

International Amazon Bestselling Author

Morgan  
Kelley

Since his wife's death, he's two  
people. Broken Dakota, and Hunter Dakota.  
Can she love them both?

**A**lliance

A Hunter Mercenary Book Twelve

# **Allegiance**

**A Hunter Mercenary Book 12**

***By Morgan Kelley***



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***Content Advisory:** This book is intended for mature audiences and contains, explicit sexual activity between various couples. This is considered an erotic thriller. If you are offended by sex or prefer no sexual details, you should stop reading now.*

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~~~~ About the Author ~~~~

**Morgan Kelley lives in the beautiful Pocono Mountains with her husband and two children. After attending college at Penn State University and studying Criminal Justice and Political Science, Morgan knew her only true passion in life would be murder and books. She put them both together and began her career as a writer. Other than books and writing, you can find Morgan hanging out in her garden and digging in the dirt.**

**Her other works include: The Junction, Serial Sins, The Blood Betrayal, The Killing Times (1), Sacred Burial Grounds (2), True Love Lost (3), Deep Dark Mire (4), Fire Burns Hot (5), Darkness of Truth (6), Devil Hath Come (7), Consumed by Wrath (8), Redemption is Here (9), Dead Shall Speak (10), Pledging to Die (11), Slay Bells Ring (12), Past will Haunt (13), Choices will Destroy (14), Blood shall Run (15), Act of Blood (16), Stalked by the Past (17), Dying to Love (18), Revenge has Come (19), Discarded by Fate (20), Dawn of Evil (21) Blood Red Rage (1) Lost & Broken (2), Unthinkable Games (3), Truth is Found (4), Haven of Nightmares (5), Forbidden Secrets (6), Kiss of Souls (7), Lost Souls (8), Celestia is Falling (1), *Vegas* is Dying (2), Christmas is Killing (3), Love is Bleeding (4), Heaven is Weeping (5), Hell is Burning (6), Justice is Dead (7), Dark Justice (1), Lost Justice (2), Paid Justice (3), Wedding of our Dreams: Dante and Steele (3.5) Dangerous Revelations (1), Dangerous Choices (2), Dangerous Misery (3), Dangerous Retaliation (4), Dangerous Influence (5), Dangerous Sacrifice (6), Sinner Repent (1), Sinner Realized (2), Sinner Reborn (3), Oracle Rising (1), Oracle Seeing (2), Oracle Saving (3), Oracle Haunting, (4), Atonement (1), Illegal Fantasies (Anthology 1), Romance Under Arrest (Anthology 2), and Holiday Reinforcements (Anthology 3), It's Good to be the Boss (1), plus many, many more...**

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**Dear Reader,**

**Since my books crossover a great deal, I recommend reading them as they are written. I tend to mention characters in books they don't generally occur in, and later in the series, there are full crossovers.**

**Some readers have contacted me for this list, and I figured I'd pass it on to the rest of you.**

**While you can read the books by series only, it only enhances the reading experience if you go in order of how I wrote them. I tend to give away secrets...**

**I'm sneaky like that.**

**On the next page, I've given you the list.**

**MK**

**Here is the reading book order:**

**The Killing Times (FBI)**  
**Sacred Burial Grounds (FBI)**  
**True Love Lost (FBI)**  
**Deep Dark Mire (FBI)**  
**Fire Burns Hot (FBI)**  
**Celestia is Falling (Croft & Croft)**  
**Darkness of Truth (FBI)**  
**Vegas is Dying (Croft)**  
**Devil hath Come (FBI)**  
**Christmas is Killing (Croft)**  
**Blood Red Rage (Littlemoon)**  
**Consumed by Wrath (FBI)**  
**Sinner Repent (Carter trilogy 1)**  
**Love is Bleeding (Croft)**  
**Lost & Broken (Littlemoon)**  
**Illegal Fantasies (Anthology 1)**  
**Redemption is Here (FBI)**  
**Sinner Realized (Carter trilogy 2)**  
**Romance Under Arrest (Anthology 2)**  
**Heaven is Weeping (Croft)**  
**Unthinkable Games (Littlemoon)**  
**Dead Shall Speak (FBI)**  
**Sinner Reborn (Carter trilogy 3)**  
**Pledging to Die (FBI)**  
**Hell is Burning (Croft)**  
**Truth is Found (Littlemoon)**  
**Slay Bells Ring (FBI)**  
**Holiday Reinforcements (Trilogy 3)**  
**Oracle Rising (Oracle)**  
**Past will Haunt (FBI Flashback 1)**  
**Choices will Destroy (FBI)**  
**Justice is Dead (Final Croft book)**  
**Haven of Nightmares (Littlemoon)**  
**Blood Shall Run (FBI)**  
**Oracle Seeing (Oracle)**  
**Dark Justice (New Croft Series)**  
**Forbidden Secrets (Littlemoon)**

**Act of Blood (FBI)**  
**Oracle Saving (Oracle)**  
**Stalked by the Past (FBI Flashback 2 )**  
**Dying to Love (FBI)**  
**Lost Justice (Croft)**  
**Kiss of Souls ( Littlemoon) (FBI/Littlemoon crossover)**  
**Oracle Haunting (Oracle)**  
**Revenge has Come (FBI)**  
**Paid Justice (Croft)**

**Wedding of our Dreams: Steele and Dante (Croft)**  
**Lost Souls (Littlemoon) Sept 2017**  
**Discarded by Fate (FBI)October 2017**

**Atonement (Hunter Mercenary) November 2017**

**It's Good to be the Boss (Romance Anthology 1) Nov 2017**

**Dawn of Evil (FBI) Jan 2018**

**Dead are Forgotten (FBI) Jan 2018**

**Love Knows No Bounds (FBI) Valentine's Day 2018**

**True Justice (Croft/FBI crossover) Feb 2018**

**Mob Justice (Croft Mob) March 2018**

**Found Curses (Littlemoon) April 2018**

**Absolution (Hunter Mercenary) May 2018**

**All the King's Henchmen (FBI) June 2018**

**Honor Thy Anger (FBI flashback) July 2018**

**No Justice (Croft Mob) August 2018**

**Secret Shame (Littlemoon) Sept 2018**

**All the Queen's Men (FBI) October 2018**

**It's Good to be Loved (Romance Antho) Nov 2018**

**Amends (Hunter Mercenary) Nov 2018**

**Angel of Death (FBI Flashback/Christmas) 2018**

**Taker of Life (FBI/ Christmas) 2018**

**Cause of Death (FBI Flashback) 2019**

**Time of Death (FBI) 2019**  
**L'Amour of Death (FBI Flashback) Valentine's Day 2019**  
**All Justice (Croft) March 2019**  
**Choice of Despair (Littlemoon) April 2019**  
**Apology (Hunter/FBI crossover) May 2019**  
**Manner of Death (FBI) June 2019**  
**The Final Orpheum (FBI Flashback) 2019**  
**City Justice (Croft) August 2019**  
**Threat of Exposure (Littlemoon) Sept 2019**  
**Blood of my Enemies (FBI) October 2019**  
**Oracle Hunting (Oracle) Nov 2019**  
**Rage of Heaven (FBI Flashback) Jan 2020**  
**Rage of Hell (FBI) Jan 2020**  
**Rage of Love (Littlemoon/FBI crossover) Feb 2020**  
**Bad Justice (Croft) March 2020**  
**Acrimony (Hunter) April 2020**  
**Sacred Truth (Littlemoon) May 2020**  
**Rage of Revenge (FBI) June 2020**  
**Enter the Truth (FBI Flashback) July 2020**  
**Advantage (Hunter) August 2020**  
**Blood Moon Rising (Littlemoon) Sept 2020**  
**Eye for an Eye (FBI) Oct 2020**  
**It's Good to be Bad (Romance Anthology) Nov 2020**  
**End is here (FBI) Jan 2021**  
**One for the Family (FBI Flashback arc 1) Feb 2021**  
**Apparition (Hunter) March 2021**  
**Haunted Visions (Littlemoon) April 2021**  
**Savage Bayou (FBI) June 2021**

**Two for the Fun (FBI Flashback arc 2) July 2021**  
**Avenge (Hunter) August 2021**  
**Altar (Hunter novella) August 2021**  
**Maze of Damnation (Littlemoon) Sept 2021**  
**Sinner & Saint (FBI) October 2021**  
**Blind Justice (Croft) November 2021**  
**Bashing Through the Snow (FBI) January 2022**  
**Three for the Glory (FBI Flashback) Feb 2022**  
**Addiction (Hunter) March 2022**  
**Dead Wrong (Littlemoon) April 2022**  
**Of Flesh and Blood (FBI) June 2022**  
**Deep Blue Nothing (FBI flashback) July 2022**  
**Abdication (Hunter) August 2022**  
**All The Stolen Valor (FBI) October 2022**  
**Dirty Justice (Croft/Hunter) November 2022**  
**Snow Body's Business (FBI Flashback) Jan 2023**  
**Stripped of Dignity (FBI) Feb 2023**  
**Allegiance (Hunter) March 2023**

**Harcourte books do not crossover and can be read anytime.**

**Dangerous Revelations**  
**Dangerous Choices**  
**Dangerous Misery**  
**Dangerous Retaliation**  
**Dangerous Influence**  
**Dangerous Sacrifice**  
**Dangerous Destruction**

**The Antiquities series also doesn't crossover. It should be read after the Dangerous series.**

**Wicked Hunt (Antiquities Series)**

**Darkest Angel (Antiquities Series)**

**Harshest Queen (Antiquities Series)**



**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***



**Dakota, maybe for once, can you stop thinking with that thick-ass concrete block on your shoulders, and just shut the hell up so your poor heart can win one round?**

**—Zayn Thundercloud.**



## *We are The Hunters...*

**A**nd, for the time being, we are back in control of the city. For the longest time, we were barely hanging on to that tenuous control. In a twist of fate in our favor, *New Orleans* has managed to hold on.

Somehow, we pulled it out of the shitter and got damn lucky on this one.

*How?*

Honestly, we have no clue.

Only, we're not asking questions about the how or why, but instead, we are accepting it and moving on.

Now that El Gato is dead and was fed to the gators in little meaty pieces to ensure that he never managed to come back, we have other issues on our hands.

Unfortunately, his number one, and keeper of the El Gato legacy, has gotten away.

We have to find his helper to ensure that Addiction stays dead.

Who is the asshole we've set our sights on?

That's simple.

It's Chevy Chesary.

*What isn't simple?*

**FINDING HIM!**

It's been three months, and we haven't been able to get a bead on his whereabouts anywhere in the city. It's as if he's just disappeared.

*We've put out his picture and name, but up to now...*

**NADA.**

Unfortunately for us, he knows that we are coming for him, so he's been very careful to make sure that he isn't found.

The man has taken hide-and-seek to a whole new level.  
And that's a problem.

*Why?*

He doesn't know that Maura is alive, and because of that, she can't walk free, or she'd be his target.

Then, we'd be right back in the same sinking boat.

For the last three months, since we just missed him by a few minutes as he left Teague's hiding spot, we've had to make sure Maura stays hidden.

She's our wild card.

She's also Jagger's heart and soul, and nothing makes a mob man testier than seeing his wife blown up, or shot by some ex-Marine asshole.

And unfortunately, tucking her away is making everything more difficult.

She's tenacious and a weapon in her own right, and now, unfortunately, we can't just point the Major at an issue, and let her go into Marine-ass-kicking-mode.

And that really sucks.

We're being progressively more cautious, but it's increasingly more difficult to keep her death a secret.

She's hella pissed that she can't walk down the street as Jagger's security and take care of business.

Really, no one blames her either.

Other than that conundrum, we also have another pressing issue.

**His name is Dakota Rakin.**

Good God.

But he's a pain in the ass.

Because he's a douchebag, he's already told us that when Chevy is found, he's out and that he's not playing this game anymore.

And that would be fine since anyone can leave at any point, but he's a dick because this misery is self-imposed.

He's Dakota of the Martyrs.

And he's the king of them.

When Eve Knight walked away, taking Violet with her to start a real life, she asked him to tell her to stay—he said, *'have a good life'*.

She **LITERALLY** gave him the opportunity to tell her to be with him, and he still didn't have the common sense to shut up and do it.

He's such a freaking idiot.

Then again, that's Dakota at his finest hot mess.

Let's just say he's not really known for making the best choices in his life.

Thus, why he's here.

If there's a horrible choice to be made, it's going to be his first option every single time when it comes to him.

*Leaving the US Marshals.*

*Letting Sarah stay in New Orleans.*

*Letting Bunny run wild.*

Jesus, but the man is a menace to himself, and everyone is sick of his piss-poor attitude about it.

With The Hunters, you're either in or you're out. There's no in-between.

There can't be.

It's a matter of life or death.

And none of us want to die. We like our lives and our families.

*To make this even trickier...*

Oh, because you know it can't be simple in The Big Easy, Eve reached out and called us for help.

Well, not 'us' per se, but she reached out to her sister snake, Mamba.

Someone is with child.

**DAKOTA'S** child.

What is the most difficult of this worst-case scenario?

Well, maybe that Adder doesn't know anything about having a baby—let alone having it be Dakota's baby.

Oh, how could this go wrong?

The second, and most dangerous part, is that Dakota has yet to find out, but we do know one thing for sure.

Boone gave him the wrong bracelet.

He thought he gave him the one that put him back on the path, but what he actually did was give him the fertility one.

**Yep.**

**Voodoo strikes again in *New Orleans*.**

I mean, it's funny as hell in an ironic kind of way, and it's also dangerous in a '*how can Dakota fuck this up*' kinda way.

Because he absolutely will.

He is, after all, Dakota.

There's no simple way out of this because they can't tell Dakota about it, or he'll go nuclear.

**Full.**

**On.**

**Meltdown.**

So now, The Hunters have to find Chevy and the girls that had been sent out to be drug mules, destroy any remaining ties to Addiction, and somehow get Dakota to figure out that the woman he wants more than anything but is too stubborn to risk it all for, is having his baby.

**His only child.**

*Yeah...*

**Jesus.**

This is going to be tricky.

Oh, and not in a good or fun way.

Dakota is a mess, still, and honestly, carrying him is getting to be a burden that they don't have time for now that *New Orleans* is still on the cusp of destruction.

It's save him now or let him go.

At some point, you have to step back and let fate, or Voodoo, take care of business.

It appears that this is that time.

**Unfortunately, for Dakota.**

What do you do when you have a man who is split in two, and can't find his way back?

Well, you do the only thing you can.

You make him your next mission to save his soul from that abyss, get him happiness, and stop *New Orleans* from falling apart yet again.

There is one thing for sure, and we all know it.

*Being a Hunter...*

There should be all kinds of hazard pay.

Because between Dakota losing his mind when he finds out he's going to be a daddy, and Chevy Chesary playing hide-and-go-seek, they are really going to earn it.

Forever fighting the good fight,

***Maura Armstrong, Jagger  
Armstrong, Zayn Thundercloud, Rogue  
Ravenscroft***

***&***

***Remmy Bowman***

We are The Hunters, and all that stands between the  
bad guys and *New Orleans* going down.





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## *Prologue*

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*Somewhere In*

*New Orleans*

*Sunday*

*Chevy's Hiding Spot*

**W**ell, well, well...this was something that he could finally get behind, and there was no doubt about that. He was damn proud of what he'd managed to do to secure his control of the city.

Oh, it had taken three months to find a way, but he'd finally managed to procure the most important asset in *New Orleans*.

### **CONTROL.**

And now, he was going to enjoy it. There was no way that he was going to take it for granted either.

This had been a hard battle and nearly had been the end of him. He'd gotten so close to being captured by The Hunters—specifically, Major Gaines and Captain Armstrong.

Now, though, with what was left of his Addiction—the stuff that was stolen from him in a drug bust, he had a new lease on life.

Still, with money, and the pre-built empire, it still wasn't easy rebuilding after El Gato was taken out.

No, not even close.

It took time, skill, and cunning.

All of which he had.

Granted, he had been stealing from El Gato to begin his new empire in *New Orleans* and had been planning on executing the man that same day, but that didn't negate his effort.

It had been huge.

He'd basically started from the ground up.

With some Addiction and the women who El Gato had transported in, he made enough money to do some damage to the city.

He'd used that money to seed his pet project, ensuring that he had a long life here in *New Orleans*.

On top of that, he was doing what El Gato couldn't. He was buying up even more cops to help with the new sex trade that he'd restarted.

Yeah, he knew The Hunters shut it down, but he didn't give a shit. It was back, and it was better than ever.

Yes, he knew that selling people was wrong, but he just didn't care.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

He also knew that there had been a thriving market here before the annoying Hunters rode into town and destroyed a perfectly lucrative business.

Some people called *New Orleans The City of Second Chances*, and in a way, it kinda was.

**For him.**

He was getting a second chance to get filthy rich off of the back of a truly scummy man who came before him.

**Teague LaVere.**

Now, the only thing that was standing in his way was the annoying Jagger Armstrong.

**God.**

That Marine had been a pain in his ass for the longest time, dating back to them being in Columbia for the mission that put him and Micah in El Gato's path.

And he was still that same pain in the ass.

**BIG-TIME.**

And that didn't appear to be changing anytime soon—which was a pity for him.

**Hell!**

He had to do something about it. There had to be a way to figure it out too.

He was tired of being hunted by an angry Marine.

The bottom line was that it was getting old.

What Chevy had learned was that the chase was only fun if you were the one doing the chasing.

It sucked the other way around. When you were the one being hunted, that was a huge-ass problem.

And for him, it had posed an issue.

Every time that he started to dig in and plant roots to build his business empire, Jagger Armstrong, the grieving husband, cut him off.

**Holy shit.**

The guy was annoying as all hell.

When he went into a bar to buy up mercenaries, five minutes later, a Hunter arrived.

When he kidnapped some women, his cargo was hijacked, and the women were set free.

When he started a meth lab in the middle of the swamp to get some capital going, someone blew it the fuck up.

Oh, he knew who that someone was in all of those situations.

*The one, the only...*

Captain Jagger Armstrong, or as the city called him, Mikey O'.

**God.**

**Damn.**

**It.**

The man was everywhere, and he was gunning for him just because they blew his wife to pieces. To be honest, something he didn't like to do, he wasn't even the one who blew her up.

That had to have been Micah.

Only, he'd taken the credit, and spread the word thinking they'd be dead at some point.

Still, Jagger Armstrong was pissy.

*Man...*

Someone held a grudge.

To be frank, it was getting old.

If someone didn't take that asshole out, and soon, he was going to have to start removing people in his ranks from life.

**Yep.**

**Offing them.**

As he'd been hiding, making his plans, he'd gotten a call from someone he knew long ago.

He supposedly had good news.

Well, that meant he just might be able to calm the hell down and celebrate.

Apparently, there was a break in the ongoing war, and if that was true, celebrate he would.

His hired guns, and his secret weapon, plus the men he bought up before Jagger could terrify them, had a little present for their boss.

Yeah, and he really appreciated a shipment of gifts.

He personally liked them curvy, big-titted, and tied down.

That was the only thing he could think they might be gifting him with now.

Since he knew that they'd never get lucky enough to kill Jagger Armstrong, even knowing how he worked and moved, he still had hope.

Or they found some new pussy for him.

At this point, he'd fuck his aggression away.

Thanks to Jagger, they'd been forced to stay out of brothels and massage parlors, looking for women wherever they could.

Oh, and that sucked.

Now, they couldn't just kidnap them. Apparently, people frowned upon that.

Only, the sex trade was **NOT** going to seed itself.

You had to have women to sell off to visitors to the country and to fly out of the airport on private flights.

If there was one thing that Chevy learned, it was how **NOT** to do something.

Abducting women off the streets had been easy before The Hunters knew what was going on.

That wasn't working now.

Back then, when he'd been brought in on the ground level years ago to work for El Gato, the man used drugs to keep the women quiet, but still, that made them a handful.

It didn't bring in the profit that they needed, and El Gato had too many balls up in the air.

Now, he was streamlining it.

He'd watched El Gato struggle to meet his supply, and he swore if he was ever running the operation, that he would do it differently.

Well, he was.

That was exactly what he was doing.

And it was genius.

One night, as he was lying in bed with a ridiculously attractive hooker...a dead one, it hit him.

**Ingenuity struck.**

It was so simple, and so thought out that he couldn't believe no one came up with it before.

What would lure pretty women, specifically young girls to him, so he didn't have to be seen on the street?

**Models.**

*Even better yet...*

**Hungry.**

**Desperate.**

**Ones.**

With the millions of dollars that he made selling off what was left of his dwindling Addiction supply, he put that money to work for him.

He opened up two modeling agencies, and they legitimately acted as businesses.

It was a way to pick and choose who he took and sold into the sex trade overseas. Since the heat was on here, the foreign buyers made him the most money.

To make the business legit, he filled it with people on his payroll, and some of the women actually did get modeling jobs.

They were the ones, who when they were vetted by his people, as they showed up to interview, had families.

That was a hard no for him.

*Why?*

It drew suspicion.

That was the last thing he wanted to do.

If they wouldn't be noticed that they had gone missing, they were the pussy they wanted for their clients.

**And it worked.**

*In spades.*

Yes, it cost half of his fortune, but...

Within a few '*jobs*', he made it all back and then some. See, American women were a prized commodity. The US was particularly protective of its citizens, and when one went missing, all Hell would break loose.

So, if you wanted fresh American pussy, you paid through the nose.

When a Saudi prince needed some pretty women to call his own, he would put in an order, discussing his '*preferences*', and they could find him someone.

Or a few someones.

The sexual appetite of some Saudi princes was staggering. They didn't have the likes of the women back home as they did here, and they wanted them.

**Hell!**

He'd been gifted a million-dollar racehorse because one of the redheads, who he'd sent over to do a modeling contract, was feisty and put up a fight.

Some men just liked their women that way.

As for the women, well, that was easy.

They would be told they were booking a gig for a foreign magazine, paid in advance, and then put on a private flight on a tricked-out jet.

**BOOM.**

It was like takeout.

They delivered to anywhere in the world if the fee was met. The redhead had netted him one million for the acquisition fee, and the racehorse.

After selling the horse, that was two million back into the coffers, and another satisfied customer.

What the prince did with the '*model*' when she arrived...not his business.



That was the prince's prerogative.

Lucrative was an understatement.

Three months in, they didn't have to deal with screaming, freaking out women.

They didn't have to deal with drugging a woman and sneaking her into a private airport.

They didn't have to deal with hiding them all over the town.

They literally walked there.

**On.**

**Their.**

**Own.**

And now, it was paying off in leaps and bounds. He was planning on opening a third agency, all with different names, and all connected to one mastermind.

**HIM.**

Now, he looked legitimate, as he picked a different name, had some plastic surgery, and hid in plain sight.

*The Hunters...*

They didn't have a clue and that was exactly why they couldn't nail him down.

He was smarter than they thought, and Jagger wasn't up to the game without the Major.

*His only regret?*

Oh, he would have loved to have gotten his hands on Maura Gaines. He would have loved to tie her down, fuck her stupid, and then send her off to be some rich man's sex slave to show her who was boss.

Only, a bomb handled that.

**Unfortunately.**

Well, he couldn't live in the past. It was time to move on, and time to remake the face of crime in *The City of Second*

*Chances.*

That made him laugh.

*Plastic surgery....*

**Never mind.**

He was at the top of his game with the new face, or maybe that was an old one. He'd studied and perfected the whole thing.

As he headed into the deep bowels of his hidey-hole to see what his men had brought him, he could hear screams. Only, something was off.

He wouldn't be shocked at female screaming, but this wasn't that. It was different.

**Male.**

**Screams.**

*What was this?*

*What the hell was going on?*

When he approached the door, someone was waiting for him. It was a very familiar face, indeed, and one that had been his helper since El Gato's death.

**Cruz Santiago.**

Oh, and he was a welcomed helper too.

This man had been El Gato's right-hand man, next to Leopoldo Geronimo. He worked for El Gato back in Columbia, and he was one of the few men who made it out alive after the compound's destruction.

Cruz had been lucky to survive the bombing and El Gato's anger.

He'd been in their boss' compound, and he had been the man who rushed him to the basement, protected him, and then got him out.

Only, it wasn't so cut-and-dry.

He'd had to go into hiding shortly after that day when the Marines made their move on the compound.

*Why?*

El Gato hated the man.

What did he do?

Well, that was simple and complex all at the same time. His big crime had been a travesty for El Gato.

Cruz hadn't grabbed El Gato's wife or child. He only saved him, and that wasn't something that made the drug kingpin happy.

Honestly, though, Chevy was okay with that.

After all, it was all working out now.

It all came to this point in the future where he was running El Gato's old show with a twist.

"Hey, Cruz. What's going on in there?" he asked, pointing at the door as the man stood in front of it, smiling.

"My men found something for you, and they brought it in. I think you're going to be very happy with what they found, Mi Amigo."

Chevy wasn't sure what he was talking about.

Only, like El Gato, he was as curious as a freaking cat more times than not.

"Why does it sound like its men being tortured in there?"

*He laughed.*

*And laughed.*

*And laughed.*

"Because men are being tortured in there. Let's just say that I'm delivering you the best gift, and while I expect no reward, I think you're going to see otherwise and uphold what you said earlier."

That was interesting.

Okay, color him intrigued.

“Now, you have to show me,” he said, as the man could barely stand still.

Yeah, it was going to be good.

He’d bet on it.

When Cruz opened the door in the barely lit room, he saw four shirtless men hanging from the ceiling by their wrists. Their feet barely touched the floor as they were being beaten on by the other men.

*What was this?*

He walked in, and as he looked around, at first, he wasn’t sure who these men were, or why they were receiving this torture.

“Did someone steal from me?” he asked Cruz.

The man just laughed.

As he did, someone took a cattle prod, and a shit ton of electricity, and drove it into the one man’s side.

He screamed in pain.

Chevy had heard that voice before, and while it took a second, he placed it now.

“You’re welcome,” Cruz said, as he walked over to the man who was being tortured, grabbed him by his wet hair, and lifted his head.

And that’s when Chevy saw it.

Oh, this was a long time coming.

This was something he dreamed about each and every day of his life. He wanted this man’s head on a silver platter, and it appeared that he’d been given that gift.

They took out the Major.

And now, they were about to take out her Captain.

**SPECTACULARLY.**

He began laughing.

“Oh, Jagger Armstrong, you seem to be in a shitty predicament. It’s been a while, my old friend,” he said.  
“Welcome to my secret bastion of safety.”

Jagger spit out red-tinged spittle and stared at the man as there was blood dripping down his battered face.

But he said nothing.

**NOT.**

**AT.**

**ALL.**

“Welcome to my little hidey-hole, pumpkin. I’d offer you some refreshments, but you’ve been a huge pain in my ass,” he said, punching him in the stomach.

Jagger braced for it.

“Oh, did you give up since I blew up your precious Major a few months ago?”

Cruz laughed.

All the while, Jagger said nothing.

He refused to give him the satisfaction.

“I bet you wish she was around to save your ass, Jagger. We all know you were only as good as your Major. She was the driving force, and you were nothing but a love-sick puppy who followed her around. What are you going to do now that you can’t rely on her to save your ass?”

He did speak this time.

“You don’t say?” he asked.

Chevy was ecstatic as he patted Cruz on the back.

“This gets you a raise,” he said.

Cruz smiled.

“Gracias, Mi Amigo.”

The man now running the show was curious about how the other guy had pulled it off.

This was huge.

“How?” he asked.

Cruz explained.

“We caught them trying to infiltrate one of your businesses to get to me. We thought you’d like to have them as...souvenirs.”

He laughed.

Oh, this was a perfect day.

Chevy was in his glory as he walked among the four hanging men.

“More Hunters?” he asked.

The man nodded.

“Si! We have two Native men, and one who we believe was once a Fed,” he said, pointing at Zayn Thundercloud, Boone Savage, and Dakota Rakin. “They got sloppy, and we delivered.”

Well, this was going to be fun.

Honestly, Chevy had been waiting for this day.

All that remained was that he needed to decide what to do with his arch nemesis now that he had him exactly where he wanted him.

**In.**

**His.**

**House.**

Oh, well, that was easy.

This was about to be a very horrible day for Jagger Armstrong.

“Remember how you fawned over her, and she became your downfall, Jagger?” he asked, his mouth near his ear.

“Remember that your destruction was a woman.”

Jagger turned his head and faced the man.

There was nothing but hate and loathing in his eyes. If this man thought he'd tell him anything...

He wouldn't.

He'd specifically not tell him that Maura was still alive. He could fuck all the way off.

**Back.**

**To.**

**Columbia.**

That was for damn sure.

“What are your final last words?” Chevy asked him, as he touched the spot on Jagers' upstretched arm where the tattoo of Maura was.

“That you always were a special kind of stupid, Chevy, and that face...you're not fooling anyone.”

He laughed.

“I want that tattoo peeled from his skin, and I'm going to feed it to him,” he said.

Well, that sounded particularly disgusting.

Only, he wasn't done.

“You'll never be El Gato, Chevy. You'll always be a piss-poor Marine who had to be dirty to get the accolades.”

That enraged him.

That was the last straw.

“Torture them, and get any information out of them about where they are hidden. I want the rest of The Hunters dead. Oh, and start with Jagger, but watch your back. He's tricky. Aren't you, J?” he asked.

Jagger said nothing.

Chevy drove in what he perceived to be the killing blow to Jagger's soul.

“Did she shout your name when she was blown up? Did you cry as bits and pieces of her rained down on you?”

Chevy asked, grinning sadistically.

He wanted this man to hurt in ways he couldn't even imagine.

Jagger Armstrong was about to spend his last few minutes alive, regretting he'd ever begun playing that game.

When Jagger didn't dignify that response, it pissed the man off.

“Torture him but keep him alive the entire time.”

Well, it was about to begin.

Jagger closed his eyes.

And prayed.

He was no stranger to capture and torture, but this was going to suck.

**BIG-TIME.**



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## *Chapter One*

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*The New Hunter Home*

*New Orleans*

*Early*

*Friday Morning*

Oh, he knew it had to be a dream. That was the only explanation, because Dakota Rakin had gone to bed the night before, and there was no way he was in the middle of a swamp chasing the one thing that he craved more than anything.

*Eve 'Plaguing His Every Waking Moment and Now Dreams' Knight.*

It wasn't possible that he couldn't even get a moment's reprieve from the non-stop battering of thinking all day, and now dreaming all night.

Fate couldn't be that cruel.

*Could it?*

It had been a long three months, and if he didn't get a break, and soon, he was going to need to be institutionalized.

Dakota didn't know what the hell was going on.

*Was he under a spell?*

*Cursed?*

*What?*

All that he did know was that he needed to wake up because like all of his dreams, they tended to end the same way.

*How?*

Oh, how about with him having sex.

*Sex in a car.*

*Sex in a park.*

*Sex in his bed.*

It didn't matter the location, but it was always more than his battered soul could take.

He was one step away from doing something drastic, all because she haunted him.

Eve haunted his every waking moment.

One might say he was fixated, but he didn't understand why.

He couldn't, for the life of him, figure out why after three months of not seeing or hearing from Eve Knight, she was still plaguing his dreams.

*His waking hours.*

*His alone time.*

*His whole life.*

She walked away when her job protecting Jinx had ended, and still, he couldn't shake her.

Dakota was seriously struggling with all of it too. It was to the point that he wanted to hunt her down and stalk her wherever it was that she was living.

It was all kinds of wrong, but he was there. It was that *'I need her'* feeling, *'or I'm going to die'*.

It scared him too.

All he knew was that he had no peace.

When he told her to have a good life, he meant it. There had been no malice or anger toward her.

The bottom line was this.

Honestly, he wasn't fit for any type of connection with anyone. He wasn't good for her, The Hunters, or himself. He certainly wasn't good for a child, and Violet, who had survived unspeakable things, deserved so much better.

His plans had been to run for it.

He'd made a vow.

He'd help them take down Chevy, and then, and only then, he'd be gone.

Well, unfortunately, that was taking longer than anyone anticipated, so now, he was stuck there. Not only was he fixated on her, but it felt as if his feet were cemented into place.

He couldn't leave.

Dakota just didn't know why.

And with each day, the dreams became more vivid. He'd been able to wake himself up before he touched her, most of the time, but not now.

Now, he was helpless.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to break away.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

He was trapped, and he knew what was about to happen. Each dream began the same with her chasing him through the swamp, and then catching him.

Each dream ended before he could figure out what her cryptic words meant.

And each dream only broke his heart more.

*Why?*

Dakota was in love with her.

He missed seeing her so damn much, and that scared him. This love was more than he'd ever felt for anyone before.

*Not Elizabeth.*

*Not Sarah.*

The week she'd spent working for them, and protecting Jinx, he fell for her hard.

Maybe it was the fact that twice, as they were moving on a warehouse, he'd nearly died, and twice, she saved him. Once, she'd gotten shot, and once, she laid her body over his to take any bullets.

Eve wasn't weak, and she wasn't afraid of anything. He didn't have to protect her.

She protected him.

He didn't understand that.

*Why?*

What did she see in him to make her want to protect him like that?

What did she want from someone who was so badly damaged by his past, and watching his wife lose her mind to the point she cursed his name and she tried to kill him?

If anything, he'd learned one thing.

**Dakota wasn't worthy.**

He didn't feel as if he was.

Being bad was his nature since he'd lured a woman to her death when he came here, and Sarah followed.

Then, if that wasn't bad enough, he'd systematically used her to be a destructive force, and when Preston was shot and killed, it ended up breaking her.

**Into.**

**Many.**

**Pieces.**

And now, his biggest fear was that he was going to do the same thing to Eve.

That's why he told her to have a good life.

That's why he sent her and Violet away.

A little part of him wanted that retirement she was craving because deep down, he desired it too. He wanted a place to be himself.

*To be loved.*

*To find calm.*

Only, he wasn't worthy of that in life.

**Clearly.**

He'd been a Fed since he was twenty-five years old, and now, he was fifty. He'd been recruited out of college to be a US Marshal. He'd tested off the charts with his hunting skills, and the uncanny ability to find just about anyone.

They'd called it a gift, but he knew it was a curse. He knew to the bottom of his soul that it wasn't meant to make him a hero, but a victim.

It led him here, and it was the cause of Sarah's death.

**He.**

**Made.**

**Bunny.**

That was all him.

He lost his wife here, and he knew he couldn't possibly be lucky enough to find love here too.

*He was toxic.*

*He was destructive.*

*He was a mess.*

At his age, he wasn't a prize or a gift to anyone. He was a burden someone would have to carry until they went insane from being near him.

That was legitimately how he felt.

**Each day.**

He'd lost control of The Hunters, allowing it to spiral out of control.

The only choice had been to hand it off to Maura Armstrong.

He'd lost control of his wife, allowing her to cross every line imaginable.

The only choice was to let the family hunt her down.

**God.**

*His life...*

Dakota knew that he couldn't lose control of anything else, and he certainly couldn't start something with a woman who was more damaged as a Snake.

*Adder was dangerous.*

*And so was love.*

He'd learned that firsthand.

Only, now, he was running again, and no matter how fast he moved, how quickly he tried to get away, she was chasing him.

**God.**

He wanted her to catch him.

Dakota wanted her to come back.

*If you find me, Dakota, I'll be yours,* that singsong voice whispered through his dream.

It made his heart race.

*Just take a walk, Dakota. You'll see me, and we can celebrate what we made.*

Tears filled his eyes as he wished and prayed he'd get a second chance.

Honestly, he wanted to find her.

He wanted to beg.

**Dakota Rakin had made a mistake.**

And he knew it.

A little part of him knew that he wished she came back for him. A little sliver of his soul wished that one day, she'd

come to the new house, knock on the door, and tell him she loved him.

Only, was that fair to her as she had a new life and a second chance with Violet?

**No.**

**Chance.**

So now, he was trapped in the dream, running for his life not because he was in danger of dying. Because he was in danger of living.

A happy Dakota was an impossible thing.

A broken Dakota was the rule of thumb.

He was the punchline to the joke. He was forced to watch his friends and brothers find happiness, and he was never going to get it.

Rogue lost Cordelia, but he found his true love, Jinx.

Boone had Merry and was happy as can be.

Zayn had never had sex in his entire life, and when he saw Stella, he fell hard. Then, he wifed her up fast.

Jagger had served countless years with the Major, and then, when his wife, Roxy, and Maura's husband, Luke, passed **ON THE SAME DAY**, they found love.

*But here he was...*

**Alone.**

Life hated him, and if something was going to go to shit, he would be at the epicenter of it.

That was a constant.

Now, as he ran around a tree, he stopped to catch his breath. Fifty-year-old dream Dakota was **NOT** in as good a shape as fifty-year-old awake Dakota.

That was crystal clear.

*Or maybe...*

He wanted to be caught.

As he leaned against the tree, his heart was thundering in his chest, and he knew who was lurking.

**An Adder.**

He heard her laughter, like he normally did, but again, this time, he couldn't pull himself from sleep.

He couldn't wake up no matter how hard he tried.

**He.**

**Was.**

**Trapped.**

As he felt a warm sensation on his arm, he stared down to see the beads Boone had given him were glowing.

They burned, but before he could pull them off to stop that heat, she was there.

Eve appeared, and his heart could barely handle it.

**God.**

The woman was gorgeous.

**No.**

Eve was even more.

She looked like a wood nymph. At her height, she was petite, and with her tipped-up nose, aqua eyes, and dark hair, she belonged in the forest green like this one.

There was no doubt that if elves and fairies existed, she could be the queen of them.

They'd all bow because she was beyond gorgeous. She was deadly too.

From her Cupid-bow lips, to the alabaster skin that glowed ethereally, he knew he was three days past screwed.

**He.**

**Was.**

**Doomed.**

As he leaned there, his heart thumped.



“Eve,” he whispered, his whole body reacting to her scent. He could smell her approach like a wolf scenting its mate.

As she moved closer, she stared into his brown eyes.

“Why are you constantly running from me, Dakota?” she asked him. “Don’t you know that you can’t run from your accidents? You can’t run when you’ve given life to a new adventure. You have to stay and do the right thing.”

There she went again, talking in some code that he didn’t understand.

He tried to wake up before they had sex. If he didn’t, he’d lose another piece of his heart to her.

There were only two pieces left.

A small one for Elizabeth and their friendship, plus one for Sarah. If he lost one more, he had to let the memory of Sarah go.

“Please don’t,” he whispered, afraid to be touched by her because then he’d be trapped in her snare.

**God.**

He wanted it in the worst way too.

“I can’t Dakota. We’re tied together forever. We made a choice, and we’ll always be in this, fifty-fifty.”

His heart skipped as he knew what was next.

Eve was going to touch him.

Each dream was always the same.

As she moved even closer, his body was wracked with an incredible amount of pleasure and ache.

He missed her hands on his body.

He knew he had to give up the memory of Sarah so that he could keep this feeling forever.

“Please wake up,” he said, knowing that if she touched him, and he partook in her one more time, he’d be lost.

It was already hard enough not to want to hunt her down, find her, and plead for forgiveness for being an asshole.

He was already struggling the last three months, setting her free, but *New Orleans*, and the Voodoo here, seemed to be controlling everything.

**Every.**

**Damn.**

**Thing.**

They said the city was a magical place, and he believed it. He was tortured daily by the memories, and now a fairy queen was haunting his sleep time.

Someone needed therapy or an exorcism.

That's why he needed to run.

He had to break free.

**For her.**

Eve deserved so much more.

"Let me go," he said. "Just set me free because you'll be destroyed if you stay with me. I can't protect you from myself."

