah?” he prompted.

“And I’m driving,” she told him.

“All right,” he replied.

“So I’ve got to concentrate,” she pointed out.

He returned that favor, sharing out loud her earlier thought. “It doesn’t snow in Phoenix.”

Right then, Sixx made a decision.

That was, she made a decision if she lived to carry it through.

But mostly, she made the decision because she was realizing acutely in that moment that life was short.

Even so, that decision had conditions.

“You don’t interfere,” she stated.

“Say what?” Aryas asked.

“I’m coming home.”

“Brilliant,” he muttered, a lightness in his deep voice she hadn’t heard since before she left and they didn’t talk all the time, but they talked frequently.

Or it was more like Aryas checked in frequently. Sixx wasn’t one to stay in contact or give much away.

Ever.

“And you don’t interfere,” she demanded. “It happens naturally with Stellan if it happens at all without you sticking your big nose in it.”

“I do not have a big nose,” he huffed. Though he was pretending to sound hurt, even in her state, she couldn’t miss he was pleased.

“Now let me go so I don’t crash this vehicle and end up in a body cast, not on my way to finishing this job and heading to the Valley of the Sun.”

“The job going okay?”

Hell no.

“It’s almost done,” she answered.

And that was no lie.

“Then I’m letting you go,” he said.

“Right.”

“Sixx?”

“What?” she demanded impatiently, beginning to blink too much and knowing from past experience that wasn’t good.

Maybe she should keep him on the line.

“I love everything about you. I’d break my back, sell my soul, work my fingers to the bone for you. And if you want me not to interfere, I’ll do that too. But if you start fucking shit up, I’m in the game. Now finish this fucking job and come home. We miss you.”

The call dropped before she could say a word.

But it was good Aryas got his words in.

They kept her going until she was safe.

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Then, dragging herself through the back door of a clinic that through the powers of Carlo had been opened specifically for her, it was lights out.

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