"I don't need to be protected from you, Dakota. You can't hurt me. I'm impossible to kill. I have to protect you from you."

**God.**

He needed to get out of here.

"Please, let me go, Adder," he begged, trying to reach that part of her.

Her laughter was musical, and as the tattoo on her arm appeared, he noticed one thing.

The scales were filled in.

"I thought you retired."

She smiled.

“When you are given a life to protect and foster, you become more than a soldier. You become the protector. My mission is complete. Is yours?”

He didn't understand.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

What was she trying to tell him?

“Please,” he whispered, as she was so close to him. He knew what would happen if she touched him. He would be pulled back in.

It would be harder to fight that addiction.

That's what she was.

**An addiction.**

He'd sworn his allegiance to The Hunters, and to fight for justice, but he was two people. He was the man who wanted nothing more than to let that broken part of him take over, but he knew he had to fight. He'd taken on a challenge, and it ended up being the most painful thing that he ever did.

“Touch me, Dakota,” she said, as she stood in front of him.

“I can't. If I touch you, I'll crave you, and if I crave you, then I'll be destroyed. Eve, run. I let you go so you'd be safe. I can't pull you back in. You were free.”

She moved even closer.

“You already pulled me in,” she whispered. “We're tied together forever.”

She put her hands on his body, and that heat exploded through him.

That desire rose up, making him shake from what he craved more than anything.

**Her.**

It was the worst addiction too.

He'd had her body twice, and that had been his biggest mistake.

Dakota knew that he'd made a connection with her.

After the sex, he set her free, so he didn't become dependent on this woman.

With Sarah, he'd been in control until Bunny appeared, but with Eve...

There was no controlling the storm.

You just let yourself go and prayed when it passed that you were still standing.

Dakota knew he wouldn't be.

"Don't," he said, as her hand slid down his chest to the buckle on his belt.

It was a star.

It was his old badge, and he'd stopped wearing it when he started killing.

You couldn't be a lawman when you didn't follow the law.

The Hunters were a whole different entity unto themselves.

With her fingers, she flicked it open, and his body shook.

"God. Please. Don't."

Oh, he knew what was coming.

They'd done this dance at least ninety times over the last three months in his dreams.

It always ended the same way.

**SEX.**

And it had felt too good to be true.

Only, at his words, she didn't stop, and she didn't heed his whispered pleas. In fact, it only emboldened her.

When she had his buckle open, and his fly down, he was harder than he'd ever been in his whole life. His dick ached for her touch, to be buried in her, and to take her body in sweaty abandon.

Only, he knew the cost.

He knew the price.

**Her life.**

Dakota loving her would only end one way.

**With her leaving.**

He'd loved Elizabeth LaRue more than anything when he'd met her. They'd dated, they'd fornicated, and he knew that she'd protect his heart.

When he proposed in that restaurant, he saw the horror on her face and heard the no, and then, she left him behind.

That was strike one to his heart.

Then, he'd been given a trainee, and he'd taught her well, and in the process, he broke the rules.

He took her to bed even though she was half of his age, and off-limits.

He'd been recovering from his partner's murder, and hearing her being tortured to death. He wasn't thinking, but his dick was.

Then, she followed him, and he made her his wife because he couldn't bear to be alone anymore.

That had been a huge mistake.

Looking back, he felt like he owed her that. While he loved Sarah, she wanted a different kind of a life. She wanted kids and to let Bunny run free.

He wanted to save people, and be someone's hero.

Only, what made him attracted to her was that she needed protecting.

### **Until she didn't.**

Then, there was Eve.

He'd craved her, desired her, and found solace in her body. He swore he'd never touch another woman for as long as he lived after his wife died not because Sarah was his soulmate.

Because he was living his penance.

He still broke that oath of celibacy with the fairy queen, as they fornicated and fought some emotional battle.

And now, she had him pinned to a tree.

*How could this go wrong?*

His arms felt so heavy as she pulled his erection from his pants.

He watched her, captivated, and mesmerized by the fact that the water was receding, and they were no longer in a swamp.

It was more of a forest.

"This is where you want to have sex with me," she said. "It's your dream and your fantasy," she added as if she was privy to his private thoughts.

Dakota needed to know.

"Are you real?" he asked, as she had his erection out of his pants so fast, it was making his brain spin.

"No, Dakota, I'm not. Not this version of me anyway. The real me is out there alone, and you've left her to raise a family alone."

He immediately thought about Violet and how he'd been cold. If he could take it all back again, he would.

### **In a heartbeat.**

The saying was wrong.

Misery didn't love company. It loved to see a person alone and dying from heartache.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

She shrugged.

“Are you? I don’t think so. I think we need to face this and do battle. I’m willing to fight for you, Dakota. Are you willing to fight for us? A penitent man will win the woman of his dreams. Only a man who can apologize can get the family that he craves. You need to remember that when our paths cross.”

His heart raced.

They were going to find each other again?

*Was that a possibility?*

“I can’t fight anymore. I’m tired, Evie. I don’t know how much longer I can hold on.”

She stroked his erection, and it felt so real to him. It was just like the last time they had wild, out-of-control sex in the bunker storage room.

He’d pulled her in, and they’d rolled around.

**God.**

He was losing control.

“I think you can hold on a little longer, Dakota. I think you’re just too afraid of the outcome. Fight for me. Fight for what we made.”

He shook his head as she stroked his dick.

“You’ll die if I love you. You’ll be taken from me.”

She reassured him.

“No, I won’t. I’m indestructible. So many have tried, Dakota. Nothing breaks me. It only makes me stronger. You’re the only one who has ever broken me by telling me to go.”

“Evie...”

She took control.

Instead of arguing with him in this back-and-forth tit-for-tat, she went to her knees and began blowing him.

It felt so real.

*The wetness.*

*The heat.*

He watched as she worshipped his erection, and he couldn't stop her.

Then again, he wasn't sure that he would.

It felt too good.

It was a familiar feeling that brought him peace.

Had someone told him that he'd fall in love again, with a mercenary, he would have laughed or punched them in the face.

Yet, here he was.

**Crazy about her.**

As that warmth built, he closed his eyes, and he smelled her. Eve's flesh called to him, and that spicy scent of whatever perfume she used was burned into his memory.

*And he liked it.*

As she worked his erection hard, he moaned in pleasure. It felt so damn good to have her mouth on his body.

Nothing felt like it.

It was perfect.

And he'd missed it.

He heard her voice, and when he opened his eyes, she was still blowing him in earnest.

But he still heard her all around him.

“Let me take care of you. If you can't take care of me, let me be the one who saves you, Dakota. I'll get the job done.”

**God.**

He needed to be saved.



There was no doubt that he was one hot mess on a good day. Lately, he'd been a wreck. He'd been divided into two. The part before Eve, and the part after Eve. Holding himself together was getting more and more difficult with each passing day.

As she blew him, his balls ached, and his belly burned in need. He watched his erection slipping between her perfect lips as she stared up at him.

**Holy shit.**

He was going to cum.

He'd recalled the last two times that he was buried balls deep in her, and it had been almost impossible.

*So difficult to walk away.*

*So difficult not to explode.*

*So difficult not to cum in her like he owned her.*

And now, she had him by the balls, literally, and was in control of everything.

He'd be lying if he said he didn't like everything about this woman.

He did.

**Way.**

**Too.**

**Much.**

As she milked his dick with her mouth, he whimpered in pleasure. The wetness coated his balls and got the front of his jeans wet.

And he loved it.

He needed this with her in order to fight back that horrible darkness that was chasing him to the edge of his sanity.

"I need to cum," he muttered.

She set him free.

As soon as she did, he moaned in agony.

He'd spent the last three months thinking about her, and how she felt when he slid into her very tight body. He'd fantasized about taking her over and over again.

And he couldn't cum.

**Ever.**

He'd jerked off in the shower.

He'd jerked off in his bed.

He'd pumped his dick until he was raw, tired, and sore, and he couldn't make it happen.

Something wouldn't let him get that satisfaction so she could just stay a fantasy and not be the one thing he craved more than breathing.

Now, he was so wild and horny that if she didn't help him out, he'd die.

There was no doubt.

"Evie, please," he whispered, as he heard his own pulse pounding in his ears.

"I want you in me, Dakota. I want you buried in my body, as you take me. I need you."

His heart skipped in his chest as if she had the power to give him life or death. She was the one in control here, and he knew it.

**God.**

How he wished she was in control while they were awake. He would kill to let her take care of him. What he needed was a strong woman.

That was part of why he fell for Elizabeth. She'd been broken at the time, but he saw her tenacity.

It was why he'd fallen for Sarah. She might have been out of her mind, but she could hold her own.

Now, there was Eve, and apparently, he had a type.

*Who knew?*

She waved her hand like any good fairy queen would, and a soft bed of moss appeared pushing up from the forest floor, making them a soft bed to fornicate on.

“Please,” he whispered as the pleasure felt like a million fingers across his body.

Then, suddenly, Dakota was free.

His body wasn't bound to that tree, and he was able to move around.

So he did.

*What did he do?*

Well, he didn't try to escape.

**Hell.**

**No.**

Instead, he began pulling off his clothing to get the oppressive material away from his burning flesh.

He desperately tried to get free of everything, but that bracelet.

For some reason, it simply wouldn't come off even when it burned his flesh.

Well, screw it.

He moved at her instead and began tearing off Eve's clothes in a mad dash to get to the fairy queen's petite luscious body.

He needed her.

*Her tits.*

*Her curves.*

*Her ass.*

He needed to make sure she was real, and even while in the dream, that he could still partake in her.

Someone was out of control.

## **HIM.**

Dakota had never craved anything as much in his whole life, and it scared him.

“I don’t understand why,” he whispered, as that desire rose up, choking him with lust and heat.

Eve was honest.

“Because I’m your soulmate,” she said, as he picked her up, and carried her to the moss. “Every fairy queen has one. You’re my chosen. All the women who came before me were just the bridge to get you to me.”

He ignored her words.

He had to.

The horror of what he did scared him to the depths of his body. If she really had been his soulmate, sending her away...

## **It damned him to a life alone.**

His stubbornness had cost him the happiness he saw in everyone else and coveted.

She couldn’t be the one.

And yet, she felt like she was.

As he placed her on the bed of moss, he began leaving kisses down her body. Dakota began worshipping the queen of his heart.

When he reached her belly button, he heard two heartbeats and he assumed they were his and hers.

What else could it possibly be?

There was no point in paying attention to anything but what waited for him.

## **PLEASURE.**

As he worked his way down her body, she was spread open, and he wanted to taste her again. He couldn’t count the times that he tried to jerk off with the visual of her sitting on his face.

It had been magical and torture for him at the same time.

When he found her clit, she moaned in pleasure.

“Yes, Dakota. Please,” she whispered. “Make me cum. I’m yours.”

His heart skipped as she said that last part. Only, he’d think about it later. Instead, he dove in, pleasuring her in ways he only fantasized about.

**He licked.**

**Teased.**

**Nipped.**

He made her take that climb, and when he got her to the top, he shoved her off and into the pleasure. She came, and he reveled in the feeling that he got when she shouted his name.

That’s all he wanted.

Dakota craved someone to shout his name and want him even though he was two people.

*Broken.*

*Divided.*

*And in pieces.*

He kept going, and as he feasted on her clit, holding her prisoner on her back, he felt it.

**Soft rain.**

It tickled his body.

Had his mouth not been busy, he would have asked her what it was. Only, she was in his head again.

“They are my tears,” she whispered. “I cry for you every night, and still, you don’t find me.”

That broke his soul even more.

It was for the best that he didn’t answer and screw everything up like he normally did.

He focused on her and drove Eve back up, and when she teetered again, he knew what he needed.

**HER.**

When she fell from the edge, tumbling into the pleasure again, she called for him.

“My only love.”

It made his heart hurt in a way that no one would ever understand. No one had ever given him that. He was always Dakota, or Dak, but never ‘*my love*’.

What wouldn’t he give to have that?

Moving above her body and as she opened her eyes, he saw it.

**Love.**

Her fingers, the ones she used to pull a trigger and take countless lives, caressed his cheek and slid to his chest. She ran her hand through the spattering of salt and pepper chest hair.

“I want to feel you against me. I only want to know what you feel like pressed to my body so I’m safe.”

**God.**

He needed that too.

Life was a freefall, and he needed security.

“Take me,” she said. “I need you, Dakota.”

Those words were music to his ears. Now, all he prayed was that he didn’t wake up from this dream until he was able to have her.

*To share his soul.*

Moving against her, Eve was already open, wet, and waiting for him. When he touched that wetness with the tip of his erection, he knew that he was lost.

Nothing would stop him now.

He had to have her.

With a gentleness that she hadn't expected from him, Dakota buried himself to the base of his erection, and heat exploded around him.

**God.**

It felt so good.

Then, it only got better.

He began moving.

Dakota began filling her with long, full strokes as he was sliding into her body, taking what his heart knew was meant to be his.

**HER.**

When he looked down at her, she said something that staggered him.

"I love you, Dakota," she whispered, and it brought tears to his eyes.

To stay focused, he said nothing back. He was trying to show her what he could be like.

Not what he had been.

He focused on the act of making love and nothing else. The last two times, he took her with brutality and force. This time, the last time he'd touch her, he'd give her what he had.

He'd give her the love he felt.

It wasn't like it would ever manifest or come true. It couldn't.

As his hips did the work, he filled her body with heat, need, and lust.

She held on, her much smaller body trapped beneath him. As he drove himself home, over and over again, he was on the cusp.

He was finally ready to cum. The need to explode was finally there after he'd been forced to live without it for three months.

She unlocked it in him.

There was no way he could hold on.

“Evie,” he whispered. “I’m going to cum,” he said, his dick throbbing and the tumble looming ahead.

She moaned his name, wrapped her legs around his hips, and kept him trapped.

“Yes! Cum in me!” she begged.

As he got closer and closer, his mouth was near her ear. He wanted to tell her one thing as they consummated this one last time in a nymph forest as the tears rained down on them.

“I love you too,” he whispered, knowing he could never say it to her when he was awake.

His heart kicked in his chest.

“Forever,” he promised.

That would be his secret to carry until his last days.

As the overwhelming need to cum, to fill her body with that heat overtook him, she whispered one thing, and it changed everything.

“I want to carry your child.”

That was all it took.

The whole dream shifted, rattling him beyond anything. He’d told Sarah no children. He’d made sure she took her birth control, and he pulled out more times than not.

He was in no shape to be a father. Dakota couldn’t even parent himself, let alone a small human who needed him. He was fine being Uncle Dakota, but nothing more.

Children weren’t in his future.

He’d destroy them too.

As he was on the cusp of cumming, he couldn’t stop. He couldn’t understand why his hips wouldn’t listen, as the need to explode was there.

It was compulsive.

It overtook everything in him.



In his head, he saw the flash of pictures, the visuals of her pregnant, him holding a child, and then Eve being taken away from him by death.

It scared him more than anything.

Only, in that moment, he was a prisoner to the lust and his own selfish needs.

As her nails dug into his shoulders, sending him off the edge, he exploded, cumming in the fairy queen.

There was the freefall until he hit the bottom. As the orgasm coated him, keeping him locked in that pleasure, that's when he felt it.

The panic came.

And the horror followed.

As the heat poured out of him, filling her with seed, life, and a possible pregnancy, he fought to wake up. It was a claws and battle moment, where he tried to climb his way up from the pleasure to surface.

Fight or flight kicked in, and he needed to wake up before something happened.

“We made a life,” she whispered. “You're going to be a father.”

And that was it.

As those words came from her, he sat up in bed, drenched in perspiration.

He came awake in fear and horror.

As he stared into the mirror across from his bed, his chest fighting for air, he saw the man there and realized it was just a dream.

**Thank.**

**God.**

It had only been a dream.

It was both a relief and a pain.

The fairy queen was gone, but at least he didn't get her pregnant.

That was the only good thing.

She was safe and not tied to the mess he was.

His heart was racing, and he'd nearly had a stroke. The idea of impregnating anyone...passing on his fucked-up DNA to a child...

It was terrifying.

There was no way he could ever do that. No one deserved to be saddled with his issues.

**NO.**

**ONE.**

Lifting the sheet, Dakota felt that telltale wetness, and realized that he had cum, but not with Eve.

**Nope.**

She'd been enough in his dream to pull him from the edge and into that pleasure.

Of course, she was.

Even he knew the truth.

He was madly in love with her, and likely would be for the rest of his life.

In that moment, as his breathing leveled, and he tried to drop his blood pressure to a non-stroke level, Dakota knew one thing.

They needed to find Chevy sooner rather than later. It was taking too long.

*Why was he so worried?*

Because he had to get the hell out of there before he did something stupid.

**FAST.**

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## *Chapter Two*

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*Friday Morning*

*Chartres Street*

*'The Office'*

*Meeting Time*

The daily routine was pretty simple. The family would wake at the new house in *The French Quarter*, and sneakily make it to Chartres by leaving from a back alley. Only, it wasn't just any back alley that surrounded their new home.

It was a wall of trees that were actually fake and attached to the gate. The gate would swing open, and they would head out, going in different directions, making sure they were not followed back to this place.

It was a necessity to ensure their protection.

They had no choice.

Stella was with child, Jinx was taking care of a little one, and Maura was still supposedly dead.

As far as they knew, there were only so many people who knew the Major was alive.

*Them.*

*And Calyx Waters, the new proprietor of The Underground.*

That's how they wanted to keep it too.

While at first, they didn't know if they could trust her, they knew now. Calyx had proved herself to be invaluable to them.

Like she'd promised them weeks ago, she fed them intel.

And that kept them safe.

Granted, it would be better if the intel would tell them where to find Chevy, but so far, it was getting them nothing.

What Calyx had told them was that the man disappeared from the city. No one could find him. He had gone off the radar, not using that name or being spotted on street cameras.

Someone had pulled a Harry Houdini and gone under where he was safe.

Oh, and that was frustrating.

The longer it took, the more difficult it was becoming to keep Maura hidden. That meant that Jagger had to go out without his customary female bodyguard.

And that was a risk.

Life marched on in *New Orleans*, and it was another day of work for The Hunters.

So, as they gathered at the place they'd once called home, and had been repaired and used as an '*office*' of sorts, they were ready for the next game plan.

They were running out of time, and everything they'd tried so far, had failed.

Clearly, Chevy had upped his game.

Their hope of finding all of the girls who El Gato had sold off to make money was dimming, and with each passing day, they knew the truth.

They wouldn't find them alive.

They were dead.

That to them was a huge blow, and as the '*good guys*', they had to do something.

They really had to find Chevy. That was their number one priority at this point.

The Hunters hadn't failed a mission yet, and Maura wasn't letting that happen on her watch. She might be '*dead*', but she was going to get the job done.

One way or another.

As Maura made coffee, from where she was standing, she could see her husband watching her.

Oh, and she knew what he wanted.

**To get her pregnant.**

That was his other obsession next to ending Chevy's reign of terror.

When they'd taken down El Gato, she still didn't get a positive pregnancy test. When they went to the doctor, they found out why.

They'd had a miscarriage.

Unfortunately, her worst fears had come true.

The stress of dealing with El Gato, in combination with the explosion from the Hummer...

She'd lost their child.

Granted, the doctor said that hadn't hurt the baby, but that sometimes, pregnancies terminated themselves. If your body knew it wasn't viable, it mercifully handled it.

It didn't feel merciful.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

After about a week of mourning, and having to tell the family, everyone had rallied around her, giving Maura what she needed.

**Family.**

She was healing, and her husband...

**Jesus.**

He was trying to get her pregnant at every opportunity. He went from scared that his wife would get hurt to horny every single minute of the day.

Ehhh, she wasn't going to complain.

The Marine was trying to conquer the hill, and she'd be lying if she said she didn't like it.

**A lot.**

Jagger would jump her twice before they left the house, and honestly, that got the juices flowing. Who didn't like being chased around by a hot man covered in tattoos?

An idiot, that's who.

Her Marine's lower soldier was saluting a lot lately, and that was never going to be a problem.

Now, he was watching her as she made coffee, and she could feel the blush moving up her body.

Oh, yeah, she knew what was going to be coming at some point—as soon as he could get her trapped.

**HER.**

She would be cumming again and again.

When he licked his lips, Maura immediately got wet from that act alone.

Yeah, there were worse things than a horny husband with a perpetual erection.

That was for sure.

**Sign.**

**Her.**

**Up.**

After she pushed the button on the coffee maker and went to go sit down in the spot beside her husband, Jagger had other ideas.

Instead, he grabbed her hand and pulled her into his body so that they were pressed together. His arms went around her hips, and his chin was on her shoulder.

And he was hard.

**Good.**

**God.**

*What kind of multivitamin was the man taking?*

Someone had the libido of an eighteen-year-old.

When he grabbed a handful of her lush ass and gave it a rough squeeze, she nearly melted right then and there.

With his mouth by her ear, he whispered pure filth to his wife, and she was all about it.

*How could she not be?*

This man got her wet with a look. Add in the fact that he was kinking it up?

**Sold.**

She'd take all he could give her.

“When they aren't paying attention, I'll meet you in the bathroom. I need to fuck my wife,” he said, his hand snaking up from her hip, under her shirt, and right to her breast. Once there, he did truly wicked things with his fingers that got her even wetter.

She'd think he was overcompensating for the loss, but the man had always been all about the sex, and she wasn't saying no to that pleasure.

Jagger knew how to get a woman off.

“Want some office kinkery?” he whispered, his lips causing chills to crisscross her body.

Oh, he was evil.

And she loved it.

Without saying a word, she gave him a slight nod, signaling that she was definitely down with that.

From not far away, when Zayn began laughing, she knew they were caught.

Jagger looked over, almost daring him.

The look said it all.



Just the other day, they found him carrying Stella upstairs for a nooner, and they didn't bust his balls about it either.

“What?” Zayn asked, putting cinnamon in his mug since they wouldn't let him doctor up the family's coffee anymore. “Can't a guy smile without you getting paranoid, Jagger?”

Oh, sure, he could, but they knew him.

Zayn was the ballbuster of all ballbusters. He liked to rile Jagger up, and then Jagger felt the need to bust him back.

It opened the third circle of Hell when Marines got bitchy, and no one wanted that.

Well, no one who was sane.

“Go ahead, pretty boy,” he said. “Try me.”

Zayn laughed.

**Hell no.**

He wasn't going there.

Jagger took a few things seriously, and one of them was the fact that he wanted more kids. He'd been on his own personal mission to knock the Major up since they found out they lost a baby.

He blamed the reformed Irish Catholic in him.

For everyone else, you'd have to be an idiot to get between him and the Major.

Honestly, Zayn was just trying to keep it light.

Their children were still not with them. Oh, they saw their babies, but they kept the kids hidden not far away in a safe space. The nannies were helping out, getting paid a shit ton of money, and keeping the location secure.

They'd had Elizabeth Blackhawk buy a safe house just outside of town, and all the kids were there until they found Chevy to end his existence.

The only little one who wasn't with them...

Rogue's new son.

Jinx was breastfeeding, so she made sure that he could be nearby. He was at the house in *The French Quarter* that they called home—under constant guard.

Well, that and Grace was all over the baby. No one in their right mind was going to come between her and her first grandson.

That was a death sentence.

As for the baby's name, they did honor Jinx's brother, but not by giving their son his first name. They let him have the middle name.

Honestly, he wasn't going to be a brute like Heath, so Sawyer Heathcliff Ravenscroft needed a name that wouldn't get his ass kicked in school.

*Heathcliff?*

**Jesus.**

That was one way to saddle your kid with trauma issues all through life.

It was for the best.

If someone tried to hurt the kid, then, the uncles would have to show up, kick the bully's parents' asses, and start some shit.

That never ended well when a PTA parent went up against some gun-toting mercenaries who liked to protect their own. God help the first woman to criticize Jinx's cupcake skills at the first fundraiser...

Zayn was trying not to snicker.

"I'm not starting anything," he said, winking at the Major who knew what was going on.

"I didn't think so," Jagger said.

Maura just laughed.

She was fine with Jagger feeling her up. If he wanted his hands in her shirt, go for it. Their marriage had hit a rocky

patch when she faked her death, and she was just glad he was back to the same old lecherous husband.

The devil you knew.

“Well, if you guys are done playing touch the titties,” Zayn began, “we still don’t have a solution for our big **PROBLEM.**”

Well, someone needed to be a bit more specific.

They had ninety-nine problems, and Chevy and his sex trade were two of them.

Only followed up by the biggest issue.

**Dakota.**

It was a sad day when one of them was the bigger problem than a man who was in hiding as he sold women into the sex trade.

Someone was making them work for it, and it wasn’t as much Chevy, as another Hunter.

When she heard Zayn starting to bring up work, Jinx went around the table to pour some coffee for them. She knew what he was talking about, and he didn’t mean the asshole hiding from them.

**No.**

He meant their asshole.

Three days ago, Eve had called her in a panic, and she’d gone to her place to make sure she was okay. She found her sister snake on the bathroom floor in tears.

**SOBBING.**

**And pregnant.**

*To say it was shocking...*

That was an understatement.

Snakes were super careful when it came to birth control, and that Eve had an issue...

Well, it was shocking.

When she finally calmed Eve down and talked her down from the ledge, she and Maura had helped her get a doctor's appointment—which was tomorrow.

Then, it took an hour to convince her that everything would be okay.

Only, no one was sure it would be.

Dakota was eventually going to find out, and that meant a meltdown, freak-out, or mental breakdown.

It was anyone's guess how he would react.

To make it worse, Eve made her promise not to tell Dakota, putting all of them in a very precarious situation.

Dakota, while a pain in the ass, and a hot mess, was family. He was their brother, just like Eve was their sister. Now, everyone was straddling a line that was eventually going to get them killed.

Without a doubt.

And not telling him?

At first, she believed it was because Eve Knight was going to terminate the pregnancy. That was what they all expected, but she'd surprised them all.

**Again.**

Yeah, she wasn't.

Her intent was to raise the baby alone and keep her little family intact.

Also, not to tell the baby daddy.

**Oh, boy.**

How could this go wrong?

Despite her full stop when it came to the man, they all knew that she was in love with Dakota.

And they knew that Dakota was an idiot for not just telling the woman he was head over heels in love with her.

On top of that, they all knew that Boone had jacked this up by giving Dakota the **WRONG** Voodoo bracelet.

It was an honest mistake, after all. The beads were the same color, and while he was trying to get his wife pregnant, the Voudon had knocked up a mercenary Marine instead.

Maybe Jagger should get a bracelet for that little *'impregnate the Major'* mission.

“Well, we have to do something,” Jinx said, pouring them each a cup of coffee from the massive pot that the Major had just made. “She’s two blocks away, and we need him to figure this out.”

Both Gene and Tommy laughed.

“You guys are giving him too much credit,” Gene said. “Dakota needs to be hit with it so it’s obvious. He’s not good at figuring out things on his own.”

Ehhh, he wasn’t wrong.

“I vote we just tell him,” Tommy said. “If I had a kid, I’d want to know.”

Stella agreed.

“I second that option. This is going to blow up in our faces when he figures it out. Dakota is thick, but he’s not an idiot.”

Everyone who didn’t agree with the *'just tell him'* plan stared at her like she was batshit insane.

Yeah, she wasn’t the crazy one.

Telling Dakota anything was a battle on a good day. Telling him that a wayward sperm found an egg in a woman he’d only banged twice and then sent away?

**Lordy.**

That would be a bad day for all of them. Mr. Moody would make them work for it.

Zayn sipped his coffee and shook his head.

“You think that we should tell Dakota, the most volatile person in *New Orleans*, that he knocked a woman up? Do you remember the shitstorm that happened when Sarah told him she wanted a baby?” Zayn asked.

Rogue laughed.

Oh, boy did they ever.

“He refused to have sex unless she took her pill in front of him each morning. He used condoms, pulled out, and contemplated a vasectomy to ensure that they never had kids.”

Yeah, they recalled.

“Well, we’re a little beyond that,” Gene said. “He’s going to have a kid, and I have faith in the man. He’d want to be part of the child’s life.”

Now, they were staring at him like he was loco.

“What? Procreation is part of our DNA, and it is why Jagger is all over the Major. He can’t help himself. She has tits, and he likes them.”

Jagger laughed.

“Not a lie,” he joked. “They are spectacular.”

And also why men didn’t have breasts. They’d be distracted all day long.

“Thanks, babe, I think,” she said.

Jinx didn’t care if Dakota got pissy. He could yell at her all he wanted. Then, she’d kick his ass for running on her sister Snake.

“He made a baby. It’s not Eve’s fault that her birth control failed. Now, she’s going to have to look at that child every day and see a man who told her to have a good life as he shoved her away. That’s horrible.”

Yeah, that had been douche-y.

They all agreed on that.

Even for Dakota.

It wasn’t his finest moment.

“Mar,” she said, staring at the woman she considered her mother. “We gotta do something. Help me talk them into doing anything at this point.”

Maura was the planner.

She was also trapped inside until they found Chevy, so she had a lot of time to think about it.

“Let me work out the details in my head,” she said. “I may have a plan we can use.”

That gave everyone some reassurance.

Maura was damn good at them.

“Thank you,” Jinx said.

Maura sipped her coffee and began running the numbers in her head.

Oh, she had one that she’d pulled together that had a good probability to work for the Dakota situation, and the Chevy one, too, but timing was everything.

One she was ready to roll on.

For the Chevy one...she needed a bit more time to figure out the percentage of success because it was dangerous.

Remmy sipped his coffee from his seat at the island and offered up his take on the whole thing.

“Dakota should be told,” he said. “I know if I had made a child, I’d want to know.”

They all knew that Remington Bowman had lost his wife and daughter. He’d give anything to get them back, so there was no shock there with his words.

They all knew that he’d trade his own life for them to live.

“I agree,” Maura said. “**BUT** we promised Eve we wouldn’t tell him. So, that means we have to be sneaky. That means we come up with a good strategy.”

Zayn laughed.

“Just let me walk up to him and tell him he knocked Eve up, she’s three months pregnant, and he’s going to be a father. Sneaky isn’t his thing. You have to hit Dakota over the head with something to make him see it. I mean, how many times did we tell him Sarah was loco before he believed us?”

Yeah, and unfortunately, it did get ugly.

For everyone.

Gene raised his coffee mug in salute. While Sarah had been his stepdaughter, even he’d voiced his concern to Preston before he’d died.

As an ex-Fed, who chased killers, and a homicide captain, he saw the signs. Only, sometimes, people looked the other way when they loved someone and didn’t want it to be true.

“We can’t be dicks,” Rogue warned. “We boned him good with the bracelet, and we owe him for that one. Someone meddled.”

They all stared at Zayn and Boone.

In fact, Boone’s wife, Merry, was giving him the look of all looks.

“And if I ever even see you wearing beads again, Boone, and I smell a pregnancy spell, you’re getting fixed with a rusty spoon, three women holding you down, and an angry wife lopping at your junk.”

He cringed.

Yeah, he knew why you didn’t mess with a woman scorned.

Merry was not amused by his Voodoo antics.

“I know! I was trying to give him the ‘*get on the right path*’ beads. Zayn distracted me.”

Then, like a good friend, and Hunter, he threw the man under the bus.

Exactly like Zayn would have done.



“He wanted the beads to keep having babies. Poor Stella all those pregnancies back-to-back...”

Zayn gasped.

Then, he pointed at him.

“Did you just try to make my Sweet Stella angry with me?” he asked.

She reassured him by patting him lovingly on the arm to ease his worries.

“I’m already pregnant, my love. You’re good. I’ll keep populating your flower garden for you. I like me some Native babies.”

He grinned.

How did he get so lucky and find this woman?

He wasn’t sure.

What he did know was that they were not having success with baby names. They were having another girl, and he was trying out names.

“Rose?” he asked.

She shrugged.

“Ehhh, kinda common.”

He tended to agree.

Only, before he could continue, Jagger got his attention by clearing his throat.

“Focus,” Jagger said. “We have to handle this because when we find Chevy, Dakota is leaving. The *‘keep him here’* clock is ticking. We all know what he said. He’s bailing, and we need to ensure that doesn’t happen. Dakota, while cranky, is still damn good at tracking people. We just need him to bounce back from the Bunny debacle, Sarah’s death, and now Eve walking away because he was a dumbass.”

Yeah, well, **IF** they could get him to focus.

That was the difficult part.

Sane...he was not.

“Where is he by the way?” Maura asked curiously.  
“We said nine for the meeting.”

Zayn knew.

“He had a rough night. I think he’s having nightmares again. He came out of his room at the house drenched in sweat and miserable. He’s likely clearing his head.”

So they knew where he would be.

**The gym.**

Dakota was trying to outrun the demons by working out to the point his body hurt.

Someone was a masochist.

“Well, we have to do something,” Jinx said. “I’m in a bad position here. I love Eve, and I love Dakota. I owe it to both of them, and if he finds out we knew and didn’t tell him...”

Yeah, it would get ugly.

**Pretty.**

**Damn.**

**Fast.**

Maura sipped her coffee as she sat between her husband’s legs on the kitchen island stool. She could feel his erection, and it wasn’t going down.

**Of course not.**

They were talking babies.

Now, his hand was slipping between her cargo pants and skin as he explored lower.

It sent a wave of chills over her body, as he didn’t seem to care that they weren’t alone. Someone was in the mood to get down and dirty.

To focus, she decided it was best to discuss the plan of action she’d been working on.

“I think I’ve worked out the Dakota thing in my head,” she said, as she tried not to give away that her husband was getting wicked.

“What?” Jinx asked, hoping the woman wasn’t joking. They really needed to do something.

She shared the simplistic nature of it.

“What if we have him watch the house?” she asked.

They all looked at her.

Some in question, but most in confusion.

“What house exactly?” Zayn asked. “What am I missing?”

She explained.

“Not this house, and not the one we sleep in. **HER** house. He’s really of no use when it comes to hunting Chevy.”

No one argued that.

She continued.

“So, we tell him that we have intel and that we need him to sit outside of her townhouse. He’s not stupid, so he should be able to piece it together. They head out at ten every day for coffee at *Café Du Monde*. He’ll see her and Violet, and maybe he’ll notice she has a baby bump, and then, we don’t break our promise to Eve of not telling him. We are showing him.”

“That’s fairly simple,” Zayn said. “And hella tricky, Major.”

Yeah, well, sometimes, you had to do the least expected thing.

“Sometimes, Marine, simple is the best and in this case, it’s the least hurtful way,” she admitted.

That was the truth.

“So, we put him on the house, and he’ll see her. If we’re lucky, he’ll figure it out. If he doesn’t...well, maybe he’ll think that Chevy is focused on her. Dakota is a dick, but

he's not soulless. He'd protect Eve and Violet if they were in danger. We can't forget that he's a good guy despite his self-deprecating behavior. ”

She had a point.

Dakota wouldn't let anyone get hurt. It just wasn't in his nature, and why the Sarah thing was killing him.

“This might work,” Rogue said. “If it doesn't, we're going to have to help him figure it out. It's clear that he's not putting the pieces together.”

**That was an understatement.**

At this rate, the baby would be in school before he figured it out.

When her husband's fingers found their way between her legs, and into the wetness, she knew they needed to get out of there and be alone.

Someone was getting brazen.

She needed a distraction.

“I also have another plan,” she said. “It involves our team and catching Chevy. Only, I have to discuss it with my husband when I work through the details. It's dangerous.”

Jagger lifted a brow.

“How dangerous?”

She said one word, and it sent chills down his body.

“Very.”

Well, that was ominous.

Before he could say anything, they all heard the beep of the alarm system as someone opened the gate.

“That's going to be Mr. Cranky,” Tommy said. “Buckle up.”

Yeah, no kidding.

When Jagger whispered filth in her ear, again, she knew they needed to leave the room.

“You guys point him at the house. I’m going to go discuss my plan with Jagger, and I don’t want him to think I’ve been part of this. He’s always telling me I scheme in my sleep.”

Well, she kinda did.

That was her job.

She continued.

“If he asks where we are, tell him...”

Jagger stood up, forcing her to stand.

Then, he tossed his wife over his shoulder and slapped her on the ass.

“Make something up that’s believable,” he said, grinning as he carried her out of the room to go take his wife in some fast, sexy romp.

As she hung over his shoulder, Maura was not amused by his caveman antics.

They made Stella laugh.

“She’s going to be pregnant if that Marine has any say in it.”

Ehhh, the men there got it.

There was something innately hot about a wife growing a man’s child. Now, if only they could get Dakota on that page, and get him to settle down and start living a good life.

**God.**

He had to fight whenever the universe was literally pointing him at the easiest solution.

**An Adder.**

When Boone grinned at his wife, ready to suggest they also do the same thing, she pointed at him.

It stopped him in his tracks.

“I can kill you without the police figuring it out. Do you think that’s wise, Boone? Voodoo won’t save you from me.”

He laughed when she winked at him.

It appeared having more kids was a no for him.

As Dakota came in the door, he looked like hell. That was saying a lot since he normally looked like life rode him hard and put him away wet.

Only, today, it was particularly bad. This was going to take a Herculean effort to fix this man’s mess.

Family had to step in.

“Yo, Dakota. What’s up?” Rogue said, sliding him a mug of coffee.

The man took it and sat where Maura and Jagger had been not far from Gene and Tommy.

“Sorry that I’m late. I hit the gym and lost track of time. I was in my own world.”

They all knew what that meant.

The man was ripped to the Gods, and it wasn’t to attract the women.

It was to forget about one.

“That’s okay. Want us to catch you up?” Jinx asked, willing to set the man up to save him.

He sipped the coffee and nodded.

“Yes, please.”

Well, here went everything.

“We have a lead on Chevy. We think we found one of his targets,” Jinx said. “We need to put eyes on the house to see if he shows up.”

He waited.

“Okay, and?” he asked, not sure where this was heading.

Zayn took over.

It took a village.

“You’re the eyes in this scenario,” Zayn said. “You tend to blend in the best being the ordinary white man.”

“Pardon?” he asked.

Rogue was the best liar out of the bunch with Jinx coming in a close second.

So, he helped his wife.

“Because true or false? You tracked people for a living and can follow them back to their hideout if they show up?” he asked.

At first, they thought he was going to be amicable. Only, this was Dakota, and the only easy thing about him was how he took his coffee.

**Black.**

“That was a long time ago. Are you sure I’m the person for the job?”

**Holy hell.**

It was like four years ago.

Honestly, that wasn’t that long ago.

“Still, we need to put someone there who won’t be picked out of the crowd. We can’t use Zayn, Maura, Jagger, or Jinx,” Rogue said. “They are Marines, and we don’t know if Chevy knows about them. Plus, Maura is supposedly dead.”

He listened.

“Boone was a cop, and that mug of his draws attention.”

He laughed.

“My scar? Are you going there?” he asked, amused.

It didn’t bother him anymore when people discussed it. In fact, it gave him street cred as a Hunter, and chicks dug scars.

His wife thought it made him look like a pirate, and that got him laid.

**A.**

**LOT.**

Rogue continued.

“We can send Stella...”

Zayn shut that shit down.

That was not happening in this lifetime. They could put money on that. She was a doctor, not a mercenary. Plus, her shooting skills...

They were questionable at best.

“We cannot send my pregnant wife to sit outside a target’s house all by herself. That’s not happening,” he said. “I’ll lose my goddamn mind.”

He played the part, only he wasn’t playing.

Stella was staying in.

**PERIOD.**

She protested to keep it going.

“Babe, give me a gun, and I’ll take anyone out who goes near the place.”

Zayn pointed.

“See why I said no to that suggestion? She’s a menace with a gun.”

She laughed.

Yeah, he wasn’t exactly lying about that, now was he?

Instead of going there, Rogue continued, trying to get Dakota to just do it. It was like wrangling cats when it came to dealing with him.

Or armed toddlers.

“Merry is a scientist. We aren’t giving her a gun and mission.”



She threw an apple from the fruit bowl at him. Luckily, Jinx had incredible reflexes and managed to snag it from the air and hand it to him.

“**HEY!** I don’t care how many pearl necklaces you steal for me. I can handle a gun and I’ll kick your ass if you don’t mind ya business.”

He laughed.

And then took a bite of the apple.

“Someone is feisty today,” he said.

From where he sat, Dakota just listened. He wasn’t in the mood to work. What he wanted to do was go home, find Eve in his dreams, and escape it all.

Now he understood why Rogue had drunk himself into a mess to escape after Cordelia’s death.

That might be step two.

“That leaves Remmy,” Rogue said. “And unfortunately, his face is well known, and if we put a hooded figure in front of the target’s house...”

Dakota got it.

That might blow up in their faces.

Finally, he gave in.

Hearing about it was annoying him. It would be easier to just go sit there with a paper and coffee.

“I’ll do it. Tell me what I’m supposed to do.”

Here came the hard part.

And the dangerous part.

“Watch to make sure that nothing suspicious is going on, and if someone tries for the owner of the place, or anyone outside it, save them,” Jinx suggested.

They tried to be as obtuse as possible.

“Who owns it?” he asked.

Well, of course, he was going to go there and do that. Why were they not shocked?

Immediately, Jinx covered.

“We don’t have an ID on the woman—only the address and that it’s a female. Honestly, we have a sneaking suspicion that she has been slotted for the sex trade.”

Well, at least it gave him a day away from everyone. Then, they wouldn’t be staring at him with pity.

He kicked back the coffee.

“Okay, I’ll go handle it.”

Well, that was easy.

Until he spoke and managed to piss everyone off who was sitting there, as they fought to keep *New Orleans* from falling.

“As long as it gets us closer to finding Chevy, so I can get the fuck out of here, whatever.”

Rogue gave his wife the look when she opened her mouth. It said one thing.

*‘Don’t engage’.*

And somehow, like with everyone there, she didn’t say shit, and that was getting more difficult each day.

He wasn’t making friends.

Why?

What Dakota didn’t realize was each time he said shit like that, it hurt the people in the family. They were fighting daily for him, and he still planned on walking.

He didn’t care.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

“Thanks, Dakota,” Rogue said.

He didn't miss a beat in his attempt to get as far from them as possible.

Dakota was already pulling away.

“Address?” he asked.

Jinx scribbled it down and then handed it to him. She hoped this worked because they were running out of options with Dakota.

“Here you go. Don't drop the ball, Dakota,” she said, warning him.

“What's that mean?” he asked.

Luckily for them, they had company.

Jagger walked back into the room, and he was smiling like a man who had just gotten lucky—because he had.

It drew the attention away from Jinx and put it squarely on the Marine.

Since the tension was high, Zayn busted his ass because that was what Zayn did when they were in bad situations.

It was his way of helping his family.

Oh, and they needed all kinds of help now.

“Where's the Major? Did you leave her tied up somewhere?”

He didn't falter.

In fact, he grinned even more.

“I wish,” he said. “She's wily and good at slipping away.”

Jinx said nothing since she was keeping her eyes on the other man. She'd learned long ago to never look away from the wild card, and that was Dakota.

She wasn't worried about hurting him.

**No.**

Jinx didn't want to have to incapacitate him in front of everyone, but she could tell it was coming. This could piss him off, and risk them all.

And she was wearing the target.

“Hey, Dakota,” Jagger said, reading the room.

Instead of a reply to the greeting, the man nodded and headed out.

At the door, he stopped to look back.

“I'll check in. I'll let you know what I see,” he said, as he grabbed an apple, the daily paper, and headed out through the same doors he came in through not that long ago.

Jagger whistled.

“He's wound tighter than...whatever is wound tight. He's about to blow. I don't feel comfortable having him help us. He's a loose cannon ready to explode.”

All of the Marines agreed.

As did the ex-Feds and cops.

They were about to discuss it when Maura came in. Her lips were swollen, and her hair was mussed up.

Someone had been manhandled.

As soon as she entered, the men began clapping, and the Marines all saluted her—including Jagger.

“Har-har, chuckle fucks. You're a bunch of wise guys who need an ass-kicking. Thanks for not saving me when the Captain scuffed up my brass.”

Jagger just sat there and whistled as if he was innocent in the matter.

He wasn't.

That had been an awesome display of bending his wife over the vanity, making her cum a few times, and then getting off as he checked out her truly spectacular ass.

If he had time, he'd write a sonnet about it.

The ass.

And then also the sex.

When security beeped, again, they knew Dakota had left the property and was on his way.

Maura lifted a brow.

“Dakota has been given his marching orders,” Jagger said, clueing his wife in.

Oh, boy.

“Was it bad?” she asked.

As they all looked at each other, trying to decide who was going to tell her, Maura sat as far from her husband as possible.

**Just.**

**In.**

**Case.**

“I’ll take that as a yes. Did you set him on the house?” she asked, as Zayn poured her a new cup of coffee, and made another pot as **EVERYONE** watched him.

“We did, and for the love of all things holy! I’m not an insurgent planting a bomb. I’m making coffee. Jagger has his hand on his gun, and not the one he just used on the Major,” he said, busting his ass.

The man laughed.

“You’re an asshole. Has anyone told you that lately?” he inquired, shaking his head.

Not far away, that got the response he expected.

*Rogue raised his hand.*

*As did Boone.*

*And Remmy.*

Then, everyone else too.

“Apparently, I am,” he said, flipping each of them off. They were all comedians.

Maura got them to focus.

“Dakota will be okay,” she said. “I’ve run the numbers, and while it’s not a one hundred percent chance that he’ll figure this out, it’s more than fifty-fifty. The ugly part will be how he reacts.”

Zayn was curious.

“Did you account for Dakota’s innate ability to fuck just about everything up?” he asked. “Because where there’s a will, he’s going to find a way.”

She laughed.

It was a pretty accurate statement.

She reassured him.

“It was ninety percent and then I factored that in. As it stands, he’s at seventy percent.”

Ehhh, they’d take it.

“We promised to protect Eve. If I have to kick his ass,” Jinx said, “I’m going to do it.”

They all looked at Rogue.

“What?” he asked. “If you think I’m stepping between my wife and a man she’s going to beat up, think again. She’s dangerous.”

Jinx moved fast, and Rogue actually jumped at the motion.

It made her laugh.

“God, I love you.”

He laughed.

**Nervously.**

“I love you too.”

Maura just shook her head.

Earlier, as her husband had her trapped against the bathroom sink, while he was having his wicked way with her, she'd been trying to focus on the other plan.

Only, someone's dick should be registered as a dangerous weapon.

“Anyway, we need...”

Before she could finish, the alarms began going off all around them.

**Oh, Jesus.**

Someone had breached their security.

Everyone jumped, and Zayn recognized that it was the alarms attached to the courtyard. They had the top-of-the-line security to make sure they were safe after their last run-in with El Gato's men and another not-so-nice snake.

As he grabbed the tablet, his face said it all. There was a whole lot of confusion going on there.

Nothing was on the screen, but there was something out of place.

“What's that?” he asked, seeing the paper.

Jagger saw what he was pointing at.

“Can we make it bigger?”

Zayn did just that.

They zoomed in and stared at the big screen TV on the kitchen wall.

The paper definitely said something.

***‘Turn Around.’***

When they did, and they pulled their guns, they found someone they didn't expect to find there.

It was Elizabeth Blackhawk.

"Hey, Fam," she said, amused by the fact that they didn't even hear her enter the house.

Zayn shook his head.

"That's exactly how you get yourself killed. You sneak up on a bunch of paranoid mercenaries who shoot first and ask questions later. Are you out of your mind? What if we shot you?"

When they heard another voice, they turned back toward the courtyard.

"Someone's jumpy," Ivan said. "And I can safely say that you wouldn't even get a chance to shoot her," he admitted, implying that her Marines wouldn't let that happen.

The big Native rolled his eyes.

"Jesus," Zayn said. "If she's here, and she's with her Marines, we have issues. Buckle up. It's an FBI boning about to go down."

Well, if he insisted.

Strolling in like she owned the place because she had at one time, Elizabeth poured herself a cup of coffee to get comfy.

Sniffing it, she was curious.

"This doesn't have herbs and cinnamon in it, does it?" she asked.

Maura laughed.

"No. We watched Zayn make it a few minutes ago. It should be good."

She took a sip.

And it was.

"Thank God," she said, leaning on the marble countertop. "Anyway, Hunters, I have some intel for you," she



said, making herself comfortable.

“What?” Jagger asked.

They all waited.

With her, it couldn't be good.

It never was.

“A little birdy popped into my office and delivered a package.”

They all knew what office she was talking about, and it wasn't going to be her *Violent Crimes Unit*.

It was her new role.

### **Deputy Director of the FBI.**

“On Chevy?” Maura asked. “Because we need to find him and can't use any tech to find his face in the crowd. He's somehow managed to avoid it all.”

She was well aware.

“I've got good news, and bad news,” she said. “I was just briefed on it late last night.”

And they knew why.

Someone got daily briefs and was not only running *The Violent Crimes Unit*, but Elizabeth Blackhawk was no longer just a director.

**Oh, no.**

Instead, she was holding down the FBI while Axelle Maverick was on leave.

Someone was the top banana.

It was hard to miss the news when it broke. She was now the queen of the kingdom—or one of them. The ladies were running the asylum.

Oh, the irony.

They'd seen the media blitz when every single news station in the entire world plastered her scowling, freckled face all over the place.

Someone had been given a powerful position at the  
FBI.

Before, she had the ear of the president.

Now, she had the power to back it up.

Let's just say that no one expected a second Blackhawk  
to be running the country's biggest federal police force.

**Not.**

**Even.**

**Close.**

Talk about giving the fox the keys to the henhouse on  
this one.

“We have intel on how Chevy is getting women out of  
the country in the sex trade.”

Gene lifted a brow.

“Uh, how?”

She explained.

“He's gone legit on the surface. Anyone ever consider  
a job as a model?” she asked.

When no one said a word, she did.

“He's smarter than El Gato. He's tricking beautiful  
women in the city into coming into his modeling agencies, and  
then making them disappear.”

Maura blinked.

**Well, holy shit.**

She was right.

El Gato wouldn't have put this much effort into  
kidnapping. It just proved that when a Marine did something,  
they went the extra mile.

Especially to make a buck.

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

*Modeling Agency*  
*At The Same Time*  
*First Appointment*

When she came in, he was salivating. The man who was playing boss for his good friend was ready to make some money.

Oh, and he was.

This one was tall, leggy, and blonde.

It just so happened that they had a request from a certain Asian businessman for a woman just like that.

The going rate?

A million dollars—if they could make her disappear without a trace.

Well, that was a given.

They had safety precautions in place, that would make it all work out.

Why?

Because they'd found their niche.

And when his friend called him, Cruz Santiago was more than happy to join up and resurface.

El Gato hated him, but this man...

He was going places.

As he approached the woman, hand out, he smiled.

“You are absolutely stunning! I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone quite as gorgeous as you.”

She blushed.

“Let’s sit down and get to know each other,” he said, taking her hand and leading her to a couch in the office.

Yeah, she would do just fine.

“Now, tell me all about you,” he said, making her a coffee and handing it to her.

And she did just that.

Oh, and she was perfect.

Perfect for the sex trade.

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## *Chapter Three*

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*Six-Twenty-Six Chartres Street*

*New Orleans*

*Friday Ten A.M.*

**Y**eah, it was going to be one of those days, and Dakota knew it. The last thing he wanted to do was sit outside a stranger's home, watching it. His gut said that this wasn't going to be tied to Chevy.

Honestly, it felt more like busy work to keep him out of everyone's hair.

Well, fine then.

If that was the status of his time left with them, maybe he should just leave earlier.

And after last night's dream, that might be for the best. Since he hadn't run into Eve in the last three months, maybe that was his sign.

Yeah, it was decided.

Tonight, he'd pack his bag and head out.

*To where?*

He wasn't quite sure.

Only, if they were going to give him the shit jobs, just to keep him busy, it was time to say goodbye.

Now that he had arrived at the address, he was able to sit in Jackson Square to watch like he'd been assigned.

Yeah, this definitely wasn't going to be tied to the sex trade and Chevy.

It was too damn nice, and he doubted the asshole was going to start targeting rich women.

That would draw too much attention.

That being said, what he could tell from it was that someone had a good chunk of money.

The place was gorgeous.

While the Hunter office was non-descript, hiding in plain sight, this place was not.

Someone liked the color blue too.

He remembered walking past this house many a time, and it had been dingy white on the outside, and now, it was bright, friendly, and even had window baskets with cascading flowers.

Someone was trying to make a house a home.

The only problem was the neighbors had to be pissed. It made their lavish townhouses look like shit.

The windows had that protective glaze on them, much like theirs did.

Someone also wanted privacy, and he couldn't blame them. The people in NOLA were noseey.

They always had people trying to get a peek into their workspace, and it wasn't nearly this nice.

As he sat there, newspaper open, and him staring over the top of it, he was watching the place to make sure that everything was calm.

If it was going to be his final job as a Hunter, he was going to do it right.

He couldn't believe his run there was done. What happened had destroyed everything in less than four years.

**God.**

He wished that he'd made better choices.

It was all kinds of ironic that the love he craved was what had destroyed him.

Now, he was losing his family. Only, to stay there was just too painful.

Unlike Rogue, he couldn't bounce back as fast. It was a good year, and he was still broken inside.

**And stubborn.**

Let's call a spade a spade.

This was all on him.

Every few minutes, he pretended to turn a page, as he sat there in his sunglasses and baseball cap.

So far, no one was moving on the house. The place was peaceful, and not being watched by anyone else either.

He scanned the area, and he was careful to make sure that no one realized who he was.

He could tell that someone was inside the building. Every now and again, he'd see a shadow move as if someone was looking out.

That didn't bode well for him.

It brought up the most important of questions.

Had he been made?

As he sat there, hoping no one figured out the place was being surveyed, he thought about his dream. Immediately, it sent chills through his body.

It had shaken him.

*Why?*

Because when he woke up, he wasn't nearly as horrified as he should be.

And that was a problem.

While he never wanted kids, and he certainly didn't want them with Sarah, he didn't hate the idea of Violet or a baby.

Yeah, and that made him incredibly pissy over the whole thing.

Eve had changed him.

It scared him shitless that he was even thinking that something like that was possible.

His DNA needed to stay contained. Besides, it was too late to be going there.

The only woman he felt anything for anymore, was the woman who begged him to ask her to stay, and he refused. He'd been an asshole to her too.

Dakota was a dick to everyone around him, and that was why it was so important that he left. Each day, it was getting more difficult to not be a bitter old man.

But deep down, he couldn't help but think about the what-ifs.

*What if she stayed?*

*What if he stopped being an asshole?*

*What if he searched for her?*

*What if she was the only way to peace?*

Everything was confusing the hell out of him, and all because of a dream. There was no way any of it could be real. There's no way she could care about him, or he'd fallen in love.

He had to be insane.

*Right?*

It had been so damn fast.

As he scratched the itch plaguing his wrist, the beads there felt warm, but he gave it no thought.

He also gave it no thought when a man approached and took a seat beside him on the bench. This was, after all, *New Orleans*.

Tourists were out and about.

"Nice weather we're having," he said, finally breaking the silence.

**Uh-oh.**



Immediately, Dakota recognized the voice as a very familiar one.

When he turned his head, he saw that he was absolutely right.

It was Ethan Blackhawk.

If he was slumming on a park bench with him, that meant his wife, Elizabeth, was somewhere in town.

The Hunters were about to be really busy.

Well, that was a good reason to leave tonight. He didn't want another promised case, where he was trapped by her.

When he turned his head further, he not only saw him, but he saw two Marines nearby. They were in street clothes, but he could tell they had some guns on them.

And body armor.

Yeah, someone was taking their security seriously. It was likely because of Lyzbeth's promotion.

They were personal security.

"What are you doing here, Blackhawk?" he asked, no humor or warmth in his voice.

Oh, well, Ethan had a very good answer for that.

**HIM.**

He was on a mission to help save Dakota from himself. It was all because Elizabeth, his wife, had a soft spot in her heart for this asshole.

Personally, he could care less.

Let him burn.

***BUT...***

Love made you do stupid things.

On top of his wife's affinity for this dick, Jinx had made a call to Elizabeth right after she had been summoned to Eve's home. She'd been worried and needed help.

And they loved Heath, who loved Jinx, so that made this their problem on a few sides.

Everyone knew the **ONLY** person who could talk Dakota down when he was being a douchebag was Elizabeth.

Only, she had a full plate now, so this shitshow circus was his to wrangle.

“We’re coming to reminisce in a city we love,” he said, lying his ass off. “Aren’t the Blackhawks allowed a holiday?” he asked.

Dakota laughed.

“I call bullshit on that one. You’re too busy to be slumming it in this park with me. Just say what you need to say, and head on out. I’m in no mood.”

Yeah, he could see that.

And that was why he was going to enjoy this wholeheartedly.

Dakota was a little too big for his britches, and he’d forgotten what they’d allowed him when it came to freedom to slay his demons.

Well, it was payback time.

The Blackhawks weren’t the only ones who had sold their souls to the government. The Hunters had too.

He could bet that this was going to hurt. Maybe it was petty, but none of Elizabeth’s husbands liked this man more than just to say hello.

Call them cavemen, but their wife had a soft spot for him, and a place in her heart.

He was honest.

“Elizabeth has intel on Chevy. She was delivering it, and we saw you walk down the street. I opted to follow. I figure we can catch up.”

Okay, that wasn’t the truth.

Elizabeth had asked a personal favor of him, and he'd give her anything. Why not deal with this pain in his ass?

He laughed.

“There's nothing to catch up about. I'm waiting for Chevy to be caught so I can leave. In fact, I'm leaving earlier. They sent me on this bullshit stakeout. They want me gone.”

Ethan rolled his eyes.

Someone was really hitting rock bottom on this one. Once again, Ethan knew one thing to be true.

If anyone would go down a martyr, simply because he was too stubborn to see the truth, it was this man.

How The Hunters dealt with him...

**No.**

**Freaking.**

**Clue.**

He'd spoken to Gene one night as they were discussing his friend's wedding plans, and the man clued him in on how far-gone Dakota was.

While he didn't care, some people did.

He wasn't a fan of the Lyzbeth bullshit, or how this man had his dick in Elizabeth at one time. He, Callen, and Chris certainly weren't fans that he'd proposed.

But alas, Elizabeth was his boss, and when she said jump, as Deputy Director, he couldn't say no. The Hunters had been created by him to ensure that Elizabeth stopped being the arm of justice for the president, and now, they were her team of mercenaries.

So, in for a penny, in for a pound.

“So sorry to hear that,” Ethan said.

Dakota looked over.

“No, you're not. You could care less if the earth opened and swallowed me.”

He actually laughed.

“True. Yet, here I am. As for finding Chevy, you can’t leave. You promised Elizabeth you’d stay until it was done. If you break your promise to her...”

He said nothing.

Ethan pushed on.

“Finding him should be any day now. Elizabeth got her hands on some intel. So, she wanted me to give you this,” he said.

He glanced over.

“What? A punch in the face?”

He laughed.

“God. I wish I could bash in your pretty boy face, Dakota, and I can’t tell you the times I’ve fantasized about that. I’ve fulfilled my sexual bucket list, but that’s on my daily one.”

Dakota actually laughed.

**Oh, he bet.**

There was no love lost between him, Ethan, Callen, or Chris.

**None.**

**At.**

**All.**

“Well, take a number. There are about eleven people in front of you, and ironically, we’re supposed to be family.”

Oh, he was aware of that too.

To get this over with, Ethan handed him the envelope.

“Here,” he said.

Dakota opened it. Inside, there was a whole new identity. In fact, there was a whole new life already created by the US Marshals for him.

“We heard you want out. You can’t leave with that name. So my wife has one ready for you when you finish with Chevy...”

He closed the envelope.

“Thank you. Tell Lyzbeth I appreciate it.”

Ethan rolled his eyes.

This man was so damn thick. He was oblivious to everything. His wife wasn’t really giving him a new identity out of love. She wanted to keep an eye on him in case he ran so they could send out The Hunters to bring him back.

Unfortunately for Dakota, he’d committed a plethora of homicides for the government. You couldn’t let people who did that just run willy-nilly back into society.

The people they rehabbed could leave, but the original Hunters...

**Not happening.**

Dakota, Rogue, and Zayn owed their souls to the US government and his wife. Retirement was years off.

Because he knew what his wife wanted, he played the psychology game and set the man up.

“I have to ask, Dakota. Is there anything that would make you stay? You’re part of The Hunters, and damn good at what you do.”

He thought about one thing.

**EVE.**

Then, he shook his head.

“Nope. Nothing. I’m out tonight.”

Ethan knew that was a lie.

You didn’t become a profiler and not know how to read the room. Blackhawk was literally weeks away from getting his doctorate.

All that stood between him and the letters after his name was a dissertation in front of his peers, and that was

already scheduled for an upcoming month.

“Okay. Well, then, I’ll just enjoy the scenery before I head back to the house. Guys, make a note. We need to get beignets for the wife for the trip back to DC. She has late meetings.”

Saint and Raphael nodded.

Then, Ethan and Dakota sat there in silence. It was time for Blackhawk to let the show go on.

It only took five minutes, and if Dakota thought the silence made him uncomfortable...

He had news for him. He’d been broken in by a woman who thrived on uncomfortable silence.

**Bring.**

**It.**

**On.**

When a delivery truck pulled up, Dakota went on alert. It had to be someone coming to grab the woman in the house. Maybe he’d been off his game and read this whole situation wrong.

Beside him, Ethan sat there and said nothing.

Why?

He knew who lived in that house, and what was going down.

They were keeping an eye on Eve Knight because she was important to Elizabeth.

Why?

Because she was important to Dakota.

While their relationship, the sexual one, ended years ago, Elizabeth was loyal to a fault.

Ethan wasn’t watching the house.

He was watching the man beside him.

Oh, and it was clear when he figured it out. There was a myriad of emotions on his carefully neutral face.

When Dakota saw the front door open, it was a sucker punch to his chest.

He actually gasped.

**It was Eve.**

What he couldn't believe was that she was two blocks from him, and he never even knew it.

Maybe, that had been for the best.

“Oh, my God.”

Yeah, he could say that.

Ethan kept going.

“It appears as if she's getting a delivery for some reason,” Ethan said. “I wonder what?”

Dakota watched the two delivery guys and that need to protect her rose up, making it increasingly difficult to breathe.

There was no doubt in his mind that he'd rush them if he believed for a single second that she was in danger.

When they opened the back of the truck, and Eve turned sideways, that's when he saw it.

**A bump.**

His heart hitched.

Did she have a baby bump?

He'd been around the women married to his brothers, and he knew a baby bump when he saw it. In fact, it was pretty close to the size of Stella's.

*That meant she was...*

**Three months.**

**Oh, holy fuck.**

He did the math in his head, and it only added up to one thing.

She was likely pregnant with his child.

Then, he saw what was being delivered and that only made his breath quicken and his heart race.

“Looks like it’s a crib. Gee. I wonder why?” Ethan asked, still watching the man.

The delivery guy carried it into the building, and the other guy came out of the back of the truck. There were more boxes.

*A highchair.*

*A pack and play.*

*A rocker.*

**Oh, Jesus H. Christ.**

Eve was pregnant.

In the dream, she’d given him a clue. How...he didn’t know, but somehow, he saw it now.

She’d said *‘family’*.

She’d alluded to a baby.

And now, he got it.

The woman he loved, and sent away, was pregnant and carrying his child.

Immediately, the color drained out of his face, and Ethan was getting a ringside show.

He clued the man in.

“In case you’re curious, Dakota, she’s three months pregnant,” he said.

Immediately, Dakota began sweating. He knew what had happened.

The week they’d been trying to take down El Gato, they’d had sex two times, and he’d been buried in her body.

**WITHOUT PROTECTION.**

**Oh, shit.**



**Shit.**

**Shit.**

More of the dream hit.

And hit hard.

**Oh, Jesus.**

He wanted to be sick.

Ethan wasn't done. In fact, he was making sure that the man grew up and owned what he'd done. He'd been the kid without a good father, and he knew how that destroyed a person.

Elizabeth wanted to spare Dakota that, so he would do what he could do.

“She’s keeping it,” Ethan said. “She has a doctor’s appointment tomorrow to get an ultrasound. She’s raising your child without you because you told her to go. She begged you to tell her to stay, and you told her to have a good life. So she is—not as a wife, but as a mother to the child you’re walking away from because you’re a selfish asshole.”

He heard what he was saying, and he wanted to be sick. How could he not?

Tears filled his eyes as he watched the woodland sprite that he loved, following the delivery men up the stairs.

“I didn’t know,” he whispered. “I honestly didn’t have a clue.”

Ethan patted him on the back.

“If it makes you feel any better, she didn’t know until three days ago. She was alone, scared, and she reached out for help. Now, going forward, you have a few choices. You can be a man and do the right thing, or you can walk. Isn’t that what your own father did, Dakota? Didn’t he run and that is part of why you struggle?”

First, he needed to know.

Then, he’d think this through.

That was how he worked.

“Who did she call?” he asked, staring at the townhouse as he waited for the men to leave. That protective feeling rose up, and he was waiting to make sure no one hurt Eve.

Now, he knew he couldn't leave.

The man beside him was right. He'd been a product of that kind of damage. Yes, his mother remarried, and he had a really awesome stepfather, but it didn't change that his real father didn't give two fucks about him.

He became a Hunter because he wanted to know where his father was.

At his question, Ethan said nothing.

Instead, he looked over when he was silent.

“Who did she call, Blackhawk? It wasn't me! I need to know!”

At the tone, Ethan's security moved closer. Saint and Raphael were now standing within three feet of the men.

**Just.**

**In.**

**Case.**

Ethan had his orders.

“Who do you think she called?” he asked. “She called the only person in the whole world who would help her.”

He knew who that would be.

Ironically, he wanted her to call him. Dakota would have helped her. He would have owned what happened and done the right thing.

That was who he was.

Oh, he knew who she reached out to.

**Mamba.**

At that realization, he got angry.

“What did you expect?” Ethan asked. “You told her to go, Dakota. You pretty much told her that you wanted nothing to do with her. She was good enough to fuck, but not good enough to love.”

That made him angrier.

It riled him up.

As he sat there, he clenched his fists.

Ethan saw it.

“Oh, I wish you would. Nothing would make me happier than to knock you on your ass. If you did get a hit in, Raphael and Saint would beat you until you bled. Make my fucking day, Mr. Rakin. Please. I’d love to let some of my own pent-up rage out on a man I can barely stand.”

Dakota breathed through the rage.

He knew that attacking Ethan would start a war. Not only with the two Marines, but with Elizabeth.

She held a few things sacred.

The men she loved and her children.

Ethan continued, wanting to get this done so they could leave.

“Anyway, she found out, she reached out for help, and she’s decided not to end the baby’s life. She’s decided that too many times, people get thrown away. Her, Violet, and so many others—kinda like you did to her. So, she’s going to make a difference and be a good mom, and she’ll have help since the baby daddy doesn’t give a shit.”

That wasn’t true.

“I care,” he said. “I would have been there for her. She didn’t want me either.”

Ethan laughed.

“You’re an idiot. You blame the world for your life, and now, you blame a woman you threw away for not calling you when she found out you screwed up.”

Dakota said nothing.

“Oh, sit there in silence, Mr. Rakin. I might be wrong. You do have a great propensity to care. Yeah, no doubt. You care a lot about yourself. You care a lot about your loss. Your feelings. Your ability to walk away and leave your family alone to clean up. You care about your heart but not that of others. You’re a coward and you never face the truth.”

He sat there.

Each word was a hit to his soul.

Because he wasn’t wrong.

“Do you know why Elizabeth didn’t say yes when you proposed?” he asked.

He said nothing.

*Why?*

Because he knew he was going to tell him. Ethan would love to get a shot in at any chance. There was no doubt there.

“She said no because she didn’t think you’d ever love her enough. You’re a flight risk, Dakota. You proved that. You ran when your partner died. Oh, you call it avenging her death, but you ran. You ran when Elizabeth broke up with you. You run and run and run...”

He said one thing.

“I’m broken.”

Ethan did what he did best.

He stopped the pity party. He’d had plenty in his life to spot one a million miles away.

“Here’s a little newsflash, Mr. Rakin. We’re all broken. You’re so hung up on the guilt of Sarah’s choices, that you’re willing to throw a family away. You’re willing to throw a woman, who makes you finally feel, to the wayside. I see how you look at her. I know the truth. You’re in love.”

He said nothing.

Well, Ethan wasn't holding back.

“You're willing to throw a baby away. A baby you made in anger, rage, and hate. Those are the things you let yourself feel. You are your own worst enemy, Dakota. Now, you are at the crossroads, and you have only two choices. Run toward and own it, even if she never loves you back, or run away, and blame her for one more shit episode in the shitshow that is your life.”

He flinched.

“You don't understand.”

That made Ethan laugh.

Was that so?

“Know why I'm talking to you and not Elizabeth?” he asked. “Because I do understand. I was you, Dakota. Only, I was in my early twenties. I hated the world. I hated everything but the rage. I lived for that. I feasted on it. I became a monster to anyone who showed me kindness because I believed I didn't deserve it. Only one person got through to the young me.”

Dakota stared at the house.

Ethan was honest.

“It was Gene. He loved me for me, and I still let him go. I let someone who made me feel alive leave because I was a selfish asshole. It worked out, thankfully, and I was actually meant to be where I am, but you won't let that rage go. You're willing to leave people who love you and a woman who does too.”

Dakota couldn't breathe.

“I'm angry,” he whispered.

“At who?”

He paused a second.

“At me.”

“For?” he asked.

The truth came out.

“For not being what Sarah needed. For not having the balls to break up with her, send her back, and walk away. What we had was a mistake,” he said, so softly that he wasn’t sure Ethan heard it. “What I began out of loneliness was a mistake.”

And there it was.

The psychologist in him knew that was the first step. You had to admit your mistake, own the truth, and then begin healing.

He patted him on the back.

“If it makes you feel any better, Sarah was beyond help,” he admitted. “Dakota, she was damaged. You didn’t do that. Life did that. She was being watched because we knew she was dangerous.”

The words registered. Only, they didn’t make him feel better. Eve, a woman he fell hopelessly in love with, and had the common sense to send away, was trapped because of his rage.

And she was a better person than him.

He watched the delivery guys head out of the house, and Eve appear on the steps to watch them go.

**His heart hurt.**

She was lovely.

She was absolutely gorgeous and smiling.

She had her hand on her belly as she made the attachment to the child she was protecting inside her petite frame.

Ethan kept talking.

“She’s trying to be happy,” he said. “Maybe you being a coward is for the best. That baby is going to have a good mother who won’t let anyone hurt it. She’ll kill to protect that child, and that’s what a parent does. I gave up my legs to save one of our children and would have given my life. When you

can say that, Dakota, you'll finally understand. Once you make a life, you're responsible for it, even if you're in the pit, fighting to get out. Then, you fight harder. You don't quit."

Dakota said nothing.

As soon as the truck pulled away, Eve sat on the steps and put her head into her hands.

"She's sad."

Well, yeah, she was.

Eve Knight was in love with a jackass.

"She's crying because she's not happy. She's carrying the baby of a man she fell in love with and who told her to leave. If she was happy, would she be sitting there alone? The reason she cries out here is she'd rather let the world see her sad than Violet."

That broke his heart.

Ethan wasn't done.

"Know how many times Elizabeth has wept in a closet so that the kids didn't know she was breaking under the pressure? Countless times. That's a mother's love. It protects the child over her own soul. Only, she has partners who cover for her. Eve is alone."

He watched her.

Then, it happened.

The Snake skills turned back on, and Eve became dangerous.

When she picked up her head, she looked around, as if sensing someone was watching her. She scanned the area, and the jig was almost up.

Immediately, Ethan shoved him down, and he followed him behind the wall as his Marines joined them.

Oh, they looked silly, but you didn't let a snake know it wasn't alone.

When Raphael checked the house, and whistled, Ethan knew it was clear.

When they got up, Adder was gone.

Eve was gone.

And Dakota was left to make a choice.

“The next step is yours.”

Dakota was bright red.

**Oh, boy.**

Here came the rage. It was the second step. There was mourning, rage, denial, and then someone handing this man his ass.

He hoped he'd get to see that.

“They set me up,” Dakota said. “They knew and sent me here.”

**Yep.**

The blame was flowing.

Only, Ethan warned him.

“They were doing what they could for you. If you throw them away, you'll have absolutely nothing left. You won't even have anyone who cares when you eat your gun, Dakota, because that's what you plan on doing. That's why you're leaving them, so you don't have to think about what they'll feel. Coward.”

He stood.

“It's not my plan.”

“Liar. I was the man you are. I know what the plans are, Dakota. If you can leave your family, and leave Elizabeth's life, then ask yourself what that says about you—not them.”

It was done.

There was nothing more he could do to help this man. He'd given him the direction, and now, it was about how fast



Dakota could come to the point where he put Eve over himself.

*The baby over himself.*

*The family over himself.*

When Ethan nodded, Saint and Raphael flanked him because it was time to go.

“You know the truth. Now, it’s going to depend on what you plan on doing with it. Remember, Dakota. You only get one chance to do this right. You get countless chances to do it wrong.”

He started walking away with one last sentence to the man he had very little faith in when it came to doing the right thing.

“Think about it, Dakota.”

Then, like he appeared, Ethan Blackhawk disappeared into the crowd that had been in the park, leaving Dakota behind.

Dakota just stood there.

He had two choices.

Go and knock on the door, or go home to fucking lose his mind.

**And he made the predictable choice.**

He started toward the townhouse to knock, but then the anger won. He turned to walk home. His family had done him dirty.

And he was not amused.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

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## *Chapter Four*

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*Four Twenty-Five Chartres Street*

*The Living Room*

*Same Time*

The family was waiting for Elizabeth to give them the intel she had received, and they knew better than to ask where it came from. That was likely going to be classified, and not something she was free to answer.

No one was shocked.

With power in the US Government came two other things.

*Secrets.*

*And responsibility.*

The woman had both, and she was balancing them carefully.

With The Hunters gathered, and Dakota off being Dakota, they were ready to finally get down to business. Her visit wouldn't be social, even if she was smiling at them as if it could be.

Elizabeth could fool just about anyone when she wanted to, and they had to hope that she had something good. Hunting for Chevy was getting old.

As the coffee was served, and the family was ready, Elizabeth got down to business.

“Okay, Team,” she said, running it like it was hers because...well, it was. “Major, you have the hard copy of the file, and it's the **ONLY** one. Lose it when this is done, okay?”

Maura saluted with two fingers, understanding the need for secrecy. This wasn't her first day dealing with classified information.

The irony was, that was how the hell they got into this mess in the first place.

*Columbia.*

*El Gato.*

*Chevy—the traitorous Marine.*

Elizabeth continued.

“For the rest of you, and when I say this is need to know, I’m dead serious. Keep your pie holes shut outside this room.”

Then, she began.

“MATE, load file Chevy Two,” she said.

In front of them, the big screen came to life, and they heard the whirling of a processor. MATE had been reinstalled inside that building, allowing them to handle the things Elizabeth sent them.

When the screen flashed, the monotone voice alerted her.

“Access allowed, Badass in Boots,” it said.

She stared at the screen.

“MATE, when I find out who keeps programming you to bust my balls every single day, I’m going to do a little busting myself,” she said. “And not in the fun way that I’m sure my damn husbands like!”

The system whirled.

“Unsure of the command. Please restate, Blackhawk, Elizabeth Renee.”

She shook her head.

When the tech took over, and they were the slaves, no one would be amused.

*Now would they be?*

“Anyway, we had something interesting happen, and at first, it didn’t draw suspicion.”

They listened.

Honestly, they hoped that she had something because they had **NADA**.

“Will it get us Chevy?” Maura asked. “Because right now, I’m still *‘dead’*, and it’s making it more difficult to keep Jagger safe without outing myself.”

She understood that.

“It will. Hear me out,” she said. Then, she began. “A woman got an invite from a modeling agency, and she showed up to the interview.”

They let her talk.

Granted, they had no freaking clue what this had to do with Chevy.

“It turns out that she was booked for a runway, in Venezuela. She came home, packed her bags, and was never heard from again.”

That made her pause.

“A model?”

Elizabeth nodded.

“Yeah, and I’d like to say it’s a coincidence and weird, but when you let me finish, you’ll see what I see. Oh, and it’s hella freaky.”

They’d take her word for it.

Immediately, Maura was flipping through the files to get to the same page.

“Are we talking Marjory Malinois?” she asked.

Elizabeth nodded.

Then, she kept going.

“She mentioned to a few friends that she was going to do the runway, and then when she never came back, they got worried. They submitted a missing person report to the police to report that she was MIA.”

Jagger lifted a brow.

“Okay, and?” he asked. “Because this doesn’t sound like a Hunter problem. If an American goes missing, that’s a CIA and pentagon issue.”

“Oh, it’s a Marine issue,” she said. “**TAG**, and shut up so I can explain.”

They did.

“The police said they would handle it, and nothing. The cop dealing with it in the missing person’s division of vice showed up at the friend’s house and told them that they made contact with Marjory in Venezuela. Apparently, she said she met a man and wasn’t coming back.”

Maura lifted a brow.

“That sounds suspicious,” she admitted, despite Elizabeth telling her to zip it. “Why wouldn’t she call her friend then?”

**Exactly.**

“Oh, it is suspicious, and you’re right. Only, she’s not the only one because we had another woman, Katherine Colt, disappear the same way.”

All of The Hunters looked as if that rubbed them the wrong way now.

Elizabeth continued.

“She, like the other woman, had no family, but she was smart enough to tell her friends that she had gotten a magazine gig, and she was going to be on the front page in Saudi Arabia. Sound familiar? It’s clear that the woman didn’t do her research or understand that they would **NEVER** put a Western woman on the cover of anything there with her hair out and wild.”

Jagger got it.

“Then, she never came back?”

“Nope. She went missing. Again, a cop came to her door—the friend who called in the MPR, and he said she’d

been reached and was living the good life in Saudi Arabia.”

“Said no woman ever,” Maura admitted. “That’s the world’s capital of oppression for women. It looks civilized on the outside, but under the truth is a darker secret.”

**Exactly.**

“I’m aware. There have been four sets of friends who have contacted the FBI because of this. They didn’t feel it was legit, and no one liked how the cops handled it.”

“And no contact back?” Maura asked.

“They’ve been texting, and getting one to two-word replies back like yes, no, or I’m good. They aren’t getting any resolution, and that sounds hella suspicious to me. It immediately made me think of Chevy and how we have a sex trade issue here.”

Gene laughed.

Oh, and not in the funny way.

“So he cracked the code on how to sell women and under the radar,” Gene said. “Where El Gato abducted by force, he’s conning them, and it’s working.”

She nodded.

“Yep, and they get right on the plane not thinking anything is wrong. They get paid upfront, they get a first-class flight out of the airport on a private jet, and they are never heard from again—according to what they told the friends.”

“And the airport?”

“It’s a private one where the records have suddenly gone MIA...”

Yeah, that was suspicious.

“So we’re back on the sex trade boat?” Zayn asked. “I really thought we scared the shit out of anyone who tried to do that here.”

She hated to break it to them.

“Well, you haven’t.”

That meant they had to deal with that on top of finding Chevy. It was like locating two specific needles in a haystack made out of needles.

“Where do we start?” Maura asked.

“Page five,” she said, as MATE went there. Maura was right behind.

Elizabeth continued to break it down.

“There are five cops that we’ve compiled onto a list and think are part of this. I’m going to bet that they are on Chevy’s payroll. He’s smarter than El Gato, and he doesn’t like to get his hands dirty. Clearly.”

Yeah, they could see that.

And that sucked for them.

“We have the name of the businesses. The friends were smart enough to get the information from their missing friends and google it. Here’s the issue for the FBI. They are legit businesses.”

“And the FBI cares about the legitimacy of a business?” Zayn asked.

“Normally, we have to follow rules, and that’s why I’m using you on this. We searched them, and we found an owner. That’s how I knew we had a problem.”

Maura was curious.

“How?” she asked.

She explained.

“We had intel that someone was helping Chevy from El Gato’s past. Once I heard that name, I knew we had issues.”

They listened.

“When you guys went in and blew the compound, there was one man who was in charge of Teague’s security. It was his right-hand asshole, Cruz Santiago. He was the one who got El Gato to safety, and then had to go MIA because El



Gato was pissed his wife and kid were left in the compound to die.”

She got it.

Someone else from Columbia was in play again. Why was she not surprised?

“So El Gato dies, and Cruz Santiago suddenly reappears? That’s hella suspicious on a good day. On a day like today, that’s a neon sign pointing down from over his head.”

Yes, yes, it was.

And it was an issue.

Anyone tied to El Gato was a shitshow. Look at the mess it was causing because the Marines didn’t take down everyone in that compound, and they let Chevy slip past them.

Now, they’d play catch up.

“He’s the owner of the businesses because you know Chevy is **NOT** going to play that game. He knows we’re looking for him, so he’ll lay low.”

Yeah, he was too careful.

“We can’t hit the places,” Jagger said. “If we do, and it’s a legit business, we just killed innocent people. We also throw up a signal flare that we’re onto him.”

Oh, she was aware.

“Exactly. That’s why I’m giving you the name of the cops. My suggestion is to start there and begin whittling away at them. You might be able to find Cruz, and in the last-case scenario, you can kick in the doors at the modeling agencies.”

Maura was quiet.

“What’s up, Major?” she asked.

“I’m working on a plan, and this might actually help. I’ll work out the details, and then discuss it with the team,” she admitted.

Elizabeth didn’t care.

As long as they handled it.

“My hope is to have Marines heading into the locations in Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, China, and any other place tied to this to try and find the missing women. You have the list. I’m good at finding killers, but even I have to admit, that this one...he was very good at covering his tracks.”

Jagger was aware of what it would take.

“We have to find Chevy and Cruz.”

She laughed.

“Well, that’s not going to be easy. We know he has a place somewhere,” she said. “Our intel is coming back with nothing. I’m talking full-on criminal silence. We’ve given you access to the street cameras, facial recognition, and all the tech we can muster. If you can’t find him popping up, that’s a bad sign.”

Remmy agreed.

“I spoke to Calyx at The Underground. She’s hearing absolutely nothing about anything related to Chevy. It’s like he’s gone radio silent, or maybe, he’s left the city to do his dirty deeds long distance.”

Jagger clued them in.

“He’s a Marine,” he said. “Chevy was trained to do just that, and he’s damn good at hiding in plain sight. We didn’t even know that he was betraying us. We believed he died in that jungle prison years ago.”

Well, that was going to be a Hunter issue.

Elizabeth wasn’t done.

“I also have more bad news for you.”

That had their attention.

“What?” Tommy asked. “I mean, dirty cops are pretty bad. How does this get worse?”

Yeah, the man was green.

“Turn to page Seven, MATE,” she said, and the screen changed. On it, there was a man in a white lab coat, and someone had burned out his eyes, taken his fingers, and removed his teeth.

“What the hell?” Zayn said. “Trying to eat a muffin here. That’s nasty, and I need a warning.”

Boone just laughed.

He didn’t.

He ate his muffins over dead bodies with Cordelia plenty of times when he’d still been a cop.

She explained.

“That’s Doctor Wilhelm Detrick. He’s a German plastic surgeon. He works as a backroom man who changes faces for a living. He turned up dead two months ago. Until now, I didn’t get it.”

Neither did they.

“Why is he tied to this?” Merry asked.

“A man hiding from you guys, and a disfigured plastic surgeon who saw a man who looked a lot like Chevy before this happened...?”

**Well, shit.**

Someone changed his face.

That wasn’t going to be a good thing.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

Maura immediately understood.

“We can’t find Chevy on facial recognition because the asshole changed his face enough to hide from us. He’s walking around in this city laughing at us because we can’t track him with tech!”

Jagger scowled.

“I really, really, really hate that asshole and that the Marines taught him how to evade more Marines.”

Oh, they all did.

Elizabeth continued.

“And to make it worse, his office, which was in his home, was ransacked. They only took one file. I’m going to bet that’s the one that was Chevy’s. He got his face done, and then offed the one man who knew what he looked like so you guys couldn’t find him.”

**Shit.**

**Shit.**

**Shit.**

“Who stole it?” Jagger asked. “Do we know that?”

She shook her head.

“It was done by someone who knows how not to leave DNA, prints, or anything that would make the FBI happy,” Elizabeth admitted.

Merry knew what that meant.

“It’ll be a cop or someone hired by Chevy in Germany. In every case I ever worked when there was nothing there to find, a cop was behind it. They know the process.”

Rogue shook his head.

Trouble was coming.

“We’re going to have to shake down some cops and hope that one of them knows what the new Chevy looks like. We don’t have time to go to Germany. That’s a long shot if I ever heard of one.”

Pretty much.

Unfortunately, unless they found something else, that was where they were with this.

“That’s all we have, and I know it’s not a lot, but we’re on the cusp of an international incident. When American citizens are being sold to foreign nations like Venezuela,

Columbia, Saudi Arabia, and China, we have an issue. Those aren't friendly nations. Trafficking women is a big no-no for Americans. We built our reputation as a country that doesn't tolerate that, and now it's going on under our nose."

Maura got it.

"Well, we'll do what we can to keep it quiet. Maybe we'll get lucky."

Elizabeth was crystal clear.

There would be no mistaking it.

"The President of the United States wants it handled and as quietly as possible. You have tech, you have money, and you have the authorization to do what needs to be done. I'll give you cover. You have my full support."

That's all they needed.

And they knew how valuable it was to have someone that high up in their corner.

*Elizabeth as an ally...*

**That.**

**Was.**

**Huge.**

"We'll get on it ASAP," Maura promised. "Give us some time to work out a strategy to start dealing with the police first."

That worked for her.

"Guys, I know this is daunting, but we have to move fast. We don't know how many women are gone now. We don't have a clue."

And that was bad.

When they heard a ding, they knew it was their camera security alerting them that someone was close. Immediately, Zayn checked the tablet.

They weren't taking any chances.

He relaxed and then clued him in.

“Dakota is at the front door,” Zayn said, as it was opened.

Well, he wasn't at the front door for long.

That was for sure.

When he came in, the man came in hot, and he was bright freaking red.

**Holy shit.**

They all knew what stirred him up too.

Apparently, he'd figured out why they'd sent him to sit on that house.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing?” he asked, walking right toward Jinx with that look on his face.

It was the *'shit is about to get real'* look.

“You set me up!”

Everyone gasped at his tone.

Oh, and he wasn't done.

**Not.**

**Even.**

**Close.**

“You knew she was fucking pregnant and didn't have the balls to tell me?” he asked, pointing at Jinx.

Well, Elizabeth knew Ethan had done the job she'd sent him to do. No one riled a man up like this other than a headshrinker with the intent to do just that.

When Dakota reached for Jinx, to do who knew what, he didn't have a chance to get her.

*Why?*

Someone had to defuse the situation. More importantly, Dakota going for Mamba?

*Was he out of his damn mind?*

*Did he have a death wish?*

**Apparently.**

Blocking him, Elizabeth grabbed his arm, spun him around, shoved him to the floor, and stood in front of Jinx as a way to stop him.

Only, he was dumb.

**And pissed.**

Of course, he got up, and of course, he took that as an act of aggression. The two most dangerous women were in the room, and he was trying for both of them.

**Lordy.**

The stupid was strong in this one.

When he charged at Elizabeth, everyone moved out of the way, jumping over the back of the couches to not get caught in the crossfire.

They cleared the space as Elizabeth's security came in hearing the melee and did **NOT** look amused by what was going on.

Maybe it was Zayn chanting '*fight, fight, fight*'.

Only, she didn't back up on this one. Dakota wasn't in his right mind, but he wasn't exactly dangerous.

Instead of risking someone getting shot, she pulled off her gun, tossed it to Maura so it didn't go into play, and did what each and every one of them had been wanting to do for three months.

**Whip.**

**His.**

**Ass.**

The whole time, he kept swinging for her face, and she kept landing shot after shot to his torso as he missed. Someone was faster and a killer and someone was just angry.

*Oh, he tried, but...*

His heart wasn't in it.

When Zayn yelled as they moved toward him, that's when she made her move.

Elizabeth punched him in the stomach, grabbed him by the arm, and flipped him onto the table where the coffee cups had been.

He hit it hard, crashing through it to land on the floor. The table, and his soul, were in pieces.

Then, she put her boot on his neck and made him focus on her.

“Dakota, Darlin’, has no one ever told you that you don’t put your goddamn hands on a lady or threaten to?” she asked. “I know your momma raised you better.”

Rogue was pissed.

**No.**

That was an understatement.

Granted, his wife didn't need him to protect her since she was lethal, but he'd be damned if he'd let Dakota be a dumbass.

“He was going to touch my wife! Let me kill him,” he said, as Zayn shoved the man over the back of the couch and sat on him to keep him down so things couldn't escalate.

Dakota was harmless.

*A pissed-off husband...*

**Not.**

**So.**

**Much.**

From where he lay, he protested.

“Everyone knew,” he whispered. “You all knew that she is pregnant, and no one cared enough to tell me!” he said, starting to cry.

Well, that was one way to look at it.



Of course, it was the way he would see it.

From her position above him, Elizabeth stared down at his prone body.

“And now you do know, Dakota. The question is, what are you going to do about it?”

No one knew the answer to that, including Dakota.

And that was the problem.

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

*New Orleans*

*Models INC.*

*The French Quarter*

By the time the interview was done, Cruz Santiago knew one thing.

She was perfect for what they needed.

This blonde, tall, willowy, and without any family in the area, could be taken and no one would be any the wiser.

As he made her wait a minute, he got his staff ready to help him.

There was one on the hook.

When she even hinted she'd do anything to be a model...

That told them all they needed to know.

Well, her dreams, and nightmares, were about to come true. Be careful what you asked for.

Someone was going to be leaving the safety of the US, and in some lecherous man's grasp for the future.

*What he did with her after...*

**Not his problem.**

It was a cash upfront business, and once the woman got on the flight, it was done.

Heading into the room, he sat across from her, clueing her in.

"We've made our decision."

Oh, she looked so hopeful.

*Wasn't that amusing?*

"We would like you to do the runway show this week. Are you available to pack up and take a little trip?"

She bounced.

"Really?" she asked.

"Yes. You'll need to go home, get your passport, and pack a bag. Here's the money for the gig, and you can use it to buy some souvenirs for fashion week there."

She smiled hugely.

"I can't believe it."

He smiled.

“Oh, believe it! You’re about to be famous. So, here’s the ticket. I hope you don’t mind flying out on a private jet. We like to treat our girls right, and when you come back, we’ll book you on your next job.”

“And my daily job?” she asked.

He played it up.

“Call them and quit. You’re going to be rich. Mind you, you’re the perfect weight, so skip the peanuts on the flight.”

She laughed.

This was the best day of her life.

She couldn’t believe it.

This had been a long shot, and she’d almost not come today. Now, she was damn glad she did.

Her life was about to change.

“Yes, Sir!” she said, taking the envelope.

Inside, was fifteen thousand dollars.

She nearly fainted.

Cruz watched, knowing that was small potatoes. For what she cost, they’d recoup that big-time.

“You won’t regret this, Mr. Santiago!” she said, grabbing her purse and racing out.

Oh, he wouldn’t.

But he was betting she would, as soon as she landed, was taken to some man’s house, and lived what was left of her life as a sex slave.

**That he'd bet on.**

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## *Chapter Five*

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### *The Courtyard*

### *New Orleans*

### *Friday Morning*

**A**fter they patched him up, cleaned off the blood, and got the skin off of Elizabeth's ring that had been from Dakota's face, they shoved his ass outside to cool down. Mostly, because Rogue was not a happy man.

It was best to keep them separated or there was more bloodshed coming, and no one needed that.

When he sat at the little iron café table, he rested his face on his arms and thought about what had just gone down inside.

And he was ashamed.

That was not the man he was.

It was when he heard the footsteps coming his way that he knew who it would be.

### **Elizabeth.**

"Just kill me already. It hurts a lot less than life for me, Lyzbeth."

She sat beside him and put an ice pack on the top of his head where he had a knot from being a dipshit.

"Well, doing stupid garbage like that, Dak, is not helping the situation. You're lucky I stopped you. Had you gone at Mamba, she would have killed you. Maybe that's why you did it."

"Maybe," he said, sitting up and holding the ice in place.

She held another one to his chest where she'd hit him pretty hard. He hadn't been in Kevlar as he was out on the street.

That said it all.

He still had a death wish.

Elizabeth knew that if they didn't get through, she would be getting the call that the man was dead. That was the last thing she wanted.

She didn't want to bury a friend.

"You love her, don't you?" she asked, staring him in the eyes.

He said nothing, but he didn't have to. She knew him well enough to know the truth.

"And you love her more than you ever loved me or Sarah."

He closed his eyes.

Well, talk about someone getting to the heart of the matter. Elizabeth was doing just that.

"It doesn't matter. I'm not good for her."

Elizabeth pulled a pack of cigarettes from her pocket, lit one, and passed it off to him.

"You're going to need this," she said. "Trust me. I'm not an advocate, but in times like these, sometimes, you gotta break the rules."

That sounded ominous.

Even though he had just quit, he took it.

"Why?" he asked.

She explained.

"Because you and I are going to have one hell of a conversation that's going to shake you to your very core. It's going to make you question everything."

He blinked.

"That doesn't sound good."

She was aware.

“I almost said yes,” she said.

He stared at her.

Maybe he had a concussion because he wasn't sure what she was talking about.

“Wait, what?”

“When you asked me to marry you, there was a split second where I almost told you yes, and told you we should elope.”

He shook his head.

“Yep. I do have a concussion. I could have sworn you just said you considered hitching your wagon to this mess.”

She laughed.

Oh, she had.

That was likely why the men hated his guts. She'd been honest with them because marriage needed honesty.

“Want to know why I said no at the last minute and left the place?”

He blinked.

“Uh, we've discussed this.”

“Do you want the real reason? The one that I never told you?”

Well, now he was curious.

He nodded.

“Because, Dakota, there are two kinds of people in the world. There are the ladies who want the white knight, and there are ladies who have to be the white knight.”

He wasn't sure where this was going.

“I spent the ten years before you being taken care of by a man. Christopher did his best, and I lived a life that a lot of people don't. I went to Fiji every year, and I had a fancy car and dinners. So when you and I hooked up, I didn't want

someone to take care of me. I wanted to save someone for a change to see that I could do it.”

He let her talk.

“So, when you asked, I was so broken that I couldn’t fall back into a relationship where someone took care of me. Because, Dakota, you’re a white knight to the core. You want to swoop in and save the woman every single time.”

He didn’t say anything.

Because she was right.

That sounded just like him.

He tried to save her when she told him she was hurt in her last relationship. He tried to save Sarah to protect her.

“Some women need that man. Some need a man who will let her protect him.”

“That’s not me.”

“I know. You’re a white knight. You’re failing miserably with your choices in women because you’re picking women who don’t need it. Pick a woman who does.”

He hoped she didn’t mean Eve.

She was the epitome of strong and the protector.

“She’s a snake. She doesn’t need me. What can I bring to the table?”

She lifted his chin.

“My brother from another mother, she’s in a freefall, and all she wants right now is someone to swoop in and save her. She’s scared and she has no idea how to raise her some babies. You’re exactly what she needs.”

He wasn’t so sure.

“Why didn’t she come to tell me?” he asked.

“Because you literally told her to go. You told everyone here you didn’t want to be a father, and Violet wasn’t your kind of gig. What I can tell you is she reached out for help. Eve called the only person she could in that freefall. She



called Jinx, crying. Does that sound like someone who has her shit together?”

No, it didn't.

And it hurt his heart that he wasn't there for her.

“I have never lied to you. I told you I questioned Sarah's ability to hold it together. I told you she was a bad choice, but you insisted. I tried to help her all I could. I'm telling you to listen to me. Eve needs someone to save her. She did it all her life out of necessity—not because that was her instinct. She was trained to be a killer. Some of us can just do it without the military. Eve is broken. She was young when she was turned out on the street.”

He listened.

He didn't know much about her.

“I shouldn't be doing this,” she said, pulling out her phone. She had clearance so high, no one could top it minus the president. “Read.”

She handed him her phone and the file that was on it. It was Eve's personal record.

The CIA one—not the military one. The CIA had files on **EVERYONE**.

Uh, that didn't reassure him.

Only, curiosity got the best of him.

As he began reading, only one thing came to mind. Her past...

It was heartbreaking.

Her mother had been a horrible person, who left Eve alone in the world. She was shuffled from foster home to foster home. In them, she was abused, starved, and hurt in ways no one should be.

His eyes filled with tears.

No one had been there to protect her, so she'd had to do it out of necessity.

It was survival of the fittest.

He kept reading.

Apparently, she lied at seventeen and joined the Marines to escape, and then, she never looked back.

He read her missions.

Oh, and they were brutal.

She took countless lives but saved so many more. She'd served with honor, and had more medals than any one person should.

She was a hero.

He looked up.

Elizabeth stopped him.

“And she’s looking for that one person who will stand by her and hold her up when her feet get kicked out from under her—like they are now.”

**God.**

He wanted that to be him.

The problem with him was he needed a purpose. As of late, he didn't have one. Oh, he pretended, but he wasn't able to find that mission in life.

Elizabeth was blunt.

“Dak, I saw her when we hit those warehouses. She took a bullet for you. She also put her body over yours when you were down. She’s a good person, and she’s kind. She’s also pregnant with a baby that she knows you don’t want. Instead of dumping it on you, she’s going to be responsible. Alone.”

He was honest.

“I don’t want her to do it alone. Had she called me, or shown up here, I would have done the right thing, Lyzbeth. I would never do that to a woman. I respect them.”

Well, except for Jinx, because his behavior had been incredibly disrespectful. He definitely owed her an apology.

**SOON.**

“Then why didn’t you walk to her door and tell her? You came home to rage at us. You could have just gone there and done the right thing.”

“I don’t know. I’m a mess. I’ve been in a freefall too,” he admitted. “Can I be honest?”

She nodded.

“I fell in love with her the second I saw her. I don’t know how or why, but I heard it. There was this click. It was as if that piece of me was missing, and then it wasn’t.”

“That’s how it happens.”

“Did you hear it with me?”

She shook her head.

“No. I heard it with Chris, Ethan, and Callen. I love you for you, Dakota, but we’re not soulmates. Eve is yours. You can fight it until the cows come home, but the bottom line is you won’t change it. She’s your person, and you found her.”

He closed his eyes.

“I know. Only, I fucked this up. Getting her back...”

Oh, it wasn’t going to be easy.

When someone cleared her throat, they both looked over.

It was Jinx.

Immediately, she headed his way.

“Can I talk to him?” she asked.

Elizabeth wasn’t sure she could take Mamba, but she’d try to protect someone who was so beat down that one more wound to his heart would break him.

“Are you going to beat his ass and kill him? Because then I have to say no.”

She shook her head.

“No. I just want to talk. I won’t get punchy. You did that plenty in there. By the way, that table was nice before you wrecked it.”

She laughed.

Oh, the tone might be light, but they could see Rogue standing in the doorway, watching his wife’s back.

This had the propensity to blow up in their faces.

**BIG-TIME.**

Nothing put a family at odds like coming for one of the spouses.

“Sure thing,” she said. “And I’ll get you a new table. Consider it done.”

When the ladies were finished, Dakota stood.

“First, I want to apologize, Jinx. I’m sorry. I had no right to be angry with you. That was a dick move, and I deserved to have you kick my ass.”

She let him talk.

“I know you’re in a bad position, and I get it. She’s your sister, and I was your brother.”

She stopped him.

“You still are,” Jinx said. “You’re near and dear to my husband. He loves you so much, and so do I, Dak, but I have to protect the weak. I’m a Marine. We’re here to level the playing field, and right now, you have a houseful of people who love you. She has no one. I get that you’re angry, and I would be too, but what was she supposed to do?”

Elizabeth let them talk it out.

Sometimes, things fixed themselves, and this was going to be one of those things.

She’d bet on it.

“Eve told me that both times you two had sex, you made it clear it was fucking and nothing more. You made her feel like you could never even care about her, and she knew

you'd not want a baby. Hell! We all know you don't. How many times have you told us that having kids in our line of work is a mistake? Our kids are mistakes."

He felt horrible.

"I didn't mean..."

She stopped him.

"Yes, you did, and that's fine. We get it. We have kids, Dakota, because most of us have seen some shit. We've been the kid no one wants. We've been the kids that mommy's boyfriend wanted to rape. We've been the dregs of society, so our redemption is to have a life and change the cycle. That's how she feels. Eve wants to undo her past by giving some kids a good one."

He hated that he'd hurt them all.

"Eve took in Violet because she reminds her of herself. She's keeping this baby because her mother would have ended her life had she had the money for the abortion. She's not doing it to spite you, or asking anything from you. She's trying to find a way to cleanse her life of the sin we've all been born into. She wanted to tell you, but she was scared you'd be cruel."

That hurt his heart the most.

"I wouldn't be."

She stopped him right there.

"Yes, you would have been. You have the ability to hurt those who love you most, and she loves you. I don't know why, but she is super protective of you. She's protecting you even now as she sits in her big house, playing protector for Violet as she struggles to put baby furniture together. When I gave birth, Rogue was there. When Maura did, Jagger was by her side. When Stella births the next flower in the Thundercloud garden, Zayn is going to be there to protect her. Know who will be there when Eve brings your child into the world? No one. Imagine how scary that is."

Tears filled his eyes.

“No one will hold her hand and tell her she’s doing good. No one will count for her, or hold her leg up. No one will watch the baby to make sure it’s okay as the nurses check it. Then, add in Violet. Who will watch her? Who will make sure she’s fed and safe? Her life is complicated more because of you, and yet, she didn’t call you to drag you in. She’s keeping you safe in her own way.”

He could see that now.

“I don’t know how to be a father. I don’t know how to be anything but a bastard. I’m trying.”

She shook her head.

“And that’s a copout. Because it’s too late, Dakota, to say you’re trying. You made a child. Now, it’s do it. Now, it’s charge that fucking hill. Now, it’s go get some tools and put baby furniture together. You made a mistake, granted, but that’s a you problem. Not a baby’s.”

His heart raced.

He didn’t want to hear that, but he needed to. He needed this come to Jesus talk.

She continued.

“It’s too late to make up excuses because one day, that child is going to utter the worst words a mother can hear. Who’s my daddy? And why doesn’t he love me? How is she supposed to answer that? *Well, honey, daddy doesn’t know about you because he didn’t want you. He’s two blocks away though, so...*”

He started crying.

That was horrible.

Why?

He’d asked his mother that before she got married to his stepfather.

A child didn’t understand.

“So I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you. I was doing what I figured was the best. She needed someone to protect her, and

I'm the only Snake left. We can beef about it, or we can take it for what it is. If you were in my place, what would you have done?"

That was easy.

He would have done the same thing.

Jinx was honest.

"I hope this doesn't destroy your relationship with my husband, or the rest of the family. That wasn't my intent. I was helping a friend. It's the same had you called me in the middle of the night and said you needed me. I'd get dressed and I'd come and find you. That's what family does, Dak. That's what it means to have a circle, and you're blessed with one. Until I was sent here, I didn't have that either. I know how valuable it is."

"I know you're right," he said.

"Then we've made our peace, and as far as I'm concerned, we're good."

Then, she went to walk away.

Only, he couldn't end it like this.

"Jinx," he said, touching her shoulder.

When she turned, he did something that no one had expected.

He hugged her.

"Thank you for being there for her. Thank you for being loyal. I'm glad she has you."

She hugged him and ran her hands up and down his back.

"I'm sure she'd rather have you," she said. "For once, Dakota, listen to all of us. We're trying to help you. You've fought us since Sarah died. You've fought us tooth and nail, and you're making mistake after mistake when all you have to do is listen. We see this from the outside looking in, and we are privy to the big picture. You're only seeing it from your point of view."

Rogue headed their way.

He knew he was up to bat.

“I have this, Baby,” he said, reassuring his wife.

She nodded.

Then, Jinx patted Dakota on the shoulder and gave her husband a kiss.

“I have to go pump so Sawyer can have food before we head out. We love you, Dakota. Never forget it. When you have a family, they let you hurt them, and they still have your back.”

Then, she was gone.

Elizabeth knew that she'd done all she could. For now, The Hunters had to heal one of their own. This time, all of the festering wound needed to be healed.

Not just putting a bandage on it.

“You got this, Boo?” she asked Rogue.

He did.

“Thank you for stopping him from making a life-ending mistake, and thank you for having our backs.”

She gave him a hug.

“It's never a problem. I have a soft spot in my heart for you assholes. Tell Zayn I'll be watching him.”

He laughed.

“And make him more paranoid?”

She grinned.

“Absolutely.”

Then, she reminded him.

“When you need me, call,” she offered. “Use the private number. I'll answer. I promise.”

When she whistled, a pack of Marines left the building, and ironically, only one was hers.



“Ivan, we gotta go,” she said. “I have to be back in DC by three. We’re cutting it close as it is, and if I miss that meeting, Gabe will shit ten bricks, and build me a cell in a prison.”

He headed her way.

As he stood by Dakota, he sighed.

“I’ve been where you are, Dakota. Listen to your friends,” Ivan said. “Oh, and if you ever try to put your hands on the Deputy Director again, I’m going to shoot them off and then shove them up your...”

“Ivan!” she said, laughing. “Seriously. Did you not just watch me kick his ass?”

Oh, he had, but still. His job was to protect the Deputy Director of the FBI.

And they took that shit seriously.

“Let’s roll, Marine,” she said, having him follow her out of the courtyard.

When they were gone, Jagger, Boone, and Zayn were ready to do damage control.

**AGAIN.**

Before they could say anything, Dakota was the one who went there.

“I fucked this up,” he said.

They all sat down, figuring this was going to take a while. Dakota...he wasn’t a fast mover.

**Ever.**

“Yeah, you did, but we need to know what war we’re fighting here,” Jagger said. “Do you love her?” he asked, hoping the man would just be honest.

When he nodded, they were surprised.

Maybe Elizabeth had knocked the concrete out of that blockhead of his.

“I don’t know how or why. I just...”

They got it.

“What are you going to do?” Zayn asked, figuring they’d have to beat some sense into him to get the man to stop jacking this up.

He lifted his head, wiped his eyes, and was honest.

“I’m going to ask you guys to tell me what to do. Clearly, I have no clue.”

Zayn literally fell off his chair and landed on his ass in the courtyard, and not because he was being dramatic.

No one expected that.

Boone laughed.

“Uh, drama queen?”

Zayn pointed.

“He asked for advice and he’s going to take it. Someone write this day down. It’s the end of the world as we know it,” he said. “Dakota isn’t fighting us.”

Jagger laughed.

It was because of the look on Dakota’s face.

That said it all.

“Don’t be shocked, Dak. We’ve run face first into the wall that is your stubbornness too many times since Sarah died.”

Boy, was that ever the truth?

Only, he got it.

“How do I do this?” he asked. “How do I go to her and make this better?”

He was thinking about what she said in the dream. She’d mentioned a penitent man, and there was nothing he wanted redemption on more than this.

Boone was honest.

“You tell her you were an asshole, and that you made a huge mistake not telling her to stay. Then, you tell her you

know that she's pregnant with your child, and you want to help raise it. Hold your ground, even if you get the shit kicked out of you a thousand times over the next seven months. You prove to her that you're not walking away."

Rogue went next.

"On top of that, you show up with flowers, your best *I'm an idiot* face, and hope that the lethal killer has mercy on you because she doesn't have to let you help. While the baby is biologically yours, she can disappear tomorrow, and you'll never know where it is."

That made him sick to his stomach, and they all saw it.

Maybe Dakota could save this.

Jagger didn't hold back.

"You're also going to bring tools, and put some baby furniture together. The women dig when the baby daddy actually is useful. Then, you're going to let her tell you what she wants, not you tell her what she needs. Because you lost that right when she asked you to tell her to stay, and you let the door hit her in the ass on the way out."

He stared at them.

"Is this legit advice? Because you yelled at your wife because she wasn't blown up, you drank for weeks because Cordelia died, and you," he said, pointing at Zayn. "You're a nightmare on a good day. You borderline lock Stella in the house and want to wrap her in bubble wrap."

Zayn laughed.

"None of what you just said is a lie, so I'm not offended by what you said about me."

Jagger knew how hard it was to eat crow. He'd done it a few times in his life, and ironically, every time with Maura. That's what love made you do.

"You tell her that you're in love with her. You don't play games going forward, and you be the man she wants and needs. You fucked this up, so you have to prove that is never

happening again. Adder might be retired, but she still has the same instincts. She can read a room.”

Rogue laughed.

“God. Mamba too. I lied to keep her off track on her Valentine’s Day present, and you’d think I was having an affair. She followed me to the drug store for vitamins.”

Dakota got it.

He had an idea or two that might help.

“Thank you. I’m going to do everything you said, and I’m going to stop pretending I don’t love her. I get it now. When your heart knows…”

“Oh, it knows,” Jagger said. He recalled being in love with Maura for so long before he lucked out.

“Thank you for being my family.”

And just like that, he was forgiven.

That’s what your brothers did. They let you be a jackwagon and loved you anyway.

To prove it, they pulled him up and hugged him.

As they did, he sighed.

“I’m sorry I hurt you guys and said I was leaving. I was a jerk.”

“Yeah, you were,” Rogue said. “Only, we forgive you.”

That was a blessing in itself.

Now, though, he was curious.

“I don’t know how to be a dad. How do you do it?” he asked since Jagger had two kids, Rogue had two kids, Boone had two, and Zayn had three.

Well, two and one on the way.

They clued him in.

“You just keep showing up, let the woman vent, and no matter what she says, you just be there.”

“Throw snacks at her. The months four through eight are the feeding months, and boy, do they get hangry,” Zayn admitted.

That was good to know.

“And if she doesn’t want me anywhere near her?” Dakota asked.

That was a simple answer.

“Then you get a paternity test, pay your child support, and you still show up,” Jagger said. “See the pattern here? **YOU. SHOW. UP.**”

He got it.

Boone had to point out one thing.

“Uh, and as a side note, you aren’t getting one kid with Eve. You’re getting two kids. How do you feel about Violet?” he asked.

He didn’t hesitate.

“Package deals are a good thing. Look at you dickwads. I can’t shake one of you let alone the rest of you.”

And there it was.

The old Dakota was there under the asshole one.

“I’ll be her dad too. I don’t mind. Like Zayn says, once you have one kid, the next ten are not a problem.”

“Spoken like a father,” the man said.

Well, now that the hug-fest was over, he had work to do to get the woman to stop hating him.

And he had a plan.

“Okay.”

He looked at his watch.

“I know we’re supposed to go out and do something,” he said. “Elizabeth wouldn’t be here had it not been about Chevy.”

Jagger nodded.

“It was.”

That brought up something else.

“Can you do it without me until I talk to Eve?” he asked. “Then, I’ll jump back in.”

“Man, we could use Adder back,” Zayn said, busting his ass because it felt good to do it again.

Dakota blinked.

“Don’t even put that out there. She’s pregnant!” he said.

They all laughed.

“I know. Sucks, huh?” Zayn asked. “Maybe you assholes won’t suggest my wife carrying a gun then. It’s not funny when your wife is armed.”

Jagger shrugged.

“I disarmed mine just fine in the bathroom,” he admitted.

That made them laugh.

Oh, they suspected.

“We got this,” Rogue said. “Make up with the Snake, and then come home.”

“I can do that.”

Then, Rogue reminded him about what Elizabeth had told him earlier. Sue him.

They’d been eavesdropping.

They were a bunch of nosey bitches.

“She has her doctor’s appointment tomorrow to get an ultrasound. Jinx said she was nervous. Maybe you should be there with her.”

Oh, he would be.

“I will keep showing up,” he said. “Even if she tries to ditch me. I’ll sleep in the park and follow her.”

Yeah, that was the right answer.

“Oh, my God! He learns,” Zayn said.

Dakota gave him a kiss on the mouth, freaking the man out.

“What the hell, Dude! I don’t know where your mouth has been. That’s like Jagger jumping the Major in the bathroom. There could be spunk everywhere!”

Jagger was accustomed to being the target of Zayn’s antics.

And he liked it.

“Get a black light, germaphobe,” he said, smacking him in the body armor. “I’ve marked my territory and you’ll never know where.”

Zayn looked horrified.

“Yeah, there too,” he said, pretending to read his mind.

Dakota would love to hang out and laugh with them, but he had a woman to get to forgive him, and that was a huge-ass task.

“Okay, I’ll check in later.”

He paused.

“She’s not in danger, right?” he asked. “This morning was just you setting me up, correct?”

They all nodded.

“Nope. She’s hidden. Make sure she stays that way,” Rogue said.

Immediately, he relaxed.

He was glad.

“We’re heading out to shake down some cops. Check-in,” Jagger said. “And bring tools and snacks—like we told you.”

He got it.

“Thanks, guys.”

Zayn wasn't done.

“Can I make one last suggestion?” he asked.

“Sure,” Dakota said.

“Before you stick your dick in her **AGAIN**, marry the lady. Because with your track record, you're going to do something dumb as fuck, and she's going to kill you.”

He stared at him.

Then, shrugged.

“Okay. I'll marry her as soon as I can get her to say yes to me.”

They all stared at him.

*What?*

*The?*

*Hell?*

Who was this new man?

Zayn fell over again, but this time, it was because Jagger shoved him into the fountain before he could say something smart.

Dakota laughed.

“See you guys later.”

Oh, they would. Hopefully, when he told them all about it, the story didn't start with *'I fucked this up'*.

**AGAIN.**

When he left, they headed in, and the ladies were working on their plans.

It was time to get some shit done before this city went to the dogs again.

“What do we have?” Jagger asked as they snagged fresh coffee, and got ready for an update.

Maura clued him in.



“Well, we called the precinct. Two of the cops in the dossier from Elizabeth are partners, and they are at work together.”

Jagger sat beside his wife and knew she'd be using that to figure out a way to get to them.

“Okay, and do you have a plan?” he asked.

She smiled.

“Do you know me at all, Husband?” she asked. “Of course, I have one. This is my thing, after all.”

There was no doubt there.

“What is it?” Zayn asked.

Because they all needed to be in on this since this was a massive undertaking, Maura broke it down for them.

“Well, what if we put a call into the department where the cops work, make a fake missing person report, and have them come to our place to check on it?”

Rogue laughed.

“Our place?” he asked.

Maura smiled at him.

“Uh-oh. That's the '*Maura wants to do something crazy*' look, and now, it's pointed at me.”

Oh, he was right about that.

“Well, that is where you come in, Rogue. We need you to steal us a house.”

He laughed at first.

And then realized the Major was **NOT** kidding.

“Wait. You want me to steal you a whole house in the middle of the morning? With literally no time to plan anything? No time to do recon?”

Tommy laughed.

“This should be fun,” he joked.

Gene agreed.

“Yeah, Rogue. You can steal jewelry, but can you steal a whole damn house where we commit atrocities?”

He sputtered.

“Fun? Not for me, it won’t be,” he said. “That sounds like it won’t be fun at all. Some of you have some sick ideas about what is fun, and what is a pain in the ass. Stealing is an art. You just don’t steal a house in an hour.”

Jinx held his hand and reassured him.

“Don’t worry. I’ll steal it with you,” she said. “We can both go and *‘borrow’* the home.”

When she winked at him, he suddenly felt a whole lot better, and not because two thieves had an easier time. They didn’t. It was because his wife would be by his side, and that was where he liked her.

“Uh, well, that does sound better,” he admitted, as she wiggled her eyebrows lecherously at him.

Jagger laughed.

Oh, they all knew why Rogue was good with it, and for one reason only.

Jinx got him all hot and bothered.

The Playboy was going to have his hands full.

**Literally.**

“Well, go find us a house that we can *‘borrow’*, kill two cops in, and leave them to rot. That should keep you busy this morning.”

Tommy stopped laughing at the cop part.

“I really get queasy when you start killing cops. Can’t we give it a codename or something?”

Jagger got up, went to the wastepaper basket, and handed it to him.

“No. It is what it is. Use that for when you puke. Five cops are on the list, and they aren’t getting away. If they are

helping people sell women, they don't deserve mercy because they gave none to the victims."

Okay, he had a point.

An eye for an eye, and in this case, he was behind them on it.

From beside his fiancé, Gene wanted to point something out.

"While you're killing cops, what should the rest of us be doing?" he asked. "Playing cards? Tiddlywinks? What?"

That was easy.

They had to cover all of their bases.

"You're going to research the modeling agencies," Maura said. "If so inclined, go look at some pretty girls in skimpy clothes trying to become the next runway model, Gene."

He took the wastepaper basket from Tommy and clutched it to his body.

"All those tits. Now I feel queasy."

That made his fiancé laugh.

*And laugh.*

*And laugh.*

It was clear what team Gene was batting for, and it wasn't the tits team.

"Good answer," Tommy said, patting him on the thigh in reassurance. "You can do it."

He snorted.

When Maura went to get up, Jagger shoved her back down.

Then, he pointed at her.

"Nope. You're still dead. You can't go wandering around. Nice try though."

She stared at him.

Oh, and she wasn't amused.

"I've been dead for three months, J. It's not a lot of fun. If I don't get out, I'm going to go stir-crazy. Tommy isn't exactly a bunch of excitement."

"**HEY!**" the man said, laughing. "That's not exactly a compliment, Maura."

She smiled.

"Sorry?"

Yeah, he bet.

Jagger understood, but he couldn't risk it. Having Chevy focus on her, and gun for his wife? As he was trying to knock her up?

**PASS.**

Instead of arguing, he gave her a kiss.

That said it all.

Then, he continued.

"Remmy, head to The Underground when it opens, and see if Calyx has any intel," he said, tossing the man an envelope full of money.

That worked for him.

When Maura opened her mouth, again, he stopped her in her tracks.

"No."

"First, I'm not a child, and second, I outrank you, Captain. Think about it."

He winked at her.

"Let me have this one, Baby. You know how I like to be bossy. It's been a while since Mikey O' got to have any fun."

Oh, she was aware.

If he needed this, she'd let him have it.

“Carry on, Captain.”

Well, if she insisted.

Next, Jagger focused on Rogue and Jinx since they had to get moving so they could get this done.

“Call us when you procure a house. We’ll show up, and then lure the cops to come to us.”

That worked for Rogue.

What wouldn’t he do for some alone time with his wife? The bottom line was that he’d do just about anything.

He held out his hand for his wife, and immediately, she took it.

“Let’s get into our thieving clothes,” he said.

That’s all it took.

She grinned.

“If we find anything pretty...”

Jagger didn’t care.

“Steal it. You both heard what Elizabeth Blackhawk said. We are sanctioned to do anything to stop US citizens from being sold to foreign nations.”

That worked for them.

After all, who were they to argue with that? Certainly not them.

As they were sitting there, Maura needed to talk to Jagger alone. It was time to let him in on her plan, and then see if he thought it was doable.

She was worried, and that didn’t make her want to use that plan with this team.

“Do you have a minute, J?” she asked.

Well, that was all that he had to hear.

Immediately, he grinned.

**Wickedly.**

“I do believe I do.”

Maura shut that down right there. He’d had his wicked way with her three times today.

His libido was going to have to stay on the back burner for a while.

“It’s to talk, Mr. Armstrong. It’s about my plan. I need to discuss that with you,” she said.

From where he sat, Zayn laughed.

It was clear that he didn’t believe anything that she was saying. Who was he to question a husband manhandling his wife in a sexy little romp?

“Yeah, talk,” he said, snorting.

Maura rolled her eyes, but Jagger was right behind her, checking out her ass the entire time.

Someone needed to calm down.

Because she didn’t want anyone to hear what she was planning to do, they headed into their part of the house, the one he’d had redone for her.

In their kitchen, she sat.

Immediately, someone was disappointed.

“Oh, boy. You did mean talk. My dick is not amused,” he said. “In fact, he feels tricked.”

She laughed.

“I did tell you it was to talk,” she admitted, knowing she needed him on the same page with her.

*This plan...*

It worried her.

“Focus,” she said, patting the seat next to her.

Jagger heard the tone, and he knew this wasn’t going to be fun. He could count the times that he’d seen her worried about a plan, and they were few and far between.

Getting ready, he sat next to her.

“Okay, spring it on me, Baby.”

Well, she did just that.

She told him the plan, and the whole time, he said absolutely nothing.

When she told him about the danger, the risk, and ultimately how it could go wrong, Jagger still didn't say anything to her.

When she was done, he stared into her eyes and needed to know one thing.

“And our other options?”

She shook her head.

That was the problem.

There were none.

Well, none she could come up with.

“That's the problem. We can't find him, J. If we can't locate him within the next day, we have to move on this. It's a good solid plan. I just don't like the risk to half of the team. That's what worries me.”

He understood why she was hesitating. Honestly, if he was responsible for coming up with this, he would be too.

**No.**

**Doubt.**

To alleviate her fears, Jagger did what Jagger always did. He reassured her in his own way.

“I'll go and handle it.”

She hated this.

As someone who had to create the strategy, it meant risking people she loved, including him.

And that hurt.

As he faced her, Maura's silence said it all. Jagger continued.

“Me, Zayn, and Dakota, if he ever fixes his mess, are the best three. If we have to add a fourth person, then Boone. We’re the best men for this job.”

Her heart hurt.

Because she was the Major, and you didn’t ask anything of your team that you weren’t willing to do, she tried.

“I can...”

**Oh.**

**Hell.**

**No.**

Jagger shut that train of thought down immediately. There was no way.

**“NOT HAPPENING.”**

She tried again.

“Jagger.”

He laughed, and not a good laugh.

“You’re asking me to let my wife, who I just happened to watch get raped by El Gato’s guerillas, do this? Did you hit your head today? Did the sex knock the sense out of you? Because you’re testing my tenacity with volunteering. I’ll legit cry, Mar.”

She knew he was going to say that.

“But I’m the target.”

He stopped her.

In fact, he hopped out of the chair, pulled her against him, and found her mouth with his. It wasn’t so much to silence her but to get that bone-chilling fear to let go of him.

As she held onto her husband, the kiss said it all.

It was hot.

**Scorching.**

Oh, and proprietary.



When he broke it, he stared into her eyes and was honest with his wife.

“You’ll have to do the hard part,” he said. “You’re going to have a far more difficult time than we will. Focus on that, and leave the rest to me.”

She wanted to cry.

Even putting him in danger, or the rest of the family, terrified her to no end.

She’d had to watch and listen countless times as the men who served under her were tortured, abused, and hurt because of their mission.

That was one of the reasons she’d gladly gotten out to guard Oracle.

It was safer.

“Jagger, you know I wouldn’t plan this unless I had no other choice. We’re going on three months, and with each woman taken, sold off, and killed...”

He was aware.

“I know, Baby. Let’s just hope everything goes as planned, and it doesn’t blow up in our faces.”

She hoped not.

Because this plan could get people killed.

The people she loved.

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## *Chapter Six*

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*The Showdown*

*Eve Knight's Home*

*The Other Chartres Street*

**K**now what was humbling? Standing in front of someone's home, knowing you were about to be handed your ass, but still having to do it because it was the right thing to do.

Dakota was well aware that was going to be the outcome, and honestly, he wasn't looking forward to it.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

There was no way this was going to end well, and he was smart enough to know he was the underdog in this fight.

*Did he deserve it?*

**Yes.**

*Was he ready for it?*

**Absolutely.**

Now, this was about just facing it.

Before he headed here, he thought about the dream, and something she'd said. It was about the penitent man, and how he'd get the family.

So, Dakota was going that route.

He'd jacked this up, seven ways to Sunday, and he needed to be the one who took one for the team. If he wanted a chance at seeing his child, the one he just found out about, he had to do this right.

There would be only one chance.

And he knew it.

As he walked up the steps, he took a deep breath and rang the doorbell. That one act took every ounce of courage that he could muster.

That bone-chilling fear filled him, as he waited for his punishment for his past actions.

**It.**

**Was.**

**Torture.**

After about a minute, he suspected that Eve saw him on camera, and wasn't going to answer. It wasn't like he could blame her.

*Right?*

He'd been an asshole, treated her like nothing more than a sexual outlet, and then told her to leave.

If she opened the door and punched him in the face, he deserved that, and so much more.

Well, that seemed about right.

Only, when she opened the door, proving she was a better person than him, his heart...

It hurt.

With her dark hair and those piercing aqua eyes, they were the same ones in his dream.

Only, he saw the pain in them.

Eve Knight was damaged, and that had been his doing. He'd broken her.

Like the world had.

That sadness hurt his heart in ways that he couldn't even articulate. In his dreams, she looked at him in love.

*Now, there was fear.*

*Now, there was anger.*

*Now, there was nothing.*

He didn't miss that she closed her sweater, covering her body from him.

It was clear she didn't want him to know what they'd created.

**God.**

How he wished he told her to stay, so she could be surrounded by people who would protect her. Instead, he'd been a bastard.

**Again.**

When she tucked away the small baby bump, he wasn't shocked.

This wasn't going to end well.

**He.**

**Could.**

**Tell.**

Finally, she broke the silence.

“Dakota? What are you doing here?” she asked, her heart thumping in her chest. When she saw him on the camera, she'd nearly stroked out.

She'd prayed he'd come to save her, but she knew that wouldn't happen. Honestly, she needed more. She needed a man who wouldn't break her, and Dakota...

While she loved him, she knew the truth.

He was a risk she couldn't take.

A few times, before she found out she was pregnant, she wanted to go back to help The Hunters. Then, she found out about her child, three days ago, and she knew she'd never see any of them again.

He found his courage.

“I just stopped by. I wanted to see how you and Violet were.”

She stared at him.

Eve tried desperately not to cry. She hoped this wasn't some jacked-up booty call. That would crush her. She was well aware that all he wanted from her was sex, and she'd never be more.

Eve was **NOT** getting back on that ride.

There was no way.

She had a child to consider.

Well, two children.

"How did you know I was here?" she asked, watching his face.

He laughed sardonically.

"Well, a funny thing happened this morning. I was in the park, and I looked over, and you were there. I thought it was me imagining things."

Eve didn't detect a lie. Earlier, she'd felt someone watching her after the delivery guys left. She'd just not known who. Honestly, she thought it was Chevy, and that freaked her out.

She'd been making escape plans all day, in case someone came here.

Before she could answer, Violet came to the door, and she smiled out at him.

"Dakota!" she said. "You came to visit!"

Yeah, he had.

It wasn't lost on him that in three months, Violet had changed. She'd become happy, safe, and filled out. She looked like a normal sixteen-year-old.

Eve had done good.

It looked as if his family was right.

Eve would make a good mother. She'd done right by a broken child, healing her.

“Hey, Kiddo. I have something for you. I didn’t forget,” he said, pulling out the biggest container of berries he could find.

She laughed.

Violet would never say no to berries. They were her favorite. She just polished off a container earlier, and her mom was going to get her more.

“Thanks. I could use a snack,” she admitted.

He handed it to her.

Eve needed to protect the three of them.

“Violet, go inside,” Eve said. “Please.”

It must have been the tone because the child didn’t argue.

“Okay, Mom,” she said. “It was good seeing you, Dakota. Bye.”

That hurt his heart.

Dakota knew the truth.

Eve didn’t want him near Violet, her, or the baby she was carrying.

The dead silence was uncomfortable, but he earned every single second of it.

“Anyway,” he said, trying to build back what he’d destroyed three months ago. The kicker was that he’d had it all, and he never knew it. “I looked over, and you were getting deliveries for a baby.”

She shut that down.

“You must be mistaken.”

He expected as much.

Dakota took the advice of his friends and kept showing up. Oh, he wanted to run, but he wanted a second chance more.

“I know you’re pregnant, and I know the baby is mine, Eve. You should have called me.”

*Why?*

So she could be told it was a mistake? So that she could be told he didn’t want the child?

**OR HER?**

**Pass.**

There had been enough of that bullshit her whole life, and she wasn’t moving forward with that. Eve wanted more for her children.

She wanted a good life for them, and Dakota, the man she’d slept with, wasn’t that person.

He was filled with hate, anger, and rage. She needed someone who understood, and wanted to build something. It didn’t have to be perfect, but he’d have to try.

Dakota Rakin was not a ‘*try*’ kind of guy. He was way too angry over his dead wife.

Because this was her turf, she stood her ground. In the back of her head, she realized that they might need to move on and leave the city.

Which sucked because she’d miss Jinx.

“Actually, Dakota, it’s not yours. It’s mine.”

That said it all.

How could he argue that?

He couldn’t.

“You’re right. It is. I just figured you might need some help putting furniture together, and I’m pretty handy with tools. I’d like to help.”

Honestly, she did need help.

While she could kill, hide, and defend, she didn’t know the difference between a bolt, screw, or wrench. That was not in her wheelhouse.

Only, she needed to know one thing.

“Are you stalking my house?” she asked.

He wished.

Stalking wouldn't get his heart handed to him like this would. Being this close to her, and knowing that he royally fucked it up...

That stung.

He loved her.

He couldn't believe it happened so fast, but when she left three months ago, he missed her.

*Eve's scent.*

*Her smile.*

*Her sarcasm and Marine antics.*

Seeing her again brought it all back, and was a reminder that he was the odd man out—out of her life.

“Again, no. I was getting a coffee, and walking through Jackson Square and saw you standing here in all black. I would have come up to you, but let's face it. We didn't say goodbye on good terms. I didn't want to get punched in the balls in a public street.”

Ehhh, that was probably for the best. When he told her to *'have a good life'*, she'd wanted to do just that.

“You didn't say goodbye on good terms. I begged you to tell me to stay. For the record, I would have. I would have stayed on that team, and I would have stayed by your side. I believe it was all you when you told me *'to have a good life'* and let me go.”

**Ouch.**

Well, never let it be said a Marine and woman wouldn't call your shit out because this one certainly was.

And he didn't blame her.

Dakota kept fighting for her.



He kept showing up, even knowing he didn't have a leg to stand on.

"I'm not here to fight. I just want to help you. I'm good with tools," he said. "I'll put the crib together, and then you won't have to. That's all. No strings attached. I promise."

Eve was smart enough to know that she needed help. When Jinx had the furniture sent to her, a gift from her and Rogue, she never said she'd have to build it.

Maybe letting him help wouldn't be horrible.

She went back into the house, and he fully expected the door to be slammed in his face. He did kind of deserve it. He'd been a douchebag to her.

When she turned, he held his breath.

"Come on in. The crib is in the nursery, and I don't know where to begin. Thank you for the help."

He didn't want her thanks.

He wanted to go back and redo everything. He wanted to tell her to stay.

Instead of saying shit, he followed her inside, surprised he was even being invited in. Not far into the house, they found Violet sitting at a big piano, eating berries as she was practicing.

When she glanced over, she smiled.

"Thanks for the snack."

"Do you play the piano?" he asked, trying to make small talk that wouldn't get him kicked out or killed.

"I'm learning to play," Violet said. "Mom said she wishes she learned. It's kinda fun. I'm not really good at it yet."

He smiled even though his heart hurt.

Dakota realized that he could have been part of this. He played the piano and would have gladly taught her.

“I know how much fun it is. I can play. My stepfather was a music teacher,” he admitted. “He taught me.”

Violet gasped.

“You can play? I know Mary Had A Little Lamb but that’s all,” she said. “What can you play?”

He shrugged.

“Stuff.”

That was all the little girl had to hear.

Eve really hoped that he wasn’t lying. She’d protect Violet to the death.

Violet slid over.

“Can you play for me,” she said, patting the baby grand piano bench.

He glanced over at Eve.

“Do you mind?” he asked. “I won’t if you don’t want me to.”

Honestly, she was curious.

Well, about this and a lot of stuff.

“No, go ahead. Violet has found that she loves music and instruments.”

“It’s a good outlet,” he said. “When I was upset as a teenager, I’d play to get the anger out, or if I was sad.”

She said nothing.

Only, she wanted to hear what he’d play.

Because she’d said it was okay, Dakota sat down, and he rolled up his sleeves.

Then, the second his fingers touched the keys, the hauntingly beautiful song floated from his fingers as if he was masterfully creating it.

It was full of sadness.

**Pain.**

**Hurt.**

**And loss.**

It wasn't lost on her why he was playing that particular song. She was feeling all of that too.

Dakota played for a few minutes, and then when the song was over, he stopped.

Immediately, Violet began clapping.

"That was the most beautiful song I've ever heard," she said. "Can you teach me?" she asked.

God.

He wanted to.

Dakota wanted more than the life he had, and until now, he didn't realize it was a family. That was the part that was missing. He hadn't wanted one with Sarah.

He wanted one with Eve.

He could picture teaching Violet, and then maybe the child Eve carried.

"If your mother says it's okay, then I can. If not, you need to listen to her. She knows best."

That was an answer Eve respected. Someone wasn't the same man. She could see that he felt bad.

As he should.

"Bach," Eve said.

He nodded.

"Yes."

Violet was impressed.

"How long did you play? Do you play often? Can you show me the music?"

He laughed at her enthusiasm and made sure to answer each question. Someone was a curious child.

That he got too.

“Since I was ten, I don’t play often since we don’t have a piano at the Hunter house, and I’ll get you the music so you can learn. I’ll drop it off tomorrow.”

Eve hated that she’d been mesmerized by his fingers on those keys. Clearly, there was a lot she didn’t know about this man.

Violet wasn’t done.

“Can I come over to see everyone?” she asked. “I miss Stella and Jinx. I miss Tommy too. He makes the best cookies. Sorry, Mom. His are just really good.”

Eve laughed.

“No hurt feelings, Violet. I suck at baking,” she admitted.

When she laughed, Dakota’s heart skipped in his chest at the sound.

He missed that too.

“We are only two blocks away, so if your mom will let you, you can visit us anytime. Just let us handle a few things we’re working on, so it’s safe.”

Eve lifted a brow.

She wasn’t sure if he was trying to be cautious or not let Violet go there.

“Chevy?” she asked.

He nodded.

“We haven’t found him. He’s gone deep, and we’re not winning this one.”

She got it now.

“When they find the bad guy, you can go,” Eve said. “We have to be safe.”

That made her happy.

“Can I really, Mom?” she asked.

Eve gave the mother’s reply.

“We’ll see.”

That told Dakota everything he needed to know. The woman wasn’t going to make this easy, and he didn’t expect her to.

Suddenly, he didn’t want to be there. His heart really hurt, and he had so many regrets. Only, his friend’s words stuck with him.

**Do.**

**Not.**

**Run.**

“Where is the crib? I’ll start putting it together for you, so Violet can keep practicing.”

That worked for Eve.

She headed deeper into the beautiful home, and Dakota said nothing as he followed until he saw the sunny rooms and the beautiful artwork.

The house...it was beautiful. It was filled with pretty things, and definitely a home that two women would be comfortable in.

It was also very calm. That was something that Dakota envied. He didn’t feel calm anywhere.

When she noticed him taking it all in, she was curious.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

She knew what she, herself, was pondering. Eve hated that he looked good here. She hated that this man, full of rage and anger, didn’t look out of place in this space.

“Just that you have a beautiful home.”

“Thank you.”

“It reminds me of you. It’s very calm and collected. The artwork is beautiful.”

Funny, she didn’t feel that way. For the last three days, she felt like she was in a freefall. Then, she looked at security and saw him at the door.

Talk about shocking.

“It’s a place to call our own. Violet picked it out, and we fancied it up. She likes art, and Doctor Gaines said to let her surround herself with what she likes. It’s very healing for her.”

“I’m glad. She did a good job picking. It reminds me of both of you.”

Eve said nothing else.

Instead, she wanted him to do his thing and leave. She didn’t think seeing him was good for her. He’d not said the most important thing.

That he’d fucked up.

Because he had.

“The room is here,” she said, walking him in.

When he got into the room, he knew it was a nursery—or would be soon enough.

On the wall, there were paint swatches.

There was no doubt that she would be a good mother. It was funny how with Sarah, he always said no because he didn’t think she’d be able to mother anyone.

Was that why he was so anti-kids?

In here, he could see that Eve was being very maternal, making sure their child had a good start.

Now, he was curious.

“When do you find out the gender of the baby?” he asked.

Eve didn’t lie.

“Tomorrow.”

Dakota didn’t push.

He was lucky she was even letting him see the inside of their house to help put their child’s crib together.

Heading to the box with the picture of the crib, he pulled a knife out, and carefully sliced it open.

“It won’t take me long. I’m good with my hands.”

Oh, she recalled.

And that was the problem.

“Thanks for helping me.”

He smiled at her, wishing to every deity known to mankind that she’d forgive him.

“No worries, Eve. It’s the least I can do. You’re growing a child. I’ll put the things together for you to help out, and anything else you need from me.”

Yeah, about that.

“What are you doing, Dakota?” she asked.

He kept working as he tried to figure out an answer to that question. Honestly, he wasn’t sure. His brothers told him to keep showing up, and he would, but he wasn’t sure this would work.

**She.**

**Was.**

**Pissed.**

He began putting the crib together before he answered her question.

“I’m trying to be your friend. Everyone needs someone.”

And there it was.

“Jinx told you.”

He shook his head.

“No, she absolutely never told me about you being here. Like I said, I saw you from the park, and let’s just say it was a shock.”

“Yeah, well, it was for me too when I saw you on my doorstep.”

“I bet. I can’t believe you’ve been down the street for three months.”

Her response was curt.

“Yep.”

He kept trying.

“You should have told us where you were. We could have helped you.”

And that was the end.

The anger cascaded over her.

Seeing him pissed her off.

*Why?*

Because she still felt every single thing she had before at that moment.

She loved him.

**God!**

She had feelings for him that she’d never had in her whole life, and likely never would again. Eve had wanted to find him so many times, especially the last three days.

But he wouldn’t hurt her again.

**EVER.**

“Why bother telling you? You told me to have a good life. You told me that I was just sex. You wanted nothing to do with me. Why would I call you and tell you anything, Dakota? You made it clear that I was nothing to you.”

Dakota saw this escalating.

The last thing he wanted was to make her upset or to lose any ground he’d gained.

“I’m sorry I brought it up. I’ll just put this together,” he said, seeing that this might have been a tactical error on his behalf.

Adder was riled up.



## **BIG-TIME.**

And she deserved to be.

“I’ll leave you to it,” she said, angrily. “Because I’ve had a rough enough week. Let’s just say I didn’t expect to find out my birth control failed, and that I was going to carry the baby of a man that I...”

She stopped.

She wasn’t going there.

Then, like he tended to do, she walked out so she didn’t have to deal with the emotions.

All the way to the kitchen, she tried not to cry, and it was damn hard.

Seeing him hurt.

It hurt to the deepest part of her soul. She was carrying a child they’d made, and she knew her luck was going to be that it was a boy, and she’d raise a child that looked just like him.

She’d be forced to see his face and his eyes for the rest of her life—and remember.

That was going to hurt every day.

The worst part was that it also made her heart skip a beat. There was nothing she craved more than that man, and having him be hers.

She hated that he still made her want him when he clearly was only here because he found out about the baby.

**Not her.**

**The child.**

Again, she meant nothing to him.

In her airy kitchen, she poured some decaf and took a deep breath to try and get into control.

Over the last three months, she and Violet were going to therapy. Violet for the abuse, and her for the abandonment issues.

She was working on the rage too.

Now, it was all coming back because she missed him, and here he was, putting her crib together.

**HER CRIB for HER BABY.**

As she was standing there, it dawned on her that she no longer heard the piano music playing.

What was Violet doing?

Of course, she had to investigate.

As she reached the living room, Violet was gone, but her berries were not.

That's when she heard them talking from down the hall where the nursery was.

As she approached, she listened to them talk—telling herself that she was making sure he didn't upset Violet. Then, she'd have a reason to kill him.

Only, that's not what she heard.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

"I bet you're excited about having a sibling," Dakota said as he worked on the crib.

Violet sat beside him and held the directions. He didn't need them, but he didn't want to be alone. When he was alone, the thoughts consumed him.

Ethan Blackhawk had been right.

He had been planning to leave so he could die alone.

"I kinda am. It's been great with mom, but...I want a friend. It's tough out there. With a brother or sister, I get backup."

Dakota listened.

"Do you have siblings?" she asked.

“Nope, but I have the men I became friends with. Zayn, Jagger, Rogue, Boone, Gene, and Tommy are like brothers. Sometimes, you have to make your family. It’s not always blood.”

“Mom says that.”

“Your mother is very wise.”

Because he liked having Violet around, he pulled a candy bar from his messenger bag and handed it to her.

“I don’t have a lot of friends,” she said. “It’s awkward. I’m not ready yet. Like I said, it’s tough out there.”

Oh, he was aware.

“I know it’s tough out there, Violet, but when you’re ready, there are people who will help you.”

She appreciated that.

“What happened to your face?” she asked. “Did someone punch you?”

He laughed.

“Yeah, you could say that. I had my ass handed to me today by Elizabeth Blackhawk,” he said, pointing to his eye and the lump on his head. “I’m running a little low on friends myself.”

“Uh-oh. What happened?” she asked. “She’s pretty nice. I can’t imagine she got angry.”

He laughed.

“Kiddo, she got hella angry with a side of bitch slappy. Oops. I should probably not curse in front of you.”

She laughed.

“Mom dropped a bowl in the kitchen, and she said about ten curses in a row,” she admitted. “It was impressive.”

He tried not to grin.

“I bet.”

Violet called him out on his shit.

“My therapist says that what you just did is deflecting. What did you do to make her angry?” she asked.

He was honest.

“I did something stupid. I got angry, and I’ve been propagating that stupidity for over three months. Everyone is just about sick of my crap, Violet. Elizabeth especially. I needed to be humbled, and she’s like the sword of God. She’ll knock you on your ass to do just that.”

“Bad, huh?”

He kept working as she held the directions.

“Yeah, bad. I shit all over my friends. I blamed them for my mistakes. I told them I was leaving. I was an all-around jerk.”

Violet handed him the tools.

“Why were you leaving?” she asked. “You said they were like your family.”

He laughed.

Yeah, well, he wished he knew.

“Do you want the long or short version?” he asked. “One has me crying, and one doesn’t.”

“Cry. I like making men weep. Go with the long version.”

He winked at her.

“A girl after my own heart,” he said, and then told her because she deserved to know. The baby her mother was carrying was his son or daughter, and he would stick around.

**Hell.**

He’d take care of Violet too.

A lot had changed for him in a few hours.

“I was married to this girl, and she came to *New Orleans* to follow me, and it made her into something she had no control over. When her father was murdered, she snapped and started killing people. Because of me, and her following

me here, she died. I've blamed myself for the last year. I feel guilty for so much in my life."

She rubbed her hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Violet. I'm working through it. We all have to find our way."

That she understood.

"Me too. I think I've found my way."

As she unwrapped her candy bar, he kept working.

"You look happy. I'm so glad you are. You deserve to be safe."

She smiled.

"Callista says that your past is your past. You have to let go of it. I'm not a whore. I'm Violet, and I'm a good person."

He stopped working.

"You were never a whore. You were a child that men took advantage of. You were a child who got lost in the shuffle. If anything, Violet, they are to blame. Your past is not your burden to carry."

She rested her head on his shoulder.

"Thank you for that."

"If anyone says otherwise, come find me. I'll hunt them down, and I'll hurt them. You are perfect as you are. You fought to get out, and that makes you amazing. You're strong, Violet, and I'm proud of you," he admitted.

"Thanks, Dakota. I needed to hear that. It's nice to be able to be around a guy and not be fearful."

"I will never hurt you, Violet. I won't hurt your mother or that baby. I'd protect the three of you. I promise."

She shared half of her candy bar.

“I’m sorry that you don’t look happy. Your heart is hurting too, isn’t it?”

What could he say to that?

This was a huge lesson to learn for him.

### **Humility.**

Of course, he was going to be a dick, finally find a woman he was worried about but could protect herself, and he pissed her off.

### **OF.**

### **COURSE.**

He explained.

“I don’t deserve that happiness right now. I made a mistake, and I’ll pay for it. Unfortunately, that’s how life is.”

She knew why he was putting a crib together.

“The baby is yours, isn’t it?” she asked. “My mom wouldn’t tell me, but I know you two had a thing. When Aunt Jinx was here, they were talking about you. I heard them.”

What to say?

He went with the truth.

“Yeah. The baby is mine.”

She was curious.

“And you don’t want it?”

He laughed sardonically.

“Here’s the craziest thing, Violet. I didn’t want kids until I found out I had one, and that there wasn’t a snowball’s chance in Hell that I could be part of its life. I’m an idiot. I missed my chance, and I know it. Now, it’s just about trying to be there for your mom, you, and the baby.”

That surprised her.

“Why me?” she asked. “I’m not your kid.”

Again, he was honest.

She was sixteen, not four.

“Because the baby your mom is carrying is my child, and your sister or brother. Why would I only take care of my child? Of course, I’m going to take care of my child’s sister. That’s how I roll. When we made a baby, we created ties from Eve to me, from me to you, and from you to that baby. Like I said. You tell me what you need, and I’ll make sure it’s done.”

Oh, she was listening from outside the nursery.

*Was it wrong?*

**Yes.**

And Eve hated that he was sweet.

She could read a room, and he wasn’t bullshitting Violet in the least. She heard his voice and the pain. This was the other side of Dakota.

She’d seen the broken side and The Hunter side.

Now, she was seeing the man he could be.

Violet lowered her voice.

“You didn’t hear it from me, but she misses you. I think you should keep trying. Mom...she’s angry now, but I know she cries at night.”

That broke his heart.

He took the wrench she was holding.

“I cry a lot too. As for Eve, I miss your mom. Only, I made a bad choice, and now I have to pay the consequences. I’m fifty, Violet, and I hope you learn that young. It sucks to get that life lesson at my age. Make good choices so you’re not in this position.”

They didn’t speak for a good ten minutes as they put the rest of the crib together. When they were done, they slid it up against the wall.

“Well, that wasn’t too bad,” he said. “You make a good handywoman assistant.”

“We did good,” she admitted.

Then, she was curious.

“What are you hoping it will be?” she asked. “The baby’s gender?”

He didn’t hesitate.

“Mine. I hope it will be mine.”

That’s when the tears came, and he knew he needed to go. He’d come back later. He’d sit outside her house to make sure she was okay.

But for now, he couldn’t hold the emotions back.

He’d been an asshole when he told his friends that kids weren’t a good idea. Twenty minutes with Violet, and having her help him showed him something.

That kids were the reason for it all.

She saw him get upset.

“I’m sorry you’re hurting. I’m sorry she’s hurting. What can I do?” she asked.

He wiped his eyes on his sleeve.

“Well, you can take good care of her when I’m not here,” he said.

“Are The Hunters hunting?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Yeah, we’re still trying to find some missing women, and we’re going to hit a lead today. As for you, though, I want to give you something.”

He pulled out a burner phone, and on it was his number, Jagger’s number, and Maura’s.

“If you need me, or any of The Hunters, call this number, or if you can’t call, head there. You were at the office before, but now, it’s much nicer. We fixed it up.”

She recalled.

“Anyway, tell your mom the crib is done. I’m going to head back so I can go out with the team.”



“You’re running,” she said. “Doctor Gaines said you can only run so long.”

“She’s right. Only, I’m done running. Now, I’m just going to go to work. The Hunters need me. We’re not doing well against this bad guy. He’s winning, and it’s all-hands-on-deck.”

Eve didn’t like that he was going out distracted. She really didn’t like it at all.

She knew what could happen.

He could die.

Suddenly, making him suffer didn’t sound like such a good thing.

It scared her.

“Give your mom this,” he said, handing her a note. “I’m going to go. I don’t want to upset her when she’s pregnant, but like I said, I’ll be back. If you guys need us, head to the house two blocks away.”

She felt bad for him.

So, she hugged him.

“Despite what you think, Dakota, you’d make a good dad. I hope you get what you’re wishing for.”

He kissed her on the top of the head.

“You and me both, Kiddo. You and me both.”

Saying nothing else, he grabbed his tools and headed out. So he wouldn’t know that she heard him, Eve tucked herself into the closest room.

When they heard the front door close, she finally reappeared.

“Are you okay?” Eve said, feeling emotional herself. That man did it to her.

“Yeah, I like him.”

She held out the note and stared into Eve’s eyes. She loved this woman, and she’d been the reason she healed.

“I know it’s not my business,” she began.

Eve stopped her.

“Anything that happens here is your business because we’re a family.”

*Well, then...*

She was curious.

With love, she put her hand on Eve’s little bump. It’s small yet, but it stood out because she was small.

“Is it his baby?”

Ah, she wasn’t shocked. She got right to the point.

“Yes.”

“Are you going to keep the baby from him?” Violet asked.

Eve had been told by Callista Gaines that if she lied to Violet, even to protect her, it would be damaging. So, she went with the truth.

“I don’t know.”

She offered her perspective, even though she wasn’t an adult, but instead, a child who grew up unloved.

“So this baby could have a Mom and Dad, and you’re not going to let it because you’re angry with him? Who are you trying to hurt? The baby? Him? Or you, Mom?”

Well, from the mouths of babes.

Eve didn’t answer because she didn’t have one.

Violet continued.

“That’s sad for the baby. I wish I had a Dad. Sometimes, I wonder if he ever knew I was around. When I was in the foster homes, I used to dream about him coming for me.”

Tears filled her eyes.

Eve’s too.

“I used to dream about that too,” she admitted. “And it never came true.”

**Ever.**

She took her hand in hers.

“Mom, don’t do it to the baby or him. You’re trying to teach me to be better than that. Don’t make this baby suffer when someone wants it. He really wants that child, and that baby is going to be so lucky. It will have both of its parents.”

That was all she said, and then, she gave her a hug before walking away.

Eve held that note, and she stared at the masculine handwriting on the outside.

It scared her to read it.

It terrified her that Dakota had been in her home and that Violet was right.

She would be punishing the baby.

Only, she’d still yet to hear him apologize in a way that she knew was genuine.

That’s all she wanted.

**Remorse.**

Despite her fear and anger, she opened the letter to read it.

*‘Dearest Evie,*

*I know you don’t want to hear it, but I owe you an apology. I hurt you, and that makes me a pretty shitty human being. I wish I could take it back, but I can’t. What I can do is help you take care of the child. I’m not leaving, and I’m not giving up. That’s the easy way, and one day, my child is going to ask about me, and I don’t want this baby to think I didn’t care. I do.*

*I won't push you or make you let me into the child's life, and maybe one day, you'll change your mind. I realized for the first time why I didn't want kids. I didn't think I could ever be a good father. I was scared that I'd fail, and damage someone else, but that doesn't matter. I'll keep trying. I'll be a failure, but I'll be a failure that keeps showing up.*

*That baby won't have to ask who daddy is. He or she will know because I'll always be there.*

*If you have a boy, I'll keep showing up at the games. I'll keep trying to teach him how to hunt or fish. I'll keep trying to be a man he can look up to, even when I know I disappointed you and wasn't the man you needed.*

*If it's a girl, I'll protect her. I'll take her to the daddy-and-daughter dances, and try not to humiliate her too much. I'll make sure she has gas money and a college education. I'll keep showing up, even though I dropped the ball and wasn't the man you deserved.*

*I made a mistake, and I'll pay for it. Only, I want you to know that when you need me, and on the day you give birth to the baby you carry, I'll be there if you want me to so you're not alone to do it. No one should be alone. Someone should love them enough to stand by them. I know that you don't think I realize how much you were there for me. I do know. You put your body over mine to shield me. You took a bullet for me.*

*You served in the military to protect.*

*I'll be there for you.*

*You know where to find me. If you need anything, even if it's pickles and ice cream at three in the morning, I'll bring it. My personal number is on the back. Anything you need, I'll get you.*

*I'm sorry that I negated what was between us. It was everything, and I never realized it until it was gone. I know I can't be that knight to save you now because you've moved on, but I'll be there for our child. I'll be the dad that baby deserves.*

*After all, the baby did nothing to deserve not having two people who love him or her.*

*I'll take care of you even if you can't forgive me. And if you never forgive me, I'll take care of this baby and Violet too. Because believe it or not, I understand now, and I'm sorry that when you told me to ask you to stay, I didn't. It's the biggest mistake of my life, and that's saying a lot because there have been so many of them.*

*And I'll pay for it.*

*Be safe, and if you need a ride to the doctor's tomorrow because I know I'm not that lucky that you'll let me be there, I'll drive you and sit in the car.*

*Anything you need.*

*I'll be there.*

*I'm sorry.*

*I know it's too late to say the words, but I need to. For you, for the baby, and for whatever happens going forward.*

*You weren't alone.*

*I love you and I'll always love you.*

*Dak.'*

As she saw the 'I love you' part, her heart thumped in her chest. What she never expected was a humbled Dakota. It was completely different than the fight she expected from him.

This was exactly what she'd wanted.

A man who could admit he'd made a mistake, and that what they'd had wasn't just sex.

**It was love.**

His words healed that hole.

*How could it not?*

Now, Adder, the protective half of her, had to make sure that Eve, the weaker half, would be safe. They were the same person, but they both had different roles.

Pulling out her phone, she made a call.

She needed to know the truth, and there was one person who would tell her.

When Mamba answered, she blurted into the phone, her heart racing, and her stomach a giant knot.

“Mamba, does he love me?” she asked.

Jinx had her phone on speaker.

Well, her husband had been right. He said that she’d be calling after Dakota showed up on her doorstep.

“Do you really want to hear that?” she asked, as her husband drove her to scope out a house to trick a bunch of cops to come to.

“Yes. He was here. He put a crib together, and he told me he loves me in a note. I don’t know if he’s just saying that to have access to the baby, or if he means it. I need to know if I get back on this ride is he going to walk? I have to protect this child, but I also have to protect me.”

“I can’t answer that since Dakota tells the men things he doesn’t tell me, but Rogue is right here. He can answer if you like.”

He shifted the car and waited.

“Yes, please.”

Rogue pulled no punches.

“Eve, he’s in love and has been since the day you two first had sex. That’s why he’s been fighting it. His heart said it was possible, but he overthinks **EVERYTHING**. Dakota doesn’t have random sexual encounters. He’s been celibate for three months. His first love was Elizabeth, and he has a close relationship with her. Then, he fell for Sarah, and we all know how that worked out.”

She listened.

“He’s only had sex with them. That’s it. Dakota doesn’t fuck and run, and he doesn’t lie. He is honest to a fault. He hates himself a lot, but he has a good heart.”

She heard him.

“So he loves me?”

“And that baby. When he found out, he tried to go after Mamba out of anger. If that’s not stupid in love, I don’t know what is.”

Eve gasped.

“And you didn’t kill him?”

She laughed.

“Elizabeth kicked his jean-wearing cowboy ass. She put him through a coffee table. It was beautiful.”

That explained what she’d overheard him telling Violet. Apparently, he didn’t lie.

Now, her heart was racing.

Before she decided on what could change both of their lives, she needed to spend time with him to see what he would do if she came back into his world.

Eve needed to make sure.

“What are you guys working on?” she asked, even though she already knew.

“We still haven’t found Chevy,” Jinx said. “We’re heading out to take care of some dirty cops.”

Again, he’d been honest.

She rolled her neck.

“Need me to come out of retirement?” she asked, suddenly feeling the need to protect Dakota. “You know how he gets shot. A lot. I’m asking because I need to see how he behaves. I need a trial run, and Adder can read a room better than Eve.”

She laughed.

Oh, Dakota was in for a shock.

Jinx would be glad to have her sister snake back, even if her husband was staring at her like she was insane.

**Eve.**

**Was.**

**Pregnant.**

Oh, Jesus.

Dakota was going to have the mother of all strokes. That was for damn sure.

Jinx went there, knowing a pregnant woman was a dangerous woman.

“I say yes, and I know the Major will too. She still can’t leave the house without worrying about being seen.”

“Rogue?” she asked. Eve wanted his opinion since he was one of Dakota’s brothers.

His wife was staring at him.

**WITH.**

**THE.**

**LOOK.**

“I say do it. This is going to stir Dakota up that the woman he’s nuts about and pregnant, is playing war games. If you want an honest reaction, then I say do it. I like when Dakota gets spicy. It’s like a telenovela.”

She laughed.

“Can I bring Violet there?” she asked. “Will she be safe?”

Rogue suddenly wished he was home to see his friend’s face when Adder was back and ready to do her job.

“Absolutely. Oh, and when you get there, and you see Dakota?”

“Yes?” she asked.



“Keep him guessing. In fact, ask him to marry you when he least expects it.”

Jinx laughed.

“What? Why?” Eve asked.

Rogue held up his fist, and his wife bumped it. It appeared that they were all working together to **FINALLY** get Dakota what he needed.

A good, solid relationship with a Marine who could kick his stubborn, hyper-masculine ass.

“Just do it. Trust me when I say that you won’t regret it.”

More importantly, neither would Dakota.

The man was a slow-as mover.

And his brothers were taking control.

**Effective...**

**NOW.**

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## *Chapter Seven*

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*New Orleans*

*House Hunt*

*Friday Noon*

Oh, one would think it was easy to just pick a house, and then abscond it for their mission, but it wasn't. The home had to be nice enough that the cops who showed up to work a potential case gave a shit, but not too nice that there were people who worked there.

It was a fine line.

The last thing that Rogue and Jinx wanted to do was to have to take out any housekeepers or staff. Killing innocent people was the opposite of their plan, so they had to be choosy.

So, they went for a midgrade option as they scoped it out.

They seemed to find a good choice.

It was a middle-class neighborhood, and the house was private enough as it was set back so they could make some magic happen.

By magic, they meant laying out the perfect crime.

They checked it out for a good thirty minutes before they were ready to move. The last step was scanning it.

Yeah, having Remmy onboard, with an infinite amount of CIA gadgets, was a damn helpful thing.

He came loaded for bear, and they were never saying no to that.

If they needed to block or bypass something, he was the man to come through with a new toy.

Since he moved in, they had a room full of tech, and no one was asking him where he got it from.

**NO.**

**ONE.**

Yeah, that was likely for the best. Sometimes, the less you knew, the better.

Besides, Zayn had asked once, and the man just laughed, shook his head, and said, '*you don't want to know*'. Which was pretty much like saying '*classified*' to Zayn.

Of course, he wanted to know.

He was a nosey old woman in a Native disguise.

Then again, maybe the ex-CIA-ex-FBI man said that for just that reason.

One would never know.

When it was time to approach the house, Rogue and his wife worked out the plan.

She would get access, just because she was a little nimbler when it came to breaking and entering. He was the tech guy and the planner. She was the doer.

It was how they got it done.

That was her thing, and he wasn't going to stop her.

*Why?*

It was incredibly hot watching her work.

Sue him.

He was a horny husband who wanted nothing more than to have sex with his gorgeous thief wife as much as he possibly could. After she'd birthed their son, he'd had to wait, and he understood why Jagger was following Maura around.

Being married was awesome.

On top of that, Mamba made his blood run hot.

**DAILY.**

**HOURLY.**

As he kept watch, she walked through the yard, blocking the cameras with the little black box in her pocket, and then, knocked on the door.

He held his breath and waited to see if anyone answered.

When no one did, he still didn't relax.

This was the mother of his children, and the last thing he wanted was for Peony and Sawyer to not have her in their life. Catching Chevy was paramount so that he could bring his family home for good.

When no one answered, and Jinx low-key looked into the windows, she glanced back at her husband, winked, and then got down to business.

She picked the lock, got inside in under ten seconds, and went right to the alarm box.

With another box, more CIA tech, she touched it to the screen, and numbers began scrolling.

It didn't take long.

When it showed the code, she punched it in, and the light went green.

It appeared that Remington had come through again.

She pulled out her phone and texted her husband to keep him updated.

Jinx knew he worried about her, and she didn't dislike feeling loved like that. Rogue was a damn good husband and father.

***'It's quiet in here. I'm going to do a quick walkthrough. I'll leave the door open. You're clear.'***

Then, she hit send and got down to work. The last thing she wanted was for them to be ambushed.

**Pass.**

Jinx headed upstairs and looked around. She could hear the door downstairs open, and she paid it no mind. She knew her husband's footsteps anywhere.

As she headed into the master suite, that's when she saw the big painting over the fireplace.

Yeah, she was betting behind it would be one of her favorite things.

**A safe.**

She simply couldn't help herself.

She had a thing for pretty sparklies, and the propensity to do grand theft larceny.

Spraying her hands with another of Remmy's gifts, she felt her skin tighten on her fingers, distorting her fingerprints. Oh, she wasn't in the registry since she was a Snake, but she wasn't taking any chances.

One nosey cop and that would be up. It was best to leave nothing behind.

Her DNA and her husband's were wiped, but one fingerprint could tie other crime scenes together, and between them, they committed a lot of theft.

That was their weekly date night.

The loot helped the family out, keeping them in business. They were doing good with it.

As she cracked the safe, she knew she had eyes on her. Jinx had an uncanny ability to know when she was being watched.

*And by who.*

"One second," she said. "I almost have it."

Oh, Rogue didn't mind watching his wife work. He was staring at her ass in those black leggings, and he liked

what he saw.

**Curves.**

What made him chill out was that he'd found a travel itinerary on the downstairs desk. The people who owned this house weren't due back until Monday.

They had time.

"Do your thing," he said. "We have plenty of time, my sexy thief."

Oh, she would.

So, she did just that.

Jinx worked on cracking the safe by pulling out her earbuds, and a modified box to hear the tumblers.

They rolled, and the telltale click gave her the combination.

When she opened the safe, she grinned.

"Paydirt."

Rogue headed her way, putting his hand on her ass as she stood on the chair to reach the safe.

He'd be lying if he said he wasn't turned on by his wife and her thievery skills.

**It.**

**Was.**

**Hot.**

"What's in there?"

She pulled out a box and opened it.

Inside, there had to be fifty gold coins in pristine condition.

She showed him.

"At one thousand dollars a pop, that's a haul," he said, picking one up and enjoying the cool feel between his fingers.

She agreed.

Pulling a loot bag from her pocket, she dumped them in. Then, kept digging.

There was jewelry and cold hard cash.

“I hope they don’t come home,” she said, pulling out a family album filled with a real treasure.

### **Family memories.**

“They are on vacation. We’re good. Let’s get ready,” he said, as he helped his wife off of the chair. When she slid down his body, she knew he was turned on.

“Someone likes watching his wife.”

Rogue held her against him.

“Someone’s wife is deliciously diabolical, and it gets him crazy watching her work. I have a thing for a Mamba. I can’t help myself.”

She kept her body against his.

Because she had a thing for a half-Native man with quick fingers and gorgeous eyes.

“Do you now, Mr. Ravenscroft?”

He had no intention of going there, but he just couldn’t help himself. There was something so erotic about having a woman who shared the same *‘hobbies’*.

Rogue just wanted a kiss, and he told himself that would be it.

Only, he knew this was dangerous territory. Kissing his wife gave him such joy, and it often led elsewhere.

### **To sex.**

Well, that was a risk he was willing to take.

Sliding his hand into the back of her hair, he found her braided ponytail and stared into her eyes.

“My wicked, wicked wife.”

She closed the gap, bringing her mouth to his. That heat exploded around them, as they did battle with their

mouths.

Rogue moaned, and Jinx held on tighter.

When he finally could set her free, he blinked trying to get through the pleasure.

“Oh, look at us here in this empty house, and nothing to do until we make sure it’s secure,” Jinx said.

Rogue lifted a brow.

“Uh, are you suggesting we dirty the place up with some sexy thief antics?” he asked.

She whispered in his ear, and his eyes went huge.

“Oh, well, sign me up,” he said, as he began getting out of his clothes. He’d locked the door when he came in, and he’d make sure they were careful.

He’d be lying if he said this wasn’t on his bucket list.

Sex during a theft?

**Sign.**

**Him.**

**Up.**

Jinx was just as quick to get out of her clothing, and as soon as they were both naked, they crashed back into each other and the sexy free-for-all began.

Rogue went wild.

He didn’t know where to start at first, but as his wife jumped up, wrapping her legs around his hips, trapping them together, he had a plan.

He let go of her, knowing she could hold on, and he focused on one of his favorite parts of her.

**Her breasts.**

He teased and tormented her, being careful not to let her leak. That was, after all, food for their child.

“I just pumped, so we should be good,” she said, knowing what he was thinking about.



Rogue was an amazing, caring partner, and he always put her and their kids first.

“Well, if you say so,” he said, switching breasts to torment that one too.

Jinx gasped in pleasure, as her husband took care of her.

With his hands and mouth full, she ran her hands into his hair, enjoying the silkiness.

Someone was growing his hair out, and she wanted to thank Zayn for talking him into it.

It made him look more Native, and that got her wet.

Sue her.

She had a type.

“Rogue,” she whispered, as he did his worst, and she loved every second of it.

“You’re delicious,” he muttered, her nipple between his teeth. “I need more,” he said.

Oh, and he meant it.

“Rogue,” she gasped, as he moved them closer to the homeowner’s bed, and they tumbled onto it.

Rogue couldn’t help himself. Jinx called to him, and when they were naked, it was a free-for-all.

As they rolled around on the bed, he got her trapped beneath him.

He was running his fingers over her clit, tormenting her because Rogue wanted nothing more than to give his wife all the pleasure he could.

Jinx gasped, her gorgeous eyes filled with love and lust. Only, that wasn’t enough.

Rogue wanted her to take that fall.

As he used his fingers to bring her so much pleasure, his wife began that fall.

“Rogue! I’m going to cum,” she gasped, as he pinched her clit, sending her careening over the edge.

Her breathy moan was music to his ears.

The whole time, he admired the most beautiful woman in the whole world.

### **His Jinxy.**

Leaving kisses on her collarbones, he waited until she pulled away from the pleasure.

As her gorgeous eyes opened from beneath that sweep of thick lashes, he saw the glint of lust.

Well, someone was going to be making him crazier than he already was.

“Was that good for you?” he joked.

There was laughter.

“It’s always good, my love,” she said, running her fingers across his cheeks. “Have I told you how lucky I am to have you?”

His heart actually thumped.

Before Jinx, there had been so many battles over what he did, and how he ran his life. It was nice to finally be loved for the man he was.

He couldn’t help that he had amazing thievery skills.

“I’m the lucky one, Jinx. You’ve made every one of my dreams come true. The minute you snuck into my bedroom, and tried to save me, I’ve been living my dreams.”

She nuzzled him.

And when he least expected it, that’s when she struck.

Jinx rolled, getting him trapped beneath her. His bigger body was flat on the bed, and she loved being above him.

“Look at all this sexiness,” she said, running her hands across his body.

He moaned in pleasure with just her touch.

“It’s my turn,” she said, loving that now, he was going to be at her mercy.

Rogue grinned wickedly, excited for that ride.

“Yes, please,” he whispered as she bit him on the neck, and then had her wicked way with him.

Jinx knew what turned her husband on, and when she left a trail of kisses down his body, he was filled with need and desperation.

“Please,” he whispered. “Touch me.”

Oh, that was the plan.

Jinx began working her way South toward his now-throbbing dick. Her deliciously sexy husband was rock-hard and ready for her oral assault.

Well, he’d better be ready.

She wanted nothing more than to drive him wild.

Sue her.

Jinx couldn’t help herself.

“I can’t get enough of you,” she whispered, as she was tormenting his flesh. When she bit him on the thigh, he moaned.

Jinx left no spot untouched.

Well, except for his erection. She was teasing every part of him but that.

*And he loved it.*

His dick was rock-hard, and she was driving him insane with her fingers and her mouth.

**God.**

He loved this.

When she stroked him, Rogue fought not to take over, getting back in control. He let his wife play, simply because she’d birthed him a son.

He saw how difficult that had been. If she wanted to control their lovemaking, so be it.

He knew who would win.

**HIM.**

As she did her worst, Rogue braced for the pleasure that he knew was going to rock his body.

Jinx was having fun, as she tried to make him lose the tenuous control he was hanging onto.

He liked it like that.

There was nothing more erotic than a woman trying to make a man cum with all the tricks in the book.

As she blew across his erection, Rogue moaned in pleasure. That simple act was more than enough to send chills across his body.

Rogue needed more.

He needed her.

“Look at my sexy thief,” she said, licking his erection from base to tip.

Before he could say anything, Rogue knew he was about to have a bigger fight on his hands. Hungrily, Jinx took his dick into her mouth and owned that mating.

She was in control, and he was at her mercy.

Oh, this was going to be a rough one.

**He.**

**Could.**

**Tell.**

As she worked him hard, Rogue clenched his fists in the bedding.

Someone was going to get him to cum if it was the last thing she did.

**God.**

He loved his wife.

“Jinx!” he practically shouted as she did something particularly wicked with her hands and mouth.

Rogue fought the need to let his hips take over.

On top of that, he couldn't look.

*If he did...*

He was done.

As she teased and tormented his goose-bumped flesh, Rogue was praying to any deity that would listen to him.

With each stroke of her warm mouth up and down his erection, he was closer to the end of that ride.

Only, his wife didn't offer mercy.

Jinx was a Marine. She fought like one, she thought like one, and she certainly fucked like one.

**Take.**

**No.**

**Prisoners.**

In the end, he was at her mercy, and Rogue was good with that.

“Baby,” he whispered. “I'm close,” he said. “Abort the mission,” he muttered.

Only, she didn't.

Jinx knew her husband was good for a few rounds, and honestly, she liked watching him cum.

She didn't let up, and all he did was whimper for mercy.

Well, that said it all.

Someone was cumming.

Jinx worked him harder, and she knew when he was done. His balls tightened, and his body shook. Then, with a shout of her name, Rogue lost control.

“Cumming,” he muttered, as his body lost the battle, and he erupted hotly down his wife’s throat.

Rogue held on through the storm, his body tight and lost in the pleasure.

Only, Jinx loved seeing him like this.

When that look of rapture appeared on his face, she was her happiest.

She moved up his body, enjoying how he rode out that pleasure.

It was sexy.

Only, she wanted more.

**Again.**

As he slowly opened his eyes, he found his wife staring down into his face, and she was grinning like a Marine who just conquered a hill.

*Him being that hill.*

She laughed.

“Was it good for you?” she asked back, using the words he’d just used.

“I think I am dead. That might have killed me, Jinx.”

Oh, well, then she had bad news for him.

**She.**

**Wasn’t.**

**Done.**

She found his mouth with hers and rolled, putting him above her.

“Oh, look,” he admitted. “I trapped a sexy Snake in someone else’s den,” he said, smiling down at his wife.

She laughed.

“Have you now?” she asked. “Maybe prove it to your wife. I like you between my legs.”

He grinned.

“Oh, I’ll do just that,” he said, loving how his wife tasted. There was no other place he wanted to be than with her, or at home with their kids.

If they ever found Chevy.

“Hurry, Rogue,” she whispered. “Your wife needs you.”

Well, that was all she had to say.

What the lady wanted, the lady got.

He found her wet and ready for more, so he feasted on her already swollen clit.

Rogue would be lying if he said this wasn’t his favorite part of sex.

Because it was.

Rogue loved giving just as much as he enjoyed receiving—maybe more.

Because she’d tortured him, Rogue paid her back.

He spread her wide, held her open, and did his worst. A thief had a gift with using his fingers, and this one had that same gift with his tongue.

Jinx held on, her body awash in nothing but pleasure.

With her hands in his hair, Jinx held on, moaning in pleasure as soon as he began feasting on her clit.

“More,” she begged. “I need more.”

That’s what he gave her.

As he worked her body, she whimpered and begged but he didn’t stop.

There was no way he could.

He needed her more than anything, and Rogue wanted to show her love through copious orgasms.

She was his heart and soul.

**His mate.**

When he nipped her, she took the tumble.

“Rogue!” she shouted, as she fell into the pleasure, and her body was crisscrossed with goosebumps.

That’s how a non-Marine did it.

As he moved up her body, and she struggled to surface, there were so many things that he wished he could tell her.

*How she was his world.*

*How she was his soulmate.*

*How he’d was blessed.*

Instead, when she opened her eyes, he said the most important thing.

“I love you,” he offered.

Her heart melted, and Jinx gave him a soft kiss.

“I love you too.”

Rogue grinned.

“Ready for that last ride, beautiful thief?” he asked.

**Yes.**

**Yes, she was.**

“Fuck me, Mr. Ravenscroft. Your wife needs you in her body,” she said.

And that was all it took.

As Rogue slid into her, he made sure she was trapped beneath him, and his sexy prisoner.

He never wanted to let her go.

*And he wouldn’t.*

As he worked his wife into a wild frenzy, he knew that he wasn’t going to last long. The fact that they were on a job, and having sex in a stranger’s room...

Sue him.



This was his kink.

When her whole being bowed, he kept sliding into her body, and then out again, stealing her breath.

“God. I could do this all night,” he muttered, watching her nipples pebble, and her body respond to his.

Oh, she could too.

“Rogue,” she whispered, her voice filled with pleasure.

He rolled, forcing his wife to ride him. What he wanted to see was her cum above him as she bounced on his dick.

As he set her free, Jinx did the work, her body rocking his world with each glide down and up his thick erection.

“Oh, fuck,” he muttered when she touched her own clit, getting herself off.

That was going to do him in.

He’d bet on it.

“Catch up,” he muttered, as Jinx did something sexy with her body that reminded him of an undulating snake.

Why wasn’t he surprised?

“I’m close,” she whispered, as she rode him and touched herself.

Rogue didn’t think he could hold on.

He began praying to the kink gods to keep him from cumming.

Only, when he opened his eyes, the sight of his wife lost in the pleasure over him was too much.

**He.**

**Was.**

**Done.**

“Cumming, Jinxy!” he shouted, as he exploded deep in her body, forcing her from the edge with him.

All that heat filled her, and he loved every second of it. It was proprietary and made him feel...safe.

She was his, and always would be.

As she lay over him, trying to fight to surface through the pleasure, Rogue rolled.

When he pulled out of his wife and caught his breath, he grinned down at her.

“Yeah, I don’t deserve you.”

She laughed.

“Trust me, I know,” she teased, knowing that was anything but the truth. This man was why she healed. He gave her a family and a purpose.

He gave her a future.

Rogue nuzzled her.

“Maybe that got you pregnant.”

She laughed.

“Oh, Jesus. You have Jagger-itis. There aren’t Voodoo beads under this bed, are there?”

He snorted.

“God. I wish.”

She gave him a kiss. Then, she was honest.

“I’m breastfeeding, so I likely won’t get pregnant.”

He looked disappointed.

Immediately, Jinx reassured him.

“When it happens, we’ll celebrate. I’m not saying no. I can’t help it if there are rules,” she said. “Talk to my uterus. I’m not driving the bus on that one.”

He held her.

“I know. We just make really cute kids and Peony is so happy to have a sibling. I’d love to give her a sister.”

She reassured him.

“You’ll have more kids. I promise.”

He smiled.

“Thank you, Jinx. Thank you for saving me and giving me everything I always wanted.”

Oh, she could say the same.

“Likewise, sexy thief. We’re living the life.”

That they were.

When he looked at his Rolex, he knew what time it was.

“How about we get the place set up, call in the report to the dirty cops, and make sure we get them secured before we call in the team?”

That worked for her.

“Sounds good.”

He was glad.

“Then, let’s get it done. You know how the Major doesn’t like to waste time. Maybe don’t tell her that you molested your husband, Jinx, while on the clock.”

She just laughed.

“ME?”

He grinned wickedly.

“Yeah, you’re too sexy for my own good,” he added, pulling her up so they could get dressed.

She just shook her head.

It looked as if it was time to get back to business. They had a renegade Marine to catch.

Oh, and they would.

They were about to start *‘Operation Unmasking’*.

And it was going to find them Chevy.

**One way or another.**

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## *Chapter Eight*

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### *The Underground*

### *Friday*

### *Same Time*

**T**alk about slumming it. That was exactly what he was doing too. Going into that cesspool was always a dangerous thing. Only, Remington Bowman had very little choice in the matter.

With each pass through the bar filled with miscreants and bad guys, it wasn't lost on him that he used to chase assholes like this.

Now, he was one.

Never let it be said that life wasn't all kinds of ironic, and that Fate liked to mix shit up.

This was his new life, and there was nothing that he could do about it.

*Why?*

He'd created this monster out of rage and vengeance, and the monster was him.

After taking El Gato apart, piece by piece, to avenge his dead wife and daughter, he simply couldn't pretend to be holier than thou.

*How did you?*

He literally cut El Gato into tiny pieces, and they disposed of him in a swamp.

The bastard had been gator bait for what he did to Karen and his little girl.

Now, he was no longer holier than thou.

Remington was one of them.

He was a killer and someone who had crossed the line into uncharted territory.

Pretending wasn't going to make it a reality. The bottom line was that he was a bad guy too.

Birds of a feather flocked together, and from the looks of it, The Underground was full of birds.

*Crazy-ass ones.*

The assimilation process had been harder than he ever believed it would be.

In the days after killing Teague LaVere, he'd struggled to come to grips with what he'd done.

Yeah, he did the man dirty, but that was Karma, of sorts, now wasn't it?

As a CIA spook, he'd broken all kinds of laws, rules, and creeds.

Only, that had been because he'd sworn to uphold the Constitution of the United States, and he'd been following orders.

In his mind, he was doing good work.

That was the job, and it mattered.

And now, he saw he'd been lying to himself the whole damn time.

Breaking the rules was breaking the rules.

**PERIOD.**

He had justified it, sugarcoated it, and made it fit into his ordered life because he didn't want to face the reality of it all.

Now, he couldn't pretend he was a good guy, so he simply just stopped trying to. There was no going back to that man with the shiny gold badge and the good intentions.

**Nope.**

**He.**

**Was.**

**Gone.**

Now, he killed indiscriminately.

He'd broken countless rules.

Oh, and he crossed lines over and over again.

The only thing that was saving his ass was Elizabeth Blackhawk, and he knew it. The woman he'd burned on an op because his boss told him to, was now his ally.

**His friend.**

She'd saved him in ways she'd never really understand either.

As Deputy Director, she now had connections and access to his files. She pulled them, and she'd used some leverage to get him erased from the FBI.

She gave him the best gift of all.

Well, two gifts.

She'd hooked him up with The Hunters, and he'd gotten El Gato, and now, he had anonymity. His face was the only thing that gave him away.

*His fingerprints...*

*His DNA...*

They were all gone.

He was a nameless face with only fake credentials that he'd mass-collected as a CIA spook.

Remington Bowman was gone.

Long live his legacy.

As far as the government knew, he was a ghost. Oh, he was well aware that some branches of the government's law enforcement still knew what he was doing, and that was because of Artemis Dubois.

She was as dirty as they came.

And as sneaky too.

He'd bet a million dollars that the pictures of him, and his dead family, were leaked to the deep web by her, and only her.

He kept tabs on shit like that, but he couldn't buy them. The sellers wouldn't release them to him.

On top of that, they went missing.

Someone had them, and he needed to find them. That was his new goal, as he played reindeer games in The Big Easy.

Now, as he was heading into The Underground, to make the connection with the barkeep, Calyx Waters, he had to wonder if one day, he'd look back and remember himself as a hero or antihero.

It was anyone's guess at this point.

But he was betting antihero.

There was no way he'd ever be anyone's salvation. The hero vibe was gone from him, and he was destined to pay for his sins.

*And they were many.*

He should stay as far from this bar as possible, but he simply couldn't.

All he knew was that seeing Calyx calmed him.

Even in a bar of deviants, seeing her made his heart slow down, his pulse stabilize, and his anger abate.

*Why?*

That was anyone's guess, but at that point, he was not in the mood to think about why. It unnerved him so much that the woman had his dead wife's face.

So instead of doing battle with it, he was just going with it.

**For now.**



Walking into the bar, people looked, but he had his hoodie covering his face, and his head down. In a couple of minutes, they'd forget he'd even walked in there.

Something would be brought up, and no one would pay him any attention.

Remmy would disappear into the background.

*Like a ghost.*

He headed to a seldomly used booth, and slid in, taking a seat to watch and wait. At some point, the woman who owned and ran this place, would see him and come over.

To make sure she was there, he looked across the bar, and he saw her.

**Calyx.**

**God.**

Each time he crossed her path, she stole his breath. It was clear that he needed some therapy because every time he saw Calyx, he thought about doing something stupid.

*And he couldn't.*

If he crossed that line, he'd lose even more of himself in *New Orleans*.

Yeah, he knew why he was drawn here.

His obsession made him keep coming back.

Easily, he could pass off this part of the job to any other Hunter. They were the bad guys in the city, and they could blend—along with terrorizing by just being here.

Only, he kept taking the job.

He came to see her.

When he held up his finger, ordering a beer, Calyx saw him and nodded.

Only, he didn't get time to watch her effortlessly move around behind the bar.

**No.**

Unfortunately, he wasn't alone.

**Damn.**

**It.**

A very familiar figure appeared and decided that she wanted to join him.

So she slid into the booth.

“Well, Remmy, imagine meeting you here,” she said, as she got comfy.

**Artemis Dubois.**

**Well, fuckity.**

The last spook he wanted to tangle with was this one. She made him cranky.

Apparently, even thinking about her opened a hole in some cesspool, letting the wicked out.

Yeah, he'd done it.

He'd summoned a wicked bitch.

Of course, that was his luck.

“What do you want, Artie?” he asked, knowing his cover there was now blown, and he suspected it wasn't accidental.

Artemis did nothing without there being some sort of intent.

She prided herself on a few things.

*Her cunning.*

*Her evasive skills.*

*And that she was named after a Goddess.*

Honestly, he really suspected that she believed herself to be above the law.

But as he'd learned, none of them were.

She shared.

“I was meeting a client and saw you sneak in. How’s your face?” she asked.

When he looked up, she saw the scar that had healed but left a mark on his cheek.

“I remember how much you valued your pretty boy face,” she said, busting his ass. “Looks like you’re just as ugly as the rest of us.”

He didn’t miss a beat.

“No one could be as ugly as you, Artemis. That black soul lurks behind your attractiveness.”

She laughed, and her melodious tone did absolutely nothing for him.

Yes, he’d gotten on that ride once.

Yes, he’d been married at the time, and he still carried that sin on his not-so-lily-white soul.

“Aww, did you just tell me I’m pretty?” she asked, batting her eyes. “I think you like me, Remmy. I know you liked me a lot that one night we spent in bed.”

Again...she’d drugged him.

So, hell, no.

Oh, don’t get him wrong. Artemis was gorgeous, and unfortunately, that was the trap.

She lured you in with that attractiveness, but her darkness, her games, and her evil spirit were enough to make you want to shrivel up and die.

She was the epitome of succubus.

If you weren’t careful, she’d eat your soul. *New Orleans* was the perfect place for her.

When he said nothing, she got the hint.

He was done playing.

“Whatcha working on?” she asked, putting her chin in her hand as she batted her eyelashes at him.

Against better judgment, he answered her.

“I think you know exactly what I’m working on,” he said.

Oh, she did.

“Still looking for Chevy?” she asked.

Remmy kept it short and sweet. He wasn’t going to give anything away that might feed the beast.

**HER.**

“Yep.”

“Did you guys hit that bar that I suggested?” she inquired. “Or did Elizabeth tell you not to because she has to always butt in to save the day?”

He stared into her eyes.

“For the record, if I was going into a dark place where my life was in danger, I would take her any time. You? I’d never turn my back on you. She’s trustworthy, Artemis. **YOU ARE NOT.**”

She smiled.

“Good plan. If you trust me, you’re dumb and then dead. At least you know better. You might actually survive the city. Here’s a piece of advice.”

He rolled his eyes.

The last thing he needed was for her to give him advice.

“Don’t dip your stick in the pretty barkeep. It might make you feel something and god knows that can’t happen. Then, you have to let go of your dead wife.”

He slammed his hands on the table, and she jumped.

“Don’t,” he hissed as people stared. “Don’t even say her name or bring her up.”

“You weren’t shouting her name when you were fucking me, Remmy. Just remember that. You can hate me, but

ultimately, you cheated on your wife and called it the mission. That's on you."

He said nothing.

*Why?*

Because she was right, and he hated that more than anything.

"You should go," he said, his voice cold and dead. "Really."

She shrugged and changed the subject.

"Go to the bar, Remmy. Tell your band of merry do-gooders to hit it. They might be surprised who owns it. Trust me."

"Yeah, never. The day I work with you or trust you is the day I pack it up, eat my gun, and send my soul to Hell."

She laughed.

"Be safe, and if you sleep with her, Remmy, wear protection. She was a whore."

He was about to protest, but why bother? She was leaving, and that was a plus in his book.

Artemis slipped from the booth, and the woman had rubbed him the wrong way.

He knew about Calyx's past. She'd been forced to the streets, and she'd changed the trajectory of her life by working hard.

He didn't fault her that.

At least she could be trusted.

*As for having sex with her...*

**God.**

He was an idiot, but he'd do it.

He knew himself.

At some point, he'd lose control, and he'd break every fucking rule he'd set into place to protect himself.

He was celibate.

He had been since Karen and his daughter's deaths. It was going on a decade, and he didn't fornicate because he had issues.

**Guilt issues.**

Oh, he could get a woman, and he could bed one down, but all he thought about was his dead wife.

It was difficult to have sex with another woman when the ghost of one was running through your head.

**Really difficult.**

When Artemis disappeared, it was seconds before he knew she was approaching. As Calyx stopped at the table, he looked up at her.

It was her smile that always got him.

*The curl of her lip...*

**God.**

He was trying to be good.

"Hello, Remmy," she said, putting down his beer. "How are you today?"

He tried to keep it business-like.

"Interested in anything that might make Mikey O' happy," he said, clueing her into the business he was there to handle.

Calyx wasn't shocked.

She figured as much.

Was it too much to ask for a sexy man to come visit the girl?

She'd hinted, flirted, and pretty much did everything but hang a banner under her bedroom window that personally invited him to her bed.

It was rare that she wanted to have sex. When that was all you did for years, to survive, the last thing you wanted was

to do it again.

She'd been used, abused, raped, and forgotten. Now, she wanted something more.

Calyx wanted him.

She was intrigued by him, and curious by nature. That was likely a bad combination for her and him.

Only, there was something about his big, capable hands, and that scar.

Jesus, but she wanted to see his whole face. He never showed it to her. She got a peek at it the night he rescued her, but she wanted to see his eyes, his hair, his smile, and him.

He was the one lure that would make her sin all over again.

“I actually do have something for Mikey O’. It just turned up with some mercenaries. First, has anyone ever told you that you’re model handsome?”

He said nothing.

*Why?*

She was clueing him in that the place to look was the modeling agencies.

*As for what she thought of him...*

If he let her see him, he'd be vulnerable. This young woman deserved a life she could enjoy. He was older than her, and he was definitely not a hero.

So he changed the subject.

“We already are focused on the two specific businesses. Anything more than that?”

She pretended to wipe the table so she could stand there longer. Calyx didn't want him to leave. When he came in, she felt safe.

Sue her.

She was attracted to the white knight trope.

When her knee bumped his, there was a shock of electricity that shot through her body.

His too.

She saw him move, and she backed off. What she wanted, and what he was willing to share weren't the same thing.

Calyx gave him more.

“Word on the street is that Chevy had a **BIG** makeover.”

Again, they were already aware.

“I've got my feelers out to see what I can get you. I don't think he's let his face be photographed, but I hear he's bragging you guys won't find him.”

Well, he wasn't wrong.

As of yet, this game of hide-and-go-seek was beginning to blow.

She didn't like to disappoint a client, so she gave him what she could.

“If you need someone to help you get into the agency door, I have a few friends who might fit the bill. Come find me, and I'll hook a guy up.”

His heart raced.

Not because of her offering up some help, but because he'd love to come find her.

He watched her apartment sometimes.

Okay, he watched her apartment every night.

When he went out to patrol, alone, under the cover of darkness, he sat across the street from this cesspool, on the roof, and watched her.

Yeah, he was a peeping Tom.

Never let it be said he didn't have hella issues and a deep need for some psychotherapy.



He wasn't denying that.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

"I'll pass that along," he said.

Calyx tried again because if anything, she was a masochist.

"If you're ever in the neighborhood, you should stop by, and maybe we can have a nightcap," she said.

*He laughed.*

*And laughed.*

*And laughed.*

*Why?*

Oh, maybe because the last thing that this woman wanted was him stopping by.

He knew what it would be like between them, and there was no way he could be gentle.

*After years of that oath of celibacy...*

*Opening that door to Hell...*

**Bad idea.**

There wouldn't be gentle and sweet. There would be rough, brutal, and fucking.

And no lady wanted that kind of man.

Instead, he flirted back because he was, clearly, an idiot.

"Maybe I already do," he said, not believing he told her his deep secret that he was around when she didn't know it. "Maybe I watch over you when you don't see me."

Her heart skipped.

**God.**

She wanted a hero in the worst way, and she knew it was him.

When he saved her outside of The Underground months ago, earning that scar, he made her panties wet.

They were perpetually wet too.

What woman didn't want that knight on a white horse saving them from the bad all around them?

She definitely did.

### **Big-time.**

"That's intriguing, Remmy," she said, her breath hitching in her chest. This man was going to be trouble, and that was her middle name.

He warned her.

"You should close your blinds," he suggested. "You never know who is watching, Calyx," he said, not meaning him, so much, but that the city was full of danger.

Okay, he meant him too.

At his words, she leaned down and got super close to him.

"If I took your advice, then you couldn't watch me, Director," she whispered. "I always know you're there. Bath time is my favorite time."

At her words, his dick got hard, fast.

### **Jesus.**

She knew he was there, and she was cognizant of him lurking in the shadows. No one ever spotted him, but she had. That was insane to him. He was damn good at hiding in plain sight.

"I can feel you near," she said. "I always know," she added as if she'd been in his head.

Oh, Christ.

He had to get space between them. If not, he was going to take her to the back room, and they were fornicating on a

case of beer.

*A few times.*

His balls were so tight from celibacy, that he wanted her in the worst way, and he wouldn't be able to say no.

Pulling the envelope out, he slid it to her before he did something incredibly stupid.

“Mikey says thank you for your continued assistance,” he said.

She tucked it into her apron.

Then, she had to help them. She'd seen the skank hanging out at this table, and she didn't like the woman. She was all kinds of foul.

So, Calyx protected him again. First with buying the pictures from the dark web, and then from the cunt nightmare lurking not far away.

“Here's a freebie,” she said. “The woman you were just talking to...”

He waited.

“Yes?”

Calyx ratted her out. Oh, she tried to keep her business quiet, but she couldn't keep her secrets from her. Calyx had friends **EVERYWHERE**.

“She's buying up mercenaries and guns so fast that *New Orleans*' bad guys can't keep up. Word is Russian mercenaries are heading here for something. You'd better warn Mikey O'. Once the Russians arrive, a place goes to shit. They are ruthless, and they like gun running and making money off of kidnappings. The word out is there are some prominent people here that they are targeting.”

**Jesus.**

Just what they needed.

Mikey O' had been laying low since the town believed his wife was dead. That had been a show of weakness,

apparently.

He'd have to pass it on.

"Who is behind it?" he asked. "The Russian mob has many different branches. They generally stay in the shadows."

She shrugged.

"I don't know, but I'll be glad to find out. For a cost," she said.

He waited.

"Come see me," she said.

When he looked up at her, she saw his eyes.

**God.**

He was gorgeous.

"That's the deal."

His heart was racing in his chest, but before he could say anything, she was done.

"Be safe out there, Remmy," she said, doing something incredibly unlike her.

She reached out, lifted his chin, and then kissed him. It was only fair.

If the man was going to sit on a roof and watch her apartment, he deserved a reward.

*Or invite.*

Only, the second her mouth touched his, she was shocked because he didn't play games.

He grabbed her by the back of the hair, his fingers knotting in the red tresses, and held her mouth to his in a brutal kiss.

He controlled, devoured, and stole.

She barely was able to stay upright. Her knees felt weak, and her body shook with that power. That had not been what she'd been expecting.

**Oh, God.**

What had she done?

She just set something free in him, and like the genie, you couldn't put him back in the lamp.

When he finally set her free, his lips stayed close to hers, and when he spoke, there was no mistaking the tone.

“Don't play games with me, Calyx. Once the door opens, you won't be able to close it. I didn't leave my job because I was bored. I left it because I am that darkness. Me not touching you is me saving you from the monster I am. Don't forget it.”

Then, he moved away, getting up from the table, and walking out the door without looking back at her.

Only, he left an impression behind.

She was breathless, and her lips tingled from that kiss. She'd slept with many men to climb her way out of the streets, but him...

**Good.**

**God.**

She was pretty sure she couldn't handle him.

Would that stop her?

**No.**

She'd be lying if she said that night she spotted him watching her, she didn't want to give him one hell of a show—intentionally.

**Sue her.**

Maybe she would the next time.

Calyx knew a good thing when she saw it. That sexy man might believe that he was dark and deadly, but she was willing to bet that there was so much more to him.

Oh, and she loved a mystery.

As soon as he was gone, she grabbed the beer and took a deep sip.

She was parched and dry from that scorching hot kiss.

*What wasn't dry?*

**Her panties.**

That was for damn sure.

Calyx only hoped the man was careful. She was going to bet that they ended up horizontal in the future.

**Bet on it.**

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## *Chapter Nine*

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*The Bait House*

*The Game Begins*

*Twelve Thirty P.M.*

**B**etween the two of them, they had everything set up, and they were ready to handle some dirty cops. When Jinx called the precinct, asking to talk to the police who handled missing persons, she was lucky to be directed right to the two cops.

Apparently, fate was on their side and not on the cops'—not today.

Playing a role, Jinx explained what had happened and that her husband hadn't been home for two days. In the most panicked voice that Rogue had ever heard **IN HIS LIFE**, she explained that she couldn't reach him.

Only, they were hesitant.

That was until his wife used what they knew tended to lure the bad guys in.

Jinx baited the hook, telling them she was alone, scared, and made herself sound very young. She peppered the conversation with '*she didn't have family around*' mentioning it more than once.

*And that worked.*

If they were assisting with stealing women and working for Chevy, they wouldn't be able to resist the lure.

And the outcome?

Well, it worked.

The two men were **MORE** than happy to offer to come to her—instead of her coming into the precinct. In fact, they were coming right out, and not to bother calling the cops again. They would handle it.

They promised.

Oh, Rogue bet they would.

When his wife found a pretty dress in the homeowner's closet and put it on, she looked lovely.

In fact, she looked tempting.

She did her hair, makeup, and she tried to look a little too appealing for her own good.

While it should unnerve him, it didn't. You didn't walk up to a Mamba and grab it.

Someone was going to get hurt, and he knew it wouldn't be Jinx.

When she noticed him staring, she started laughing.

“Rogue. Focus.”

He was.

He was focused on her ass in that vintage-y dress, and how it made him want to play man of the manor with his deadly wife.

“I could take you again,” he said, watching her slip on heels, and make herself lovely bait.

Oh, she bet.

“Maybe I'll let you as we wait for the team to get here. You do know how much I love my husband all over me. He's incredibly sexy and tricky. It's that wicked smile, and those very clever hands that make me giddy.”

Well, if that didn't describe him, nothing did.

Because he could, he gave her a kiss.

Then, he was serious. Staring into her eyes, he warned her.

“Be careful. I don't like the idea of anyone touching my wife. I'll be in the next room if you need me. Just yell for help.”

*Was he serious?*



She stared at him like he'd lost his mind.

“You do realize they didn't codename me Mamba because I looked good in black, right?”

He actually laughed.

*How could he not?*

Sometimes, he liked riling her up because how could he forget how dangerous she was. The tattoo on her arm was a constant reminder.

“Someone is very spicy. Save it for bed later,” he said. “You, me, those pretty things you stole, and hot sex. I'll let Mamba bite me.”

Well, he didn't have to offer that up twice.

“Deal,” she said, patting him on the ass. “Maybe you'll get lucky, and we can have another baby.”

**Oh, Jesus.**

That had him ready to go. His wife knew what buttons to push, and he loved him some kids.

“Flirt.”

She winked at him.

“Absolutely. My husband is hot. The day I stop hitting on you, get my head checked, or look for Boone's Voodoo dolls.”

He snorted.

“Too soon, Mamba. Too soon.”

She found him amusing.

As they heard the doors closing on a car, Rogue knew it was time.

He was about to let two dirty cops near his wife. He might be the one who needed his head checked out.

“Do your thing, Mamba,” he said, touching her arm where her tattoo had once been.

**God.**

He missed seeing it.

She'd used tattoo-covering makeup, and she looked pristine, pure, and a little too bait-y for his liking, but he had to trust her.

**She.**

**Was.**

**Deadly.**

Oh, and his.

When there was a knock on the door, Jinx played the role. One of the reasons the US government picked pretty women who looked easy to take, was that they were often overlooked as deadly.

Oh, she was tall and thin, but she could bench press her husband.

Jinx worked out hard because if this city had taught them anything, it was that strength was a necessity for the women here.

As she opened the door, she turned on the fear and woman tears.

The act began.

Someone deserved the academy award on this one.

“Oh, God! Thank you,” she said, hysterically, as she wrung her hands in anxiety. “I was afraid you wouldn't come! I hate being alone here!”

Jinx hoped it was enough.

Then, she saw it.

The two cops stared at her, and there was lust and calculation.

Yeah, she'd bet that the cops weren't only making missing people disappear, but they were also grabbing them when one crossed their paths.

She'd bet on it.

These guys were not only dirty but sick too.

“Mrs. Wilcox, I’m Detective Cecil Schultz, and this is my partner, Detective Stellan Sterling. We talked to you on the phone about your missing husband.”

She clutched her chest, trying to keep them focused on her body, and not her face. She wasn’t sure if they ran her or not, and she was being careful.

Not because they might hurt her.

**No.**

Because if they ran, she had to find a way to stop them, and that meant death. If they died, Jagger couldn’t interrogate them.

“Oh, please come in. I’m so worried. I’ve only been married a year, and my husband is older. He’s never done this before, and I have no one else to call. My family is deceased, and he’s my only lifeline in the city. You have to help me find him!”

The more she told them she was alone, the happier they looked.

That was all it took.

They followed her into the house, and when they were inside, they passed a closet.

From it, Rogue was watching, and the detective who wasn’t wearing a sportscoat had zip ties tucked into the back of his pants.

There was no doubt what they were going to do.

Someone was going to be abducted.

He’d bet on it.

It appeared that these two cops were all about taking what wasn’t theirs. Jinx had a husband, and that was not happening.

That was a negative.

He was worried, but he almost wished he could see their faces when his wife went all Mamba on them. That was always a good time.

One would be out cold before the other even suspected anything.

“In here,” she said, luring them to the biggest space where she could move more freely. Honestly, she was surprised they let her get this far.

A smart predator would have struck the second she turned her back. That was going to be a big mistake.

**For.**

**Them.**

She took a picture from the mantle in the living room of an older man, using all of the props that she could.

“Here he is,” she said. “This is my husband, James Wilcox. Please find him.”

The one man pulled out his pen and notebook. Then, he focused on her.

“I have to ask some questions before we can file the report, Miss. But first, do you have any water? My throat is parched.”

Jinx played along.

“Oh, sure!”

She spun on her heel and rushed toward the kitchen.

That’s when the two men began whispering to each other, unaware that Rogue had moved closer to keep an eye on his wife as she booted their asses around the room.

“Chevy would like that one. She looks young. She’ll get him some good money. We’ll grab her, wipe the scene, and take her. I got dibs on her first though,” Stellan admitted. “She looks barely legal. I haven’t had twenty-year-old pussy in a while.”

Cecil snorted.

“Or I hold her down, and we take turns. She has more than one hole.”

Rogue was listening, and it was becoming increasingly difficult not to go out there and kill them both.

Instead, he was his wife’s eyes and ears when she was in the other room.

He texted Jinx as she stood in the kitchen.

***‘We were right. They are planning your abduction. Break their legs or I will.’***

He put his phone away after he saw that his message was received and read. His wife had been alerted, and now, the ball was in her court.

It appeared that the fun was about to begin.

When Jinx came back in, she had a glass of water in her hand, and she hustled it to the thirsty dude, her breasts bouncing.

Oh, Rogue was going to enjoy this, and her, later. If this didn’t get his juices flowing, nothing would. His sexy bait was really being bold.

He almost felt bad for the two men.

**ALMOST.**

His wife was about to whip some cop ass, and they weren’t going to see it coming.

“Here you go,” she said, moving close to them. It was when they both grabbed her shoulder, that she went into snake mode, and fought.

**Like a mamba.**

She knew that the best way to handle them was to disarm them. Then, she'd be safe from a gunshot wound. Then, she could freely fight.

As soon as they tried to contain her, she grabbed both of their guns, hit them in the head with them, and then released the magazines.

Then, she tossed them.

The hit didn't knock them out, but it caught them off guard.

"What the fuck?" Stellan said, touching his bloody forehead.

She answered.

**With.**

**Her.**

**Fist.**

She grabbed his arm, slammed her foot down on the toe of his shoe, driving her heel through his foot, and then kned him in the stomach.

When his partner went for her, she elbowed him in the nose and used her other foot to slam backward into his thigh before driving the other heel into his leg.

Then, because her husband had asked her to, she broke him.

He went down, screaming in pain. The whole time, she had Stellan's arm in a lock and then worked his shoulder over until she heard the pop.

Ehhh, it wasn't a leg, but she hoped a shoulder would do.

She dislocated it, kned him in the face, and then used her fist to slam into his temple.

**He.**

**Went.**

**Out.**

Then, she turned and walked toward Cecil who was very cognizant of what was going down around him.

The shit was hitting the fan.

“Who are you?” he asked, as he tried to crabwalk away from her, but he had a broken leg and was in pain.

From the shadows, Rogue was amused.

Oh, these two cops.

**Idiots.**

“Abducting women for Chevy? You’re a piece of shit, so now, I’m your worst fucking nightmare,” she said, grabbing his head, and kneeing him in the face.

The crunch of his nose told the tale.

That had to hurt.

From the power behind the knee to the face, his head snapped back, and he went out.

When Rogue came out of the shadows, he was grinning.

“Remind me never to forget your birthday, our anniversary, or the day you gave birth to our son. I’m not being Mamba’d. That was particularly nasty, and oh so sexy, Snake lady.”

She went to him, and the switch was flipped.

“You seemed to have forgotten Valentine’s Day on your list.”

He laughed.

“Oh, I’ll never forget that day. Ever. Trust me. I look forward to it.”

She cuddled into his side as he pulled out his phone. He rattled off a text, one-handed as he took that moment to be in very close contact with his wife.

***‘J, we have two cops contained. My locator is on. We’ll get them ready for you. Also, as a heads-up, we spoke to Eve. Adder is coming back, and she’s heading your way. Retirement was for the birds. Dakota is about to shit himself when he finds out. If you love me at all, you’ll record his face when he finds out. I want to watch it later.’***

He hit send, laughing the entire time. When he showed his wife, she grinned.

“Yeah, he’s going to have a stroke-worthy headache before the day is up.”

That was an understatement.

“Well, my sexy little killer, want to help me contain the enemy so we can wait for Jagger to show up with Maura and interrogate the rapist kidnappers?”

She grinned.

“Can I keep the dress?” she asked. “I think it makes me look very *‘lady of the manor’*.”

He didn’t miss a beat.

“Can I have sex with you later and take it off of you, Lady of the Manor?” he asked. “You know...when we repeatedly try to have another baby?”

She grinned.

“Deal.”

*Yeah, his life...*

It was damn good.



**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

*Chartres Street*

*Yes.*

*That Chartres Street*

Dakota didn't go right back to work.

He simply couldn't.

There was too much to think about. So, he walked around for a while, trying to come to grips with the fact that he'd really fucked it up.

This was about as bad as he could possibly jack with it. In his stubbornness, and his stupidity, he lost something good, and now, he'd be forced to watch his child's life from the outside looking in.

**God.**

The universe really hated him.

It was crystal clear that Eve was over him, and because of his shit attitude, and pity party, he wasn't only going to be alone, but he was likely not having a relationship with his child.

**Holy shit.**

He'd given life to a little person, and now, he was scared shitless.

One of his biggest fears was that bringing a child into the world would mean it being harmed.

He saw how Jagger, Rogue, Boone, and Zayn all struggled with protecting their families, and he never wanted to be in that situation.

Only, he was.

And there was no way out.

Finally, he got it.

The stress of the situation was astronomical. The only thing he had at the moment was that he was grateful Eve was retired, and there was no chance his child would be hurt.

At least there was that.

After the anger he saw from her, it appeared that all of the advice from his friends was for naught.

He was dead in the water when it came to a certain woman.

**Yep.**

He'd fucked up.

When he accessed Chartres street, going in the front door, the team was waiting for him.

They were in the living room, and sitting there.

He was too bummed out to realize that was odd in itself. Had he not been so riled up, sad, and sick to his stomach, he would have seen the looks on their faces.

Something had gone down, and he was oblivious.

**AGAIN.**

As he came in, he put the tools down and sat.

“Uh-oh,” Maura said, trying not to laugh. What the man didn't know was that Eve had beaten him back here, and she was tucked away in the kitchen.

He looked up.

“Did it not go well?” she asked.

He laughed sardonically.

“You could say that. Let’s just say that Eve is not happy I’m around, and I think I’ve lost my one chance at any relationship with her. I’m a fucking idiot.”

Boone took a bracelet out of his pocket and tossed it to him.

“What’s this?”

“It’s for calm and patience. You’re going to need it,” he said, trying not to laugh.

Oh, it was so difficult.

The man put it on.

“I know. It’s going to take forever for her to forgive me,” he added.

Gene laughed.

That wasn’t what Boone meant, but the man would soon find out.

“Well, there are other women out there,” he said, setting Dakota up.

It was clear that he wasn’t having it.

“I’m not like Jagger. I don’t fuck anything with a vagina until the woman I want finds me,” he said.

Jagger laughed.

“Hey now. Don’t bring me into this mess. You do you, and I did me. I still got the lady,” he said, pointing at his wife.

Dakota didn’t care.

“The bottom line is no, there aren’t other women out there for me. I found her and lost her. God! Why is my life so complicated?”

Zayn opened his mouth, and Maura pointed at him.

“That fruit is low-hanging, Zayn. Don’t do it.”

He closed his mouth and grinned like an idiot. Somehow, Dakota, the dumbass, managed to fix it and didn’t

even know it.

They kept going.

“Come on, Dak,” Stella said. “You’re sexy. I’m sure you can find another babe.”

Zayn stared at his wife.

“Did my sweet Stella just call another man sexy and in front of me?”

She snorted.

“Well, he is if you like that cowboy hero thing. He’s brooding and difficult. I like big, sweet, and a teddy bear.”

Zayn laughed.

*In what world did that describe him?*

*Seriously?*

Dakota wasn’t having it.

“I don’t think you get it,” he said. “I knew, and I decided to be an asshole. She was the one. When I married Sarah, I loved her, but, and I am so sorry to do this to her memory, but what I felt about her and what I feel about Eve... it’s not the same. It’s not even close. Then, add in she’s having my child. A child she’ll not want me to see.”

“Maybe she will,” Maura said.

He laughed again.

Oh, he wouldn’t get that lucky.

*How did he know?*

Because his life was a disaster.

“I wouldn’t if I were her. I did her dirty. I made her feel like she was less than she was, and for fuck’s sake, she told me to ask her to stay, and I didn’t! What the holy hell is wrong with me? Why can’t I do the right thing? It’s like my brain is on delay. I do something stupid, only to realize it three months later!”

Jagger sipped some coffee.

“So you’re not trying to get back into her life just because of a baby?”

“No. I miss her. I’ve dreamed about her every night for three months, and I didn’t know about the baby. I’ve deserved the torture, and now, she lives two blocks away. I was a dumbass. I’m sorry I told you guys having kids was a bad idea. I was a callous asshole. Why you guys even stick by me...?”

“Because we love you,” Tommy said. “You’re our family, and we want to help you.”

He sighed.

“Well, if anyone has any ideas on how to make a very deadly Adder forgive me, I’m up for suggestions because she doesn’t need me. She’s stronger than me, and she’s going to be raising two kids on her own because I’m a...”

“Numbnuts?” Zayn asked.

“Douche canoe?” Stella asked.

“Ridiculously stubborn?” Boone asked.

He stared at them.

“And you guys say we’re family? What do you do to your enemies?”

Maura laughed.

“Uh, we kill them.”

He sighed.

“Okay, guys, I get it. I’m an idiot. Now, how about something to help me show her I’m slow, but I eventually come around.”

Maura knew.

“I might have a plan,” she said.

Dakota stared at her.

“If you’re busting my balls, I’ll cry. I’m a man on the edge now.”

“I’m serious,” she said.

When she whistled, Dakota saw movement and looked over toward the kitchen.

What he didn’t expect was to see her standing there watching them.

It was Eve, and it was clear that she’d heard everything that he just said.

**God.**

**The mortification.**

“Oh, fuck,” he said, standing up as he waited to see what would happen.

“Dakota,” she said.

He didn’t move.

It was the deer-in-headlights look that was particularly amusing for Zayn.

“Numbnuts...we just helped you. You’re welcome. The lady came looking for you. The family came through again.”

As he stood there, she and Violet came out of the kitchen.

Dakota couldn’t believe it.

As she moved to stand in front of him, Eve stared up at the man she loved.

Oh, she’d heard it all, and he’d been honest. She needed proof, and these people gave it to her. She was finally ready to let the anger go and move on.

“I forgive you,” she said.

He stared, mouth open.

She lifted his chin and closed it.

“You’ll catch flies.”

When she showed up, she’d told them how she wanted back in, and she wanted to know if Dakota was really going to

be a better person.

Maura had told her to go wait in the kitchen and let them do the hard part.

Well, he'd not known she was there, and he'd laid it all on the line.

What he said in his letter...

It hadn't been a lie.

*It was the truth.*

*He loved her.*

*He wanted her.*

**Dakota was the one.**

Finally, he found the words.

"Eve," he said. "I don't know how to tell you..."

Only, he didn't get to say another word.

*Why?*

Well, maybe because she jumped up, wrapping her legs around his hips, so she was eye to eye with him.

"Thank you for the note. That's what made me come here. I felt your emotion in it, and if you do all of that like you promised, I'm going to take one last chance on you. I have to protect my kids," she said. "If you stand by me, and help me do that, I'll be more than happy to risk my heart. I love you, too, Dakota, and I want you to be part of our baby's life. I'm trusting you to protect this child."

Tears filled his eyes.

He held her, burying his face in her neck.

"Evie, I'm so sorry. I was a jerk. I never should have told you to have a good life. It's been hell. I can't have a good life without you. I'll do more than protect the baby. I'll protect you and Violet too. With my life."

She let him cry.

When she heard him being honest, and his family hadn't warned him, she knew she'd give him another chance.

*Why not?*

She knew how she felt about him.

“Please don't leave me again,” he said. “I'm an idiot on a good day. I'm an asshole on a bad one, but I mean well most of the time in between.”

Zayn laughed.

“Ehhh, he's not wrong. If you look up confused in the dictionary, the cowboy's picture is there under the definition.”

That was okay.

She was confused too, and they'd figure this out together as they took this journey.

Instead of making it more difficult, she lifted his head and stared into his eyes. Eve needed one thing and then, she could forget the past.

“Then make a promise. I need to know you're in for the long haul. We made a baby, Dakota. It was an accident, but still...”

He stopped her.

“No, our child isn't an accident. It'll be a miracle. It's a gift, but it will never be a mistake. Ever, and I'll kill anyone who says that.”

She smiled.

And there was the man she wanted by her side.

“I agree.”

Dakota took a chance.

He kissed her, and it was soft, gentle, and she loved every second of it. She'd seen the other side of Dakota, the broken side.

Now, she was seeing another part.

**He was sweet.**



When he broke the kiss, he put her down and focused on Violet.

“Can I date your mom?” he asked.

Violet thought about it.

“Let’s see how you behave,” she said, smiling.  
“Luckily for you, I’m easily bribed.”

He lifted a brow.

“Bribed?”

“Yeah, you have piano skills, and I want them,” she said. “My mom for some lessons.”

He laughed.

“Spicy like her mother,” he said. “This is going to be fun.” Then, he held out his hand.

When Violet took it, he winked at her.

“You got your lessons, Kiddo.”

When he looked over at his family, Jagger was recording him.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

He laughed.

“Recording a memory. Rogue wants to see this going down,” he said.

Well, the part coming next.

Dakota just rolled his eyes.

Maura had a job to do. It appeared, everyone was going to win in this one, but, now, unfortunately, they had work to do.

Maura knew they’d given them as much time as they could.

She’d already sent Remmy the address, and they had to head there.

“Well, now that you’ve kissed and made up, we have to go. Merry, can you and Boone stay here and continue to do some research on the five cops? Maybe we can figure something out that will lead us to Chevy.”

Merry and Boone were in.

“Sure,” she said.

“Stella, you’re in because you’re pregnant. Tommy, we’re going to kill cops so...”

He didn’t miss a beat.

“Pass,” he said. “I’ll stick here with Violet and the other half of the team.”

Yeah, she got it.

It was about to get nasty up in that *‘borrowed’* house, and she couldn’t blame him. She didn’t like killing Marines—unless it was Micah or Chevy.

She was gunning for the last remaining one.

“Okay, the rest of us are going to head out and get this handled.”

Dakota had been standing there holding Eve’s hand, and he reassured her.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he said to Eve. “Try to stay out of trouble.”

She actually smiled.

Then, she dropped the bomb right on the man who was just recovering from a day full of surprises.

“Oh, didn’t Maura tell you?”

He lifted a brow.

“Tell me what?”

“She offered me a position. Adder is coming out of retirement. I’m going out with you. It seems I missed doing this goody-two-shoes shit.”

It took a second to register.

Only, they all saw when it occurred to him what she was saying.

You couldn't miss it.

And that's when it happened.

All the blood drained from Dakota's face, and he couldn't say jack shit.

Jagger laughed and zoomed in.

"And that's the money shot," he said, continuing to record for Rogue and Jinx who were missing the funniest moments of the day.

"Oh, Jesus," Dakota said, blinking but saying nothing else.

*What could he say?*

Stupidity had its price.

It was going to be bone-chilling terror as he watched his pregnant woman fight for justice in *New Orleans*.

And it was going to be hell.

**For him.**

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## *Chapter Ten*

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*En Route To*

*The Wilcox Residence*

*Friday Afternoon*

**W**isely, when Dakota found out that Adder was back, he said nothing. He kept his mouth locked shut, but his eyes were the window to the soul, and they were a symphony of displeasure.

Not saying it was the hardest thing he'd ever done... that just might be an understatement.

Oh, and it was clear that it cost him so much to keep from saying jack shit. From the look of horror on his face from the second he found out Adder was out of retirement until now in the ride, they all knew that he wanted to demand she stay in.

Yeah, but that boat had sailed.

Someone had already pissed off a snake once, and doing it again wouldn't have a good outcome.

At least he was self-aware of that.

Maybe a younger snake could teach an old hunting dog new tricks.

Instead of being a dick, he shut his pie hole, kept his thoughts to himself, and did something that all the women appreciated.

Dakota tried his best.

Unfortunately for him, though, while enough for the ladies, the men...they weren't letting him get away without a few rough moments.

Yeah, his friends busted balls.

**Left.**

**And.**

**Right.**

All of the way there, they asked Adder about what role she wanted to play, and if she was up for killing while carrying a baby on board.

They asked how long she could snipe with a baby belly.

Oh, and they asked if she was available for a job the day after she delivered, just to be dicks.

The whole time, Dakota fought hard to say nothing, and it was a Herculean effort too.

There was no doubt in his mind why they were riding him so damn hard.

Because he'd been a douchebag.

He had all of this coming because of the shitty comments he'd made over the last three months about leaving and how dangerous it was to have kids when you did what they did.

Payback was a bitch.

“So, Dakota,” Zayn began. “Still planning to saddle up that horse of yours and ride out of town?” he asked, grinning a little too much.

Dakota stared at him.

“I swear to God, I'll punch you in the face.”

It made him laugh.

And that was the Dakota they all loved to bust.

To reassure him, Eve patted him on the hand and winked at him.

Maura knew they needed to focus.

“We're at the coordinates that Rogue was transmitting. Are you guys done busting ass? Or can we maybe get to work?” she asked, staring right at Zayn.

“Uh, your husband...”

“Knows better,” Maura said. “Now stop being dicks to see who is a bigger one. Leave the man alone, and get focused before I kick you in your brass.”

That said it all.

The Major was done letting the soldiers act like fools. They had to work.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Zayn said, saluting her.

Maura rolled her eyes.

“Let’s go.”

Out of the vehicle, they hustled toward the house, but Dakota didn’t move as fast.

He was hovering.

As everyone else headed in, he stopped Eve. She was in body armor, all black, and he wanted to throw up. He could take the guys riding him, but he was worried.

This was going to be hell.

He was out of the frying pan and into the blazing flames of Hades.

Of course, this was his luck.

“Yes?” she asked, trying not to laugh, even though she knew what was coming. When they were suiting up to get in the vehicle, Maura had warned her.

Apparently, Dakota was a caveman.

As were Zayn, Jagger, Rogue, Boone, and Gene.

Maura had reassured her that they tried not to, but Hunters had to be themselves.

She also told her not to hold it against him, and that he just wanted to protect her.

Well, she had news for him.

She wanted to be protected.

After a life of dangerous things, she could hold her own, but there was nothing so satisfying as looking over your

shoulder and not seeing the danger, but a man who had your back. That was exactly what she craved.

**His protectiveness.**

So now, she was waiting for him to lose it, so she could reassure him.

And she'd be calm.

Adder wasn't riled up.

"Yes?" she asked, as he stared into her eyes, clearly conflicted. Had he not been, she would have questioned how he felt about her.

*What man would be enjoying this?*

"Please don't do this," he said. "I know I have no right to ask, but you're pregnant."

She let him talk.

"I'll take your place. I'll do the killing. I want the mother of my child safe. Go home, and take care of Violet and our unborn child. Please."

She reassured him.

"I am safe. You're going to protect us. I have faith in you as the man I love, and the father of our child."

**Good God.**

**This sucked.**

"Eve."

She just stared into his eyes.

Dakota was going to have to face his fears. If they were going to work as a couple, as parents, he was going to need to trust her and her him.

That's the only way it would work.

"Please. Our child..."

She took his hand and placed it over her belly. It was covered by Kevlar. Because she was petite, normal Kevlar on say, Jinx, didn't cover all of her abdomen. On her, it did.

“We’re safe. I’m going to need you to trust me and protect us.”

His heart was racing.

He said one word, and it explained it.

“Sarah.”

She touched his cheek.

“Dakota, I’m not Sarah. I’m a killing machine, and I’ve been trained to survive. When I’m too big to do this, I won’t, but right now, I miss having a mission. I miss being near you guys. For the first time in my life, I realized that I didn’t have to be a solo creature. I could be with a family and feel useful. Please don’t ask me not to.”

He took her face in his hands.

“If I lose you or that baby...”

It was crazy that in six hours, he’d gone from not giving a fuck about anything to having everything to lose. It boggled his mind how someone he swore he didn’t need or want now became his whole world.

Eve and that baby were his future, and he wanted nothing less than her, the baby, and Violet.

He had piano lessons to give.

She stared up into his eyes.

“If we’re going to make it, you’re going to have to trust me, and protect me.”

He got it.

He’d let fear rule, and now, he was going into protective mode.

“And you won’t get angry if I’m overprotective? I’ve never done this before.”

She shook her head.

“I’ve never been protected. It kinda feels nice to be able to relax a bit and just be me. Unless you get caveman-y, I’m not going to get bitchy.”



He got it.

“Okay, then, let’s do this. Stay by me,” he said. “No one is touching you or my child,” he admitted.

He had always prided himself on being the kind of man who put his partner first. He was super protective and tried to put that away. If Eve wanted that man, she’d get him.

For him, her pregnancy changed everything. Once more, he had everything to lose, but this time, he wasn’t going to lose it. This time, he was going to have what everyone else did.

### **A family.**

To reassure him, Eve held his hand and smiled up at him.

“Yes, Dear.”

He actually laughed.

“You’re funny for a tiny little fairy that I can carry on my back.”

She winked.

“Kinky. I learned a new fetish today. We can try that out later, forest intruder.”

He laughed.

Yeah, this was going to be an interesting adventure, and he kind of liked it.

Holding hands, he escorted Eve into the house. Once inside, they found the rest of the family gathered around the two cops. It appeared they were in time for the interrogation.

“Let’s see what they know,” Jagger said.

Hopefully, it would help them find Chevy.

“Wake them,” Maura said, as she rolled her neck and got ready.

It was clear who was in charge.

*Not Mikey O’, but the Major.*

When Rogue and Zayn dumped two buckets of cold water on them, they came awake pretty damn fast. Their sputtering told the tale.

Soon, their screaming would.

“Welcome to the party.”

The cops looked around, and it was clear they knew the kind of trouble they were in. Let’s just say the shit was getting deeper by the second.

“We’re not talking,” Cecil immediately said. “We don’t give a fuck what you do.”

Oh, well, challenge the Major and find out that it could get worse.

Without hesitating, she pulled her Ruger, and Maura put the nose of the gun against his head and pulled the trigger. It had the response she wanted.

First, Cecil was dead, blowing his brains out the back of his head. Then, his partner lost it.

Immediately, he freaked out.

“No! Please!”

Oh, it was a little too late to be begging. This cop was tied to something so dirty, that his mercy opportunity was shot to shit.

Maura rested her boot on the chair dangerously close to his junk, as she placed the nose of the gun that just took out his partner under his chin.

“Then you should probably tell me everything you know about the modeling agencies and the missing women. Five ladies, that we know about, were conned into a contract and sold into sex. I want to know who is handling this shitshow.”

Granted she knew who, but she wanted this man to information dump all he knew before his life came to an end.

That was all she had to say.

Stellan began talking.

**Fast.**

“We were brought in to help out. We don’t know who hired us, so I can’t tell you that. We were asked to make some reports disappear.”

Rogue clued her in.

“He’s dirtier than that. I overheard them talking about using my wife before they shipped her off. They are definitely hunting for women too.”

She stared at him.

“Are you now?”

He said nothing.

Well, the pistol whip to his face changed his mind.

“Yes! We help find the women too if they call us. I’m sorry!”

Now, she was pissed. Cops should be there to help, not do this kind of shit.

“**HOW MANY?**” she asked, knowing he’d be aware of what she was asking.

At first, he hesitated, but when she moved her arm to pistol-whip him again, that loosened his tongue considerably.

“Twenty-seven,” he said softly.

She stared him in the eyes.

“You helped send twenty-seven vulnerable women out of the country and into the sex trade?” she asked. “Fellow Americans?”

He swallowed but said nothing.

Only, Maura saw the fear.

Never let it be said that she couldn’t read a room. He wasn’t saying something. She could see the conflicted look as he tried to decide if telling them would save him or damn him further.

“What aren’t you saying?” she asked. “Because I can end your life painfully, or mercifully. You choose.”

He must have believed her.

“It wasn’t only women. Some were children,” he whispered.

**Oh, holy, fuck.**

She turned and took a deep breath before she snapped his head right off his neck like he deserved. As a mother, this information was horrifying.

Jagger saw his wife ready to lose it.

“Where the hell did you get children?” Jagger asked, moving closer to him.

Stellan didn’t want to die.

He was honest.

“I didn’t personally send children. I heard from my partner that they were also dealing in them too.”

Jagger got closer.

His face was inches from the man’s.

“If you have any sense, you’re going to own this now because as a parent, as every one of us in this room is, we’re going to punish you in ways you can’t imagine.”

That worked.

“Cecil told me that he was told if we were called to a report, and the woman who called us had a kid...we could take them both, and we were to.”

Jagger said nothing.

“Apparently, the modeling agency was preying on single women and if a single mother came in, and she had kids, they took the kid and separated them. The kid went to one location and the mother to another.”

And that was a fate worse than death.

All the mothers moved closer.

Rogue was honest.

Oh, Jagger had been wrong. It wasn't going to be the men who had at Stellan.

It was going to be the women.

“See the nice ladies?” he asked. “They don't take kindly to what you just said. You're about to get fucked up, and we don't feel sorry for you.”

Maura composed herself and grabbed him by the shirt. She was ready to end him.

“Where are they?” Maura asked, knowing they had to shut this down ASAP.

In that moment, their priorities shifted. There wasn't time to find Chevy. They had to make sure they deconstructed his businesses first so that no more women were preyed upon—or the children.

Stellan shook his head.

“I don't have the information. The guy who brought us in keeps track. He doesn't trust the man doing it, and he is keeping records to make sure we don't get burned.”

Well, they had bad news.

He was burned.

Maura's hand went to his throat, and she began squeezing until his eyes went huge.

“Do you think I'm standing here for my own sake?” she asked. “I suggest you give me his name.”

The man nodded, and when Maura released his throat, he spilled it.

“Tate West.”

Well, no shock there. He was on the list.

They had to find that man to get the list of women and children. Then, they had to get that list to Elizabeth ASAP. They might still have a chance at a recovery mission if there were Marines on the ground in those countries.

Maura pulled out her phone and made a call to the one person who might know who that was.

Well, the two people.

When Gene's face came on the screen, she cut to the chase.

There was no time for chitchat.

"Tate West. He's on our list. What do you know about him off the top of your head?" she asked.

Gene thought about it.

"You know, the name sounds familiar, but I'm not sure. Let me ask Tommy."

He turned the phone, and the man was making some cookies with Violet.

They were both in aprons, and she was eating cookie dough from the bowl.

"Ask," Gene said.

Oh, she did.

"Tommy, who is Tate West?" Maura asked. "Do you know that name?"

The man didn't hesitate.

"Sure I do. He's the night shift evidence locker supervisor. He's the guy that keeps track of anything that's brought in. He was a beat cop but got promoted right around when I got my job."

Gene got it now.

That's why he didn't know the name. If the man had been a beat cop, there were so many of them on duty in *New Orleans*.

"Is he now?" Maura asked.

Tommy nodded.

It appeared that El Gato had really gotten his hands on the cops in that city. They had a lot of criminals playing cop,

but that was going to end, and soon.

That was for damn sure.

She was curious.

“Can you ID him?” she asked.

He didn’t hesitate.

“Yeah, easily. Why?”

Oh, because if he had a list, they needed to get their hands on it. This part of the job was about to get tricky, but what choice did they have?

“We’ll talk when I’m back. I’m taking care of two dirty cops,” she said. “Well, one, now. We’ll be back in soon and update you and Gene.”

“Sure thing, Major,” Tommy said, as he went back to baking with the teenager.

Gene turned the phone.

“What’s he done?” he asked.

She told him everything, and the minute she said kids, he got red.

The rims of his ears were crimson, and the rage was on his face.

“That’s foul. How old were these kids?” he asked. “So I can really get pissed off, come down there, and jack some asshole up.”

Well, they had that part handled.

**Trust her.**

No one in that room was entertained by any of this, and this man’s life was pretty much over. He was living on borrowed time. These homeowners were coming back from vacation to a very messy cop situation.

She focused on Stellan as he was crying.

“I suggest that you tell me, or I will take you apart and keep you alive the entire time I do it. You don’t look like the

kind of guy who will enjoy torture, Stellan.”

At the word *‘torture’*, he spilled his guts.

**FAST.**

“From what Tate told us, they were from ages five to thirteen. That’s all I really know about it.”

**God.**

She wanted to be sick.

If it had been babies, that was bad enough, but then it would have likely been black-market-baby sales. That generally meant that the babies were bought by infertile couples.

*At the ages taken...*

They were children who knew who their parents were, and that they were being abducted.

That meant pedophiles.

“How many kids?” she asked.

“Five.”

“Please, please, please, hurt him,” Gene said. “I mean really hurt him. I will do it. Give me the location, and I’ll come down there and peel his flesh from his body.”

There was no need.

She had this.

“Oh, I’m going to be the one who puts this filthy animal down. It’s cops like you that give the rest of them a bad name,” she said. “We need that list.”

She rolled her neck, and there was the audible popping of bones.

“Where is it? The records?” she asked. “I need to find those kids and their mothers. If you stall me or you give me shit, you’re about to live the next twenty-four hours in more pain than you ever felt in your life. I’ll take you apart.”

That was all he had to hear.



He was crying like a pussy.

Zayn pulled his head up and held a blade to his throat.

“You heard the angry lady. Where does Tate keep the records?”

The scared cop whimpered.

Then, he finally told them.

“He keeps it where no one can get it, in the evidence locker. His desk is in there, and it’s in that.”

**Well, shit.**

Her hope had been that it was at his house, so they could swing by, get the man, get the book, and get out.

*That it wasn't...*

This was going to be more difficult. That desk was in the deep bowels of the police department. That was going to mean breaking in there.

**Damn.**

**Damn.**

**Damn.**

There were a ton of cops at any time, and they weren't exactly invisible. If Chevy had El Gato's bought cops, they would know their faces.

Only, what wouldn't she do to save a child?

“Mar, we gotta do it,” Rogue said.

Oh, she was aware.

It was time to get moving.

“Gene, we'll be back in shortly, and we'll work out a plan. For now, though, I have a scumbag dirty cop to teach a lesson.”

That was fine by him.

**Hell!**

That was fine by everyone there.

Gene and Tommy only had one final wish. As their faces appeared on the screen, side-by-side, she saw the rage.

“Make him bleed,” Gene said.

“Please,” Tommy added.

Oh, that was the plan.

“Expect us back at Chartres,” she said.

She went to tuck her phone away, but instead, had a plan. Yeah, it would come in handy,

Maura got ready to take out more of El Gato and Chevy’s trash.

“Well, Stellan, do you have anything to say for yourself?” she asked, holding her phone up and recording him. She wanted everything that he said going forward on the record.

“I’m sorry. It was wrong to help as he was selling those women and children. Chevy Chesary made us do it. He told us to. We were scared. I’m so sorry. Really.”

She kept going, doing a video interrogation for future use. It happened a great deal to prisoners, and this man was now hers.

“How old were the kids, Detective?” she asked, using his title so that when this came out, the world would know the truth.

**He.**

**Was.**

**Dirty.**

“They were ages five to thirteen,” he said, as everyone stared at her.

They must have thought she was insane. She’d already gone over this. Oh, but there was always a method to her madness.

“And how did you get them?”

“Cecil and I didn’t. It was when the mothers went into the two modeling agencies. When they were seen there, they were chosen. Tate said that they were chosen because they had no one and just wanted a better life. Chevy sold them. God. He sold them to men. I’m sorry.”

At his confession, she stopped recording.

“Do you have a burner phone?” she asked her husband, hoping he had a spare.

Usually, he did.

“Sure. Why?”

“Can I have it?”

His wife could have anything she wanted.

Instead of questioning her further, he tossed it to her, and she immediately took the number and forwarded that video to the phone from her burner phone.

“We’ll leave this phone on him to be found. I feel bad for the people who own this house. When they return, it’s going to be a crime scene.”

Zayn grinned.

“Look at the Major, creating a plan on the fly, and a pretty diabolical one at that.”

Oh, she wasn’t done yet.

There was more to come.

She pulled two knives that she’d sharpened in case she needed them. Well, it looks like that had been a good plan of action, now hadn’t it been?

She glanced over.

“Mamba, Adder, why don’t we show men who help sell women and children what happens when they get caught by the judge, jury, and executioner?”

Oh, the Marines would clean up the mess if given the chance, and this man...he was part of that.

The two women came closer.

Adder flipped out her own blade.

“That works for me,” she said. “They were babies,” she whispered in his ear. “You sold babies to perverted men who likely hurt and killed them. You’re a dead man,” she admitted.

Maura handed a blade to Jinx, and then Maura began cutting away the man’s clothing. As he fought, screamed, and begged, they stripped him down.

He began profusely trying to save his ass, but that wasn’t happening. She glanced over at the men who were watching with zero emotion on their faces.

“Please find a way to shut him up,” Maura said.

That was all they had to hear.

Dakota grabbed a piece of the man’s discarded clothing, and shoved it in his mouth, choking him on it.

Then, Zayn, who lived and died by the belief that people should always carry duct tape, slapped a piece over his mouth.

When he was silent again, the ladies got to work.

Each one shoved a knife into the man’s flesh, and slowly, filleted him.

They cut down to the bone, opening his legs and arms up sickly.

“Well, I’m not hungry now,” Dakota said. “That’s enough to make you a vegetarian,” he added. “Filet of bad cop. I give it zero stars.”

“I give the ladies five though,” Rogue said. “Never piss off a mom, wife, or female Marine. They get stab-y.”

**Clearly.**

The man screamed into the gag as the pain had to be incredible.

“Imagine what those five-to-thirteen-year-olds felt when they were taken from their mothers and old perverted

men hurt them,” Jinx said, as she wasn’t done.

She began cutting around his face as if she was going to remove it.

The man was a bloody mess.

They hit arteries and veins.

When they were done, they wiped off the blades and put them away as the man suffered. Like Maura had promised, he didn’t die.

He lived through the torture.

Maura focused on Remmy who had been quiet.

“Did you hit up the bar?” she asked, giving the man time to expire for his crimes.

It wasn’t lost on him that he’d done the same thing to El Gato. It was clear that they’d both been trained by the same sadist.

He nodded.

“Yeah, and I’m not sure what to think about it,” he said. “Artemis was there. She asked if we hit up that bar she gave us the name of months ago. She was really focused on that.”

Maura thought about it.

“Elizabeth said not to trust her, and we opted not to go there because it was too convenient. I know when it comes down to it, I trust Elizabeth more than anyone. She’s always had our backs.”

Everyone there agreed.

*Including Remington.*

“It’s totally going to be a trap,” he admitted. “She’s a snake, and Calyx gave me a heads-up about something else.”

“We don’t claim her,” Jinx said. “She’s not a snake. She’s scum. There’s a difference.”

He laughed.

“My bad. It’s just a saying, Mamba and Adder. No insult meant,” he said, giving them both fist bumps.

From where he stood, Jagger was curious.

“What did Calyx warn you about, exactly?” he asked. “Her—as in Artemis?”

He nodded and thought back to that kiss. He’d been thinking about it the whole time he was there. It was hard to forget Calyx’s lips against his, and how she tasted like fruit-flavored gum.

He explained.

“Yeah, she said that word on the street is Artemis is building an army of mercenaries up for some reason. I’m betting she’s buying up the ones who worked for El Gato and are now unemployed. She’s an opportunist. If that’s not bad enough, she’s buying mass quantities of guns too.”

“Uh-oh,” Rogue said. “That’s not good. She’s prepping for war. The only time you buy guns and soldiers is if you have a heads-up that something is brewing.”

The man in the chair kept screaming in pain, and they ignored him.

Thank God for duct tape. Zayn was right about it.

Remmy wasn’t done.

“Oh, it gets worse. The Russians are heading this way. We don’t know why, but I’m betting it has something to do with the guns and Artemis. You’ve been laying low the last three months.”

**Shit.**

“Okay, well, keep your ears open. If there’s something brewing, we may have to jump right to that. Russians are generally low-key unless someone bought their mob services. They are for hire,” Jagger said.

“Or they are who Artemis is building an army against,” Remmy said. “With her, we won’t know until it bites us in the ass. She’s sneaky.”

He was aware.

“I’ll be out patrolling tonight,” he said. “I’ll swing by The Underground, and I’ll keep an eye open to see what’s going on. Maybe a drunk will run his mouth.”

Yeah, they knew where he was heading.

**To watch Calyx.**

*Why?*

When he first came there, he’d disappear in the night, and they had Zayn follow to make sure he wasn’t going to burn them.

**Not.**

**Even.**

**Close.**

Instead, he sat on the roof across from Calyx’s apartment, gun in hand, either ready to kill her, or watching her.

It was a tossup on which.

They either had a peeping Spook or a paranoid Hunter. The jury was still out.

“Good plan,” Maura said. “Call us, Remmy, if you need us.”

Oh, he would.

“What are you guys doing?” he asked. “I know you’ll have a plan.”

Oh, she did, and they didn’t have a choice. This mess was forcing her hand.

“We need one team to hit the police station, and the other half is going to a bar. Elizabeth said it’s owned by Cruz Santiago, and he was El Gato’s right-hand man, so...”

No one looked amused that they were doing exactly what Artemis wanted.

Call them crazy, but that seemed bad.

Yeah, and dangerous.

“The bar won’t be bad,” she reassured. “It’s going to be the police station I have to worry about. I’ll work out a plan,” she promised.

“What about him?” Jinx asked, pointing at the freaking-out man. He was bleeding enough to slowly be dying, but not fast enough.

Maura tucked the phone into his shirt pocket, and then put the nose of her gun under his chin. She pulled the trigger, ending his whining, closing out that part of his life, and giving the women some well-deserved justice.

Well, that answered that question.

When parts of his skull dropped from the ceiling, Zayn barely managed to avoid it.

“Well, a little heads-up would have been nice, Major,” Zayn said, checking his hair to make sure that it was detective-free.

“My bad,” she joked. “Next time, I promise.”

Then, Maura looked around.

“Did you steal anything worth value?” she asked their two thieves.

“Yep,” Jinx said. “They had gold and some money. We have enough to make it look like a theft gone bad.”

That worked for her as a backup plan in case what she was planning went bad.

Maura pulled out her knife, again, and carved a Z into the dead detectives’ foreheads.

Jagger was curious.

“Uh, what is that for?” he inquired. “Are you getting a signature?”

Maura explained.

“Well, someone has to take credit for killing dirty cops, and it can’t be us. So... let the good cops think about this one,



and try to figure it out.”

He laughed.

“So now we’re not only hunters but Z?”

She shrugged.

“Why not?” she asked. “Elizabeth hates when we point it at us, so let’s make her life easier for a change. A happy boss is a boss we can call for help.”

That was always a good thing. When they had to call her, she needed to be happy.

The heat was on here, and they might need some favors.

While they’d love to take credit for this, they just couldn’t.

They were the bad guys.

When she was done, and they’d cleaned up, it was time to set the scene.

“Jinx, make sure this place is ready for the homeowners.”

She laughed.

“Can I keep the dress?” she asked.

Maura found her amusing for so many reasons.

“Your husband’s kink is none of my business, Mrs. Cleaver.”

Rogue grinned wickedly.

“Mind ya business, Major,” he said, winking at his wife.

As they headed out, locking the place down, they stopped at the vehicles. It was then that Eve clued them in.

“Make sure you plan for my assistance. Dakota and I talked. I’ll definitely be joining you,” Eve said. “I do love hitting up a bar or sneaking into a police station.”

Maura was curious.

“Are you back, Adder?” she asked. “Once I work you into the plan, it’s kinda set in stone.”

The woman understood how difficult the Major’s job was.

“Count me in. I liked being part of the team. I don’t want to be a loner anymore. I like having a family, and Jinx was right. You can always come home, and I’m home with you nuts.”

Maura gave her a fist bump.

“Welcome,” she said. “We love having you on our team, and as a heads-up...you’re just as nutty as the rest of us lunatics.”

She found that funny.

“Are the nuts running the asylum?” she asked.

Oh, you could say that.

Know who wasn’t as enthusiastic about her being back and it official?

The baby daddy.

Dakota just closed his eyes.

“This is going to be a long seven months. I don’t know if I’m going to make it.”

Rogue and Jagger laughed.

Yeah, welcome to their world.

It was brutal loving a badass woman.

And full of worry.



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## *Chapter Eleven*

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*Chartres*

*Mid Afternoon*

*Regrouping Time*

The whole way back, Maura was quiet as she let Jagger drive. Her military boots were on the dashboard, as she was writing in a notebook. That was something she did often when she was working on a plan.

While it might just look like numbers and equations, somehow, to the Major, it translated into a statistically accurate plan.

Someone's brain was just wired differently.

The Major had to math all the damn time.

**That was her thing.**

Everyone in the vehicle was silent, too, allowing her to get some work done. They knew damn well that they were now up against the clock.

There were kids in play, and they'd be dead before they could get to them if they wasted even a single, solitary second.

That couldn't happen.

This was going to take speed, precision, and accuracy. All of which were the Major's specialty.

No one was going to get in her way on this one.

When they arrived back at the house, they divided up.

The three Marine ladies had to go clean up since they'd gotten a little spilled detective on their gear.

Honestly, no one wanted the blood of a dirty cop under their nails.

As they were getting into clean clothing, the men were in the kitchen waiting for them, and they were predicting the

nuclear fallout of Adder joining their team.

Call it a hunch, but old dogs were hard to train, and this dog was pacing around.

No one was shocked.

**No.**

**One.**

Dakota was Dakota, and he was pretty much predictable.

Now, while alone, they were going to do what they spent a hell of a lot of time doing.

**Clean up.**

**Aisle Dakota.**

“She’ll be fine,” Jagger said. “She’s freaking Adder. You can stop wearing a path in the floor. It’s not like she’s any less deadly. When a woman is with child, they tend to get meaner.”

All the husbands laughed.

*If that wasn't the absolute truth of the matter...*

Only, Dakota had the fear of Sarah squeezing his soul, and they all understood that.

“She’s also carrying my baby, and one I’d like to meet one day. When your wives were pregnant, you guys lost your minds. Rogue, you paid Adder five million dollars to babysit your wife.”

He wasn’t lying, and he’d do it again.

“You, Jagger, practically wore the Major on your chest all day long. You were so close to the back of her, we thought someone sewed your dick into her.”

He snorted.

“Sorry, I had a visual,” he said.

“And you, Zayn, yelled at our dog because he licked Stella. You have your own crazy to deal with.”

“The Playboy trained that dog. He was a hot mess before Jinx. I can’t trust Odin. He might kiss her to death. That’s a fear right there.”

Rogue laughed.

“You’re insane.”

Zayn gasped.

“You don’t say?” he asked.

Rogue shook his head and focused on Dakota.

“It’s funny how the guy who swore that kids were a mistake is suddenly freaking out and gets it. Talk about fate bitch slapping someone hard.”

**He.**

**Was.**

**Aware.**

It sucked too.

“Oh, I’m definitely freaking out. Why I suddenly have this clarity is also a mystery. If any of you geniuses want to clue me in…”

Zayn bit into an apple that he snagged from the bowl on the counter. Stella kept them in healthy food since she’d taken on the role of house mother.

Because he wasn’t letting her out of the house with a gun—unless he was wearing it. She was carrying his next child, and that wasn’t happening.

Because Dakota was Dakota, he explained.

“Ehh, you were bitchy for one reason and only one reason. You were scared. That’s why you didn’t want kids. No one really dislikes having kids. Well, decent people don’t. You just got freaked out that you’d have to bury them both and that made you act stupid.”

He stared at him.

Sometimes, he forgot that Zayn was pretty smart and astute. He hid behind the big Native act all too much.

“I really don’t like you. Be more like Boone. He sits there and says nothing. We all like Boone for a reason. He doesn’t cause shit.”

*The men all laughed.*

*And laughed.*

*And laughed.*

Why?

Because Dakota was in the position he was in because Boone had slipped him a Voodoo-y spell bracelet. He wasn’t so innocent.

“What?” Dakota asked.

“Nothing,” Boone said, giving them all a one-eye glare. He’d curse their asses if they opened their mouths and pointed the crazy at him.

**No way.**

Dakota sensed something off.

He was suspicious on a good day, and today had blindsided the hell out of him.

“No. You’re not telling me something. I’m freaked out, not dumb. I can read a room. What is it that made the chuckle fucks laugh, and you get nervous?”

No one said anything.

“Okay, I’ll go ask Stella because she’ll just tell me. We all know whatever it is, you’ve already told her, Zayn, because you’re a gossipy grandmother.”

**Okay.**

He had him there.

Instead of arguing, Zayn shrugged. It was time they told him the truth anyway.

“That bracelet got your babe knocked up. Boone put the Voodoo hoo-doo on you-boo-boo.”

Dakota stared down at it.

Then, over at the man.

“Pardon?” he asked. “How did beads do that? It’s only a bracelet,” he said, thinking about how it got warm in his dreams, and how he’d missed knowing that Eve was pregnant.

Maybe he was oblivious.

From not far away, Boone was glaring at him.

“Snitches get stitches, bitches. I’m not helping you again!” he said. “Your ass is on your own.”

Zayn knew the man would figure it out eventually. Dakota wasn’t dumb.

Someone would tell him, and honestly, now was the time to do it. While stirred up, Dakota was worried about Eve, not being angry.

So, he explained.

“Remember when he gave you a bracelet when we were out checking out El Gato’s warehouse?”

Of course, he did.

He wasn’t an idiot either. His short-term memory was just fine.

“Uh, yeah. When we got back from the surveillance mission, he said it would calm me down.”

He laughed.

“Not the Voodoo spell he used. You accidentally got the fertility spell beads. He hexed you accidentally. He’s wearing the calm beads. He was trying to knock his wife up, and you got in the crossfire.”

**Oh, boy.**

Boone’s wife was curious now.

Merry was staring at her husband.

“Oh, no. Boone. Are you still trying to get me pregnant and slip that nightmare onto my wrist?” she asked. “How many times do I have to tell you that it’s all kinds of wrong to use the Voudon to get your wife pregnant?”



“More than once?” he asked, keeping his one eye on his woman. She was fast and could get mean if he used Voodoo on her—unless it was to amp up their sex.

That was always welcome.

“Pretty much,” she said. “Only, I’ll let Dakota handle you. I’m sure he’s not going to be nice about it.”

Dakota stared at him.

“So you used Voodoo on me to amp up the mojo so I’d knock up Adder?” he asked. “Against my will?”

He tried to explain.

“In my defense, like they said, it was to put you on a calming path. It really was an accident. The beads are the same color, just in a different pattern,” he said, holding up his wrist. “It’s not like I used the hair Zayn stole from you. That would be wrong, and crossing a line.”

Dakota moved closer.

Honestly, Boone was expecting a punch to the face, and then, he was going to kick Zayn in the balls.

Misery, and pain, liked company.

What he got, instead, was a kiss to the middle of the forehead.

“Do you have one for protection? Like for a certain snake as she’s out there carrying precious cargo? Is that possible?” he asked.

And he was calm.

*What?*

*The?*

*Hell?*

They all just stared at him as if he’d lost his damn mind because he wasn’t the least bit angry.

That wasn’t how Dakota rolled.

Stella shook her head.

“Who are you?”

He shrugged.

“You three douchebags told me not to think and do the opposite of what I’d normally do. Old Dakota would be mad. Worried but back with Eve, Dakota, is not mad. I did it my way and it made a mess. Now, I’m doing it your way and trying to go with it.”

*Still...*

This was weird.

“I don’t know which Dakota I like less. Douchy Dakota, or eerily compliant Dakota,” Zayn said. “This one reminds me of a zombie. Maybe we should give him some beads for that.”

Dakota punched him in the body armor.

**HARD.**

“Shut up, dumbass.”

Zayn laughed.

“Is that a possibility to get one made to protect Eve and my child?” Dakota inquired again, being serious.

“Uh, sure,” he said. “I can do that. When are you punching me in the face?” he asked.

“I’m not. I’ll punch Zayn instead. He should know not to rat people out **LIKE A SNITCH!**”

Zayn shook his head.

“A guy can’t win.”

Before Dakota could say anything, they had company. The three Marines were back.

“What did we miss?” Maura asked when they came into the room. They heard the laughter when they were leaving the secret door under the stairs.

From where he stood, Dakota threw them all under the bus. It was time they learned not to meddle. Oh, he wasn’t angry, but in their world, they rode ass hard.

It was payback time.

“The guys had Boone slip me a fertility bracelet, that he swears was an accident, so I’d knock Eve up and we’d be in this position for my **OWN GOOD**. They just confessed.”

Maura actually gasped.

“You Voodoo’d him?” she asked. “Against his will? That’s got to be a foul ball,” she said.

Eve moved closer and stared at him.

“Uh, anyone got a snake trap? There’s an angry Adder coming my way. Thanks, Dakota,” he muttered.

The man just laughed.

It was all fun and games until his woodland fairy booted the pirate’s ass around the room, now wasn’t it?

“Did you now?” she asked, as Boone’s wife sat not that far away sipping her coffee.

“Don’t blame him. He’s a slut for the Voudon. He knows not what he does,” she said, making Eve laugh. “I’ve tried to talk him down from the spell ledge, but he’s insane and wants me pregnant more than anything. Little does he know the impotency spell I did is kicking his ass.”

He gasped.

“That’s not funny!”

She disagreed there.

“It kinda is. Who knew I could make your swimmers get confused,” she joked. Sometimes, being a scientist and dealing with a religious husband was insane.

This was one of those times.

Adder cleared her throat.

“Mr. Savage, I have a question.”

Boone blinked.

“Yes?”

She got closer and lowered her voice. Then, she pulled a crisp hundred from her cargo pants.

“Got one for protection? You know, for the baby on board?” she asked. “Get it delivered. I need one ASAP. I’m small. I’m going to be really showing soon.”

Boone had not been expecting that.

The whole family was surprised and looked back and forth between them.

“My god. They are alike,” Stella said. “Dakota found his soul mate. Finally. Who would have seen that one coming?”

Eve wasn’t done.

“And his *soulmate*’ is allowed to carry guns, Blondie,” Eve said. “Can you with yours?” she asked, not letting anyone bust Dakota’s ass.

She was feeling protective of him too.

Stella pointed.

“I was just put in my place by Adder because you won’t let me have a gun. I hate you all. None of you nuts get to be this baby’s godparents!”

Zayn snickered where he stood.

And no one believed it.

Instead of going there, Maura sat down, and she was ready to work.

“Okay, chuckleheads, we have two places to hit. We’re going to divide up, and hit the police station to get into the evidence locker, and then the bar.”

For the last ten minutes, Gene was listening to the younger members of the family talking shit, and he was amused. Now, he was having a cup of tea, and ready to get down to work.

He liked to be in the action.

“Who is hitting the locker?” he asked.

She smiled at him.

“Well, we’re putting a snake on each team. Adder, what’s your specialty,” Maura asked, already knowing, but she wanted the team to be aware.

“Killing.”

She laughed.

That was **NOT** where she was going with that.

“Other than that.”

“I’m good with tech. I can also blow things up. I can sneak into places, but Jinx was the one who was so much better at that. So, if you’re asking in a roundabout way if I can get a team into the police station, I can, but she’s going to be better at that.”

That was exactly what she’d been asking.

“I’m better utilized in a firefight. My reflexes tested higher than Jinx’s.”

Her friend shrugged.

“Not a lie. She is faster.”

Which was befuddling to all of them since they’d seen how fast Jinx moved.

Maura made up her mind.

“Well, then Jinx, you’re going to the police station with Rogue, Gene, and Tommy.”

Immediately, caught off guard, Gene began choking on his tea.

“What?” he asked, his eyes watering. “What do you mean Tommy? Why would he need to go? He’s fine here,” he said.

She stared at him like he was loco.

“Well, he knows what Tate West looks like, and you both know your way around the precinct. Rogue and Jinx are the thieves. They will get you in and out without a situation. He’ll handle the tech, and she’ll sneak you in.”

**Oh, Jesus.**

Tommy tapped his fiancé on the shoulder.

“I know you didn’t mean that to sound like it did, Honey,” he said. “Because that will make me cranky, and when I get cranky, I get mean.”

Gene closed his mouth.

**Damn it.**

He’d hoped this day wouldn’t come. It wasn’t that Tommy couldn’t defend himself. He was a cop, and he’d been a damn good one. It was just...

He was a caveman, and he’d lost Preston.

“I’ll keep my thoughts inside my head,” Gene said. “So you still let me sleep with you.”

He patted the couch, signaling the other option.

The message was clear when it came to where Gene would be sleeping if he did otherwise.

Maura kept going.

“Now that Tommy has spoken, the rest of us will be going to the bar, minus Boone, who will keep his ass here and think about what he’s done by using Voodoo on people.”

“Can I make that bracelet for Eve, or will that be considered a bad idea?”

Maura just stared at him.

“I’ll stay here with the ladies and not touch any beads,” he said.

Zayn laughed.

Only, Boone wasn’t getting his ass busted without handing it back.

“Unless it’s okay to give Stella better gun skills with some pretty pink beads so Zayn has to let her be armed. She can tuck a piece against the baby bump.”

Immediately, the man stopped laughing.

“That’s not funny. No one is to give her a gun or a spell that helps her get a gun. That’s a calamity.”

She stepped on his foot, trying to squish his toes.

“You’re mean, my sweet Stella, but these are steel-toed boots.”

She smiled.

“Ever hear of the phrase, fuck around and find out, Marine?” she asked.

He nodded.

Oh, he had, and the last person he wanted to make angry was his pregnant wife.

“I’ll stop laughing now.”

“Good plan,” she said.

Maura was done playing games when it came to beads. Instead, she walked over to Dakota, took them from his wrist, and tucked them into her pocket.

“Well, now, no one will have to worry,” she said, focused on Boone. “Do you understand? Because we aren’t going to have a wayward Voodoo practitioner making dolls or pouches of shit, right?”

He nodded.

“Has anyone ever told you that you were mean, Major?” he asked.

Jagger laughed.

“You should see her in her brass. She makes mean look like fun. That’s why I fell in love with her.”

She pointed at him.

“You better believe it.”

He winked.

“Okay, team. We’re going to get our shit together, and we’re dividing up. We can’t head out until nightfall,” she said,

looking at her watch. “So everyone is to be in their gear and here in two hours. We’ll each go our way and handle this.”

That worked for them.

They worked best when the sun began going down, and thankfully, that was early.

“We meet up at nineteen hundred hours. Then, we’ll head out.”

Maura needed a few hours.

With each piece of evidence she found, she was realizing that she was going to have to implement the plan.

And that worried her.

It was three days beyond risky and might get someone hurt.

That was a problem.

**For her.**

**And for them all.**

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***



*Somewhere In New Orleans*

*A Bar*

*Deal Time*

Her mother had always told her that she could make a deal with the Devil, and walk out with the goods and her soul intact.

Artemis was well aware of it too.

Some people just had the gift of reading the room, and being that damn savvy at making a deal.

Some called her a snake oil saleswoman, and some called her a ghost for the CIA, but what she called herself was an entrepreneur.

**A capitalist.**

Her mother had raised her alone, and she was the product of an affair. Her mother had worked in DC, and she'd slept with a powerful man, and she'd been the byproduct.

A CIA operative so good at the game, people feared her. Sometimes, she feared herself.

She'd been burned, betrayed, and hurt in the game, and it only made her better.

*Meaner.*

*Sneakier.*

Now, she was playing a whole other game, and this one was for whoever could pay her the best.

After all, capitalism was the way of the West, and she was going to make sure she was taken care of and well.

It wasn't like she could trust a man to do that. Men were fun, but they were a distraction.

Honestly, she didn't give a shit about them.

Not one had really piqued her interest. Oh, she'd played with a few, but none that she found were her equal.

What she wanted was someone who understood, and who could talk themselves out of Hell and back, but could see the real her.

No one ever did.

**Not.**

**One.**

**Person.**

Her mother did, but she'd died in that nursing home years ago after she'd gotten back from Columbia. Dementia took her early, and every day, she prayed it wouldn't be her fate.

It was hard to watch it happen.

It was also hard to live with the cross on her shoulder because she hadn't been taking care of her mother personally.

Don't get her wrong.

She had the best care, the best nursing staff, and the best doctors. It cost a small fortune and had burned through her savings.

*Millions of dollars.*

**Testing.**

**Stem Cells.**

Anything she could get purchased in Germany to help her mother get better, and now she'd emptied her coffers.

Now, it was about retirement.

She was getting up there—in spook years. What she needed to do was make some money, get a nice little bungalow on a beach, and build straw baskets as her hobby.

Because why not weave baskets?

She was crazy enough.

With what was coming to *New Orleans*, she wanted to be able to make some money on it.

She was, after all, good at what she did.

When her phone rang, she took the call.

“Yes?” she asked, knowing who it was. “I’m already here, and I’ll be ready for the meeting. Get me the guns I’ve ordered, and I’ll have the money ready for you. If you cross me...”

The caller said something.

It made her laugh.

“I don’t give a shit about the FBI, or anyone they have on the ground. I care about doing what I need to do. I have a client. How about you don’t get us killed, and you deliver the goods?” she asked.

The man on the phone got it.

**FINALLY.**

This was no game.

This was a serious thing that had taken weeks to get into play, and she’d shit a brick if anyone screwed that up.

*This asshole.*

*The Hunters.*

*The FBI.*

While she could play nice, Artemis Dubois knew one thing.

Bad things were brewing, and if she didn't get ahead of it, she was going to get caught up in it.

And she didn't want that.

**It meant death.**

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## *Chapter Twelve*

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*Chartres Street*

*Private Rooms*

*Friday Late Afternoon*

**A**fter working out the plans, they all divided up to either get focused for the upcoming jobs, or to grab something to eat. With two pregnant women, food had to be a priority.

You didn't make a hangry woman wait.

That was the shit that got you killed.

On top of that, regrouping and calming down were important. The job of getting in and out of the police precinct was a particularly dangerous one.

You didn't walk into the enemy's home and shit on their couch and not expect it to go sideways. That meant nerves of steel and being ready for just about anything.

Gene wanted to make sure Tommy was ready for what was to come. Yes, he always wanted to go out with them, and yes, they told him he had to be ready.

He just needed to make sure the man's head was in the right space. This wasn't a social call.

People were likely going to die, and hesitating got you one thing.

**DEAD.**

The last thing Gene wanted was to bury another person he loved. Over the last three months, they'd gotten close. In fact, he couldn't imagine his life without Tommy.

He was a good man.

Somehow, in his life, Gene had been blessed three times. His years with Ethan showed him so much, and he'd become the kind of partner a person needed.

Then, his short time with Preston had given him the great capacity to love. It opened his world to being himself and not giving a shit.

Now, with Tommy, he was learning that it was okay to have someone take care of him. Not that Ethan and Preston didn't, but Tommy's love language was different than the other two men.

*Ethan's had been passion.*

*Preston's had been physical contact.*

*Tommy's was taking care of him.*

The only thing Gene wanted going forward was to be married to Tommy for the rest of his life—no matter how long that was.

In *New Orleans*, that was anyone's guess.

So now, he needed to ensure that the man was ready for what was to come. Gene came across as funny, sarcastic, and silly, at times, but once he put on that Hunter gear, he was a killer, and there was no questioning it.

Once outside in *New Orleans*, it was about survival of the fittest, and he had a fiancé to come home to.

That was the bottom line.

Tommy was going to have to learn that.

**And fast.**

“You have your gear, right?” Gene asked.

Tommy held his hand.

“Yes. Maura had Jagger get me fitted. It's in the room and ready to go.”

Yeah, Tommy could feel the tension.

It would take an idiot not to see that his partner, and soon-to-be husband, was concerned.

He wasn't saying anything to him, but his face said it all.

You'd have to be blind not to see it.

And Tommy did.

He understood why Gene was hovering, worried, and concerned.

Oh, and he got it.

This was no game.

They weren't going to be carrying guns with fake bullets. This was like being a rookie cop, and they were waiting to see if he could hold his own.

This was literally the first time The Hunters planned on letting him go out with the team. There was no doubt in his mind that that took trust.

Trust he'd have to earn.

There was also no shock that he was being paired up with Gene. That way if he jacked this up, Gene would be there to cover his ass.

They all knew that Gene was protective beyond what was necessary.

He was the hover fiancé.

And that was expected.

While he was, technically, over Preston's death, and his heart was healing, the man was still twitchy.

Tommy knew he needed to reassure him.

**Really.**

He'd be fine.

Tommy was a cop, and while he wasn't as big and scary as Gene appeared, if it came down to saving himself or his partner, he'd pull that trigger every time.

*New Orleans* was becoming the Wild, Wild West, and he was getting his ass to that altar if he had to carry him over his shoulders.

He wasn't playing.

“I’m going to be fine,” Tommy reassured, promising the man so he could calm down.

Once the door to the room closed, Gene became that caged tiger.

He paced.

“Talk to me, Gene. We’re partners in this, and I can see you’re not handling this well.”

He wasn’t.

Gene finally said what they both knew he wanted to get off his chest.

“I don’t like it. Stay in, and I’ll go with the Ravenscrofts.”

He wasn’t letting that happen.

“I know who Tate is, and if I show up, he’ll not think about it too much. I can just tell him *‘I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d say hi’*.”

He stared at him.

“You abandoned your job, you went missing, and no one could find you after your house was shot up, Tommy. This isn’t a game. It’s life or death.”

He said the quiet part out loud.

“And you think I can’t survive if it came down to it?” he asked. “You think that I somehow managed to hunt down a serial killer for sixteen years, crisscrossing like five states, and then managed to help you find him but I’m somehow stupid?” he asked, waiting to hear the answer.

They just might be having their first couple fight over this. He could see that going down. His fiancé was a powder keg waiting to blow.

Gene closed his mouth and said nothing.

Instead, he walked away.

He wasn’t arguing with him.



As he went to stand on the balcony that overlooked the courtyard, he stood there with his arms on the rails as he watched the sunset in the distance.

It didn't take long for Tommy to follow him out to join him.

"Gene, talk to me."

The hardest part was articulating it. Gene wasn't superstitious, but you didn't live in *New Orleans* and not see some shit that made you believe.

If he put it out there, it might happen.

"Please. We're going to get married. I'm going to be your husband. Just tell me, so we can work it out. I can't help you if you keep everything locked away from me."

He was right.

Well, here went nothing.

"I'm afraid you'll get hurt. I'm sorry it's annoying, but remember when you were squirrely over mine and Ethan's relationship, and it drove you insane?"

Tommy ran his hand up and down his back to offer some reassurance.

"I recall."

Gene hoped the man understood.

"We all have our things. I keep seeing Preston getting shot in the head, and I don't know if I can do it again. This is my issue. It's my fear. That's what makes me hesitate when it comes to us. While I love you so much, I don't know if I can stare into your eyes and watch you go empty when you die."

He heard the tremor in his voice and knew that this was something that could make or break them. If Tommy made light of it, he would lose Gene.

Honestly, Tommy would fight like hell to get to the altar and see this man marry him.

He'd kill countless dirty cops to see their wedding. If someone came for his man...

Well, that was an issue.

There was only one other solution, and Tommy offered it up.

"Then maybe, Gene, we leave."

Gene closed his eyes.

"Maybe."

Tommy wrapped his arm around him and rested his head on the man's shoulder.

"If you can't let go of that fear and stay here, Gene, we can go. If this isn't what you want, I'm ready to leave. I'm staying to be with you and to help clean up, but you won't let me do the last part. I'm not Preston."

Gene stared out at the city and suddenly wasn't in love with it anymore.

That gut-wrenching fear had him by the balls. Since coming here over a decade ago, he'd sworn he'd never walk away from this place.

It was his spirit animal.

*New Orleans* just called to some people, and he was one of them. Just like with Elizabeth, they just knew this place was special.

Now, if it meant Tommy's life, he'd let this place go.

"You can decide. I'll follow," he said. "Just like you told me, Gene, that if I left, you'd follow. We're a unit. If you need to make that choice, I support it one million percent."

He got it.

Only, he wasn't ready to decide.

"I'm going to go take a shower. I need to refocus," Gene said, pulling away and heading into the adjoining shower to find his Zen.

In this city, that was a monumental task.

Tommy let him go, simply because if it was him, Gene would do the same.

**Temporarily.**

Standing there, he didn't feel helpless. What he felt was desperation to reach the man and show him that he wasn't exactly Stella with a gun.

He could hit a target and it was second nature.

It wasn't long before he heard the water turn on, and he knew the man he loved was showering.

Well, Tommy had a few choices.

He could give him space, let him stew, or go be with him until Gene worked it out in his head.

He chose the latter.

*Why?*

Because that's what a good partner did. They had your back, even if they weren't one hundred percent sure that the issue was an issue.

Heading toward the bathroom, he walked smack into the door when it was locked.

*What?*

*The?*

*Hell?*

Did his husband-to-be put a locked door between him in some half-assed attempt to keep him out?

Oh, hell, no.

They were getting married when this was over and possibly leaving. The last thing he was going to do was let his man lock him out.

They could fight.

**Scream.**

Yell, but no one was shutting the door between them. That was a no in his book.

That was akin to fighting dirty, and he wasn't going to let that happen. They'd argue and then regroup—not that BS.

With the lock-picking kit that was in the one drawer, it was a good thing he let Rogue teach him how to be a little bit larcenous.

It was about to come in handy.

When in *New Orleans*, break into some places. Why the hell not? It was, after all, their shared bathroom.

Kneeling in front of the door, he placed the picks inside the lock, playing with the tumblers. It took all of ten seconds before he heard the click.

And Gene was no longer locked away.

Getting up, Tommy tossed the kit onto the dresser, opened the door, and headed in.

It was time to talk.

**Or fight.**

Honestly, anything was better than someone locking him out of the room.

When he closed the door, he knew how bad it was going to be.

Gene was standing in the shower, his hands on the wall as the spray hit him in the face.

It ran down his torso, and the tension was clearly visible across his body.

Someone was not fairing well when it came to this one. That was for damn sure.

Well, Tommy knew how to help him.

It was time to rile up a bad guy with some dirty, distracting sex.

It wasn't like he didn't want to jump on the man when he saw him naked in the shower. His body was crisscrossed with tats and his ass...

**Lord.**

**Have.**

**Mercy.**

Someone could bounce a quarter off his derriere, and it would get some height.

Bless the Major for making them stay in good shape. He'd kiss her later for that.

*Bet on it.*

As he began stripping out of his clothes, he knew when Gene was aware of him being there.

His body tensed more if that was even possible.

"I need to work through this in my head, Tommy. I don't want to fight."

Tommy heard the tone, but he wasn't giving up.

"Good. Then, we won't fight. We'll fuck."

At the word, Gene slowly turned his head and stared over at him.

"You don't want me like this. I'm not going to be easy, and I'm not going to be gentle."

Tommy stood his ground.

"Then, you don't know me very well, Gene, because I want you any way I can get you. Like I said. We'll fuck our way through this."

Gene stood taller, and his body rippled with that dominancy that rose up whenever this ex-cop was near him. With his runner's physique and his sleek lines, Gene was incredibly attracted to him.

Ethan had been sleek like that, while Preston had been bulky like himself.

"It's not a good time, Tommy," he warned.

Only, when he turned, Tommy could tell that it was a good time. Gene's dick was standing at attention, and he was rock-hard.

Someone was protesting, but the dick barometer was telling a whole different story.

“You just lied. You want to put your hands and erection all over me.”

Gene stared at him, his dark eyes boring holes through Tommy. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t a little scared.

He’d never seen Gene like this.

Tommy wasn’t sure what this man would be like, but he was curious.

Unfortunately, that tended to kill the cat more often than not.

This could only go two ways.

Anger sex wasn’t their thing, in which case, the next time Gene said to give him time, he would, or it could be scorching hot. Then, he’d be all over him every time he was worked up into a tizzy.

Gene didn’t move, but Tommy did.

He got closer, and it took everything Gene had in him to stand perfectly still. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t turned on.

He couldn’t help it.

What he wanted was to dominate this man, take what was his, and order him to sit his ass in their office.

He knew that two out of three of those things were possible. It was the last one that had him tripped up.

“This is the last warning, Tommy. You don’t want to do this while I’m this pissed off.”

Oh, he really did want to do it now.

*How did he know?*

His dick was standing at attention too. Oh, and look. It was pointed at his fiancé.

**Perfect.**

“You need to get some of the mad out, and I like being your sexy plaything. We’re going to be fine.”

*Were they?*

He wasn’t so sure.

Gene was teetering on the edge, and everything in him said to take what he wanted. Only, he knew that would be something out of control.

“Tommy.”

“Use me, Gene. Use me to get through this, and give me all the pleasure I know that comes with it. I’m your bottom, and I want to help you.”

**God.**

His dick throbbed.

Could you really fuck the mad out?

Well, it appeared that they were going to find out, one way or another.

As Tommy approached, he went into bottom mode, dropping to his knees in the shower, so that he was before Gene and his deliciously rock-hard dick.

“I will be out of control.”

Tommy stared up at him.

“I like you out of control. Use me. I give you permission to put your hands all over me.”

And there it was.

When Gene blinked, he knew this was going to be something that either brought them together or broke them apart.

He kept that lust and wickedness inside him. He kept it locked up and only let it out on a few occasions. Only, before he married this man, he wanted him to know the truth.

Rough sex got him off.

*He needed it.*

*He craved it.*

Topping or bottoming, he couldn't do vanilla. He wanted role-playing, dirtiness, and to screw the way he lived.

**On the dark side.**

“Tommy.”

The man took control, for what was likely the last time—well, until they'd fornicated.

On his knees, he reached out, and just as he was about to wrap his fingers around Gene's erection, the man grabbed his wrist.

Tommy gasped and looked up.

“Did I give you permission to touch me?” he asked, the cold and ice in his voice sending chills across Tommy's body.

He blinked.

“If you want to play this game, Tommy, you play by my rules.”

He slowly nodded.

“May I touch you?” he asked, agreeing to the terms by just asking that.

Gene shut off the fear.

Instead, he turned on the control.

“Make me cum, so I am in control, and then, Tommy, we're going to bed.”

He moved closer.

“Thank me, Thomas.”

His own dick jumped. The Gene who normally was in control clearly wasn't.

“Thank you for letting me suck your cock.”

And that was all it took.

The switch wasn't just flipped.

It was ripped out of the wall.



Gene actually growled, and then found the back of Tommy's head with his big hand. He controlled him, driving his rock-hard erection down the man's throat.

**Deep.**

**Chokingly deep.**

He forced the full length of him into Tommy's mouth and throat, showing him that he might be out of control, but he was still driving that particular bus toward the cliff.

"Remember, Thomas," Gene said. "I warned you that I needed space. This is the side of me that you haven't seen," he admitted.

Tommy was trying to swallow him deeper because there was nothing hotter than being on your knees for your lover and blowing him.

This was his love language when it came to taking care of Gene. He liked when he dominated the fuck out of him.

*Maybe he was broken.*

*Maybe he was flawed.*

But he wanted to go deeper into that darkness to find the ultimate pleasure.

How could he not?

Tommy didn't move, but instead got the man's dick deeper. It was to the point that he couldn't breathe. Oh, and he loved every second of it.

He could feel the artery in Gene's dick throbbing more and more. Someone liked dominating him, and Tommy loved every second of it.

As the air ran out, and he was about to push off of his erection, he felt Gene give him a little bit of space. It was enough to slide his mouth up his erection a wee bit.

He caught his breath and understood.

"Deeper. When your lips kiss the base of my cock, then, and only then, do we continue. You wanted to see me at

my worst, so welcome to the party, Thomas.”

Oh, he wanted that.

Putting his hands on Gene’s thighs, he lubricated his erection as best he could with the saliva pooling in his mouth. Then, he worked him deeper into his throat.

Gene watched, and it was the hottest, filthiest, and sexiest thing he’d ever seen.

Now, he got why Ethan loved dominating him all of those years ago. It was incredibly erotic if you had the right bottom.

Oh, and Tommy was the perfect one.

“More,” he ordered, as Tommy continued to work him down his throat.

In his defense, Gene wasn’t small. His dick was thick, and this man was working for it.

“I want your saliva on my balls, Thomas. Work harder,” he ordered.

Oh, and Tommy did.

It didn’t take long once he controlled his gag reflex. He forced Gene’s dick into his throat, and then, stared up at him, his eyes full of tears.

His gaze said it all.

Someone liked to please.

“I’m about to get rough,” Gene said. “Our safe word is homicide. Once you say it, I stop. If you don’t say it, Tommy, I don’t stop. Understand?”

*He tried to nod.*

*He tried to breathe.*

His heart was racing in his chest.

“Then we begin,” Gene said, setting his head free. “Make me cum, and swallow every drop. Then, we’re going to bed. You will address me as Sir, and nothing else. If you break this role, the game ends. Are we clear?”

He nodded again, letting his dick slip a little out of his mouth.

“Did I tell you to stop holding my cock in your throat?” he asked.

Tommy’s eyes went huge.

“Down your throat.”

He fought to get it back again, and when he did, Gene leaned against the shower wall.

“Fuck your face with my dick, and again, make me cum down your throat.”

Tommy got to work.

He blew him in earnest, and the sounds in the shower were music to both of them.

*The slurping.*

*The moans.*

*It was a symphony of sexiness.*

Gene watched the man on his knees, and he loved every second of it. He remembered the days he was Ethan’s sexy bottom, and he’d learned a lot about the man, and himself.

If you didn’t get dirty, it wasn’t sex.

And if you didn’t leave a few marks, it wasn’t rough enough.

Those were words to live by.

As Tommy blew him, Gene enjoyed the view of the man on his knees. He could see his dick, and someone was enjoying himself.

“Someone likes being my cock sucker, doesn’t he?” he asked, feeling the moan from Tommy as he tried to make him cum.

His own dick throbbed with that need to pour down this man’s throat.

As Tommy's head bobbed, Gene felt his hands slipping up his thighs and wanting to explore.

"Mouth only," he warned.

That lasted only a minute. Before he knew it, someone was breaking the rules.

When Tommy's fingers probed him, slipping into his ass, it was more than enough to make Gene cum. It tore him from the control, and he exploded.

When Tommy tried to move his head, Gene wasn't letting it happen. When he said he wanted him to swallow his cum, he wasn't joking.

He forced Tommy's head down his dick and choked him with the explosion from his balls.

Tommy's eyes went huge as the wave of heat poured down his throat.

Gene kept him trapped with his nose buried against his skin, as he enjoyed the tumble into the pleasure.

As soon as he could surface, he did, and he set Tommy's mouth free.

The only thing he said?

"Follow me, Thomas."

Tommy got up, his raging erection rock-hard from that experience. He loved when Gene's voice got husky and full of lust. He also loved pleasing him in bed and taking care of him out of bed.

When Gene took a seat at the bottom of the bed, Tommy assumed he wanted another blowjob.

Only, that wasn't the case.

"I want to see you pleasure yourself, Thomas. Jerk off for me."

The red flush moved up Tommy's body.

"What?" he asked.

“Not how you address me,” he said, getting up, going to his go-bag, and pulling out his belt.

Tommy’s eyes went huge.

“You wanted this, Thomas. Now, address me or expect some pain.”

Tommy swallowed.

“Yes, Sir,” he said. “You want to watch me jerk off?” he asked, flushing even redder. He’d never done that before.

Not the jerking off.

Oh, he’d done plenty of that.

The jerking off in front of another person.

“Yes. Do it,” Gene said, sitting back on the bed to watch the show.

“I don’t understand, Sir.”

“You want to be my bottom, right? Well, a bottom does what the top wants so that he can bring them both pleasure. I know you, Tommy. You like to please. I like to be pleased. This will make us both happy. Jerk off.”

His hand went to his dick.

As he began stroking, he felt incredibly naked. Not in the clothing sense, but in the way that his partner was watching him. Jerking off was something you did alone, and now, he wasn’t.

Gene watched as Tommy pleased himself.

Once, Ethan asked him to do just this, and he’d questioned it too. When he was told why, he got it.

How could he learn to pleasure his partner, if he didn’t see how he liked to be touched? It also gave control away, and when you were the bottom, you had to trust your partner.

Once Gene handed that control over, his sex life had become ridiculously erotic.

Tommy just had to trust him.

As his hand moved over his erection, Tommy was trying to focus on his partner.

Gene stopped him.

“Focus on getting off. Not me. Pretend I’m not here, Thomas. You have to teach me how to pleasure you. I want to see what makes you excited, and how you liked to be stroked. We are all different.”

That’s when he understood.

Tommy put his faith in his man and began running his hand up and over his erection, paying particularly close attention to the tip. He worked it hard, and Gene saw exactly what the man liked.

“Come here,” he ordered.

Tommy moved closer, his hand never stopping. When he stood right in front of Gene, the man was close to his erection.

“Continue,” he said, blowing warm breath over the tip of Tommy’s now wet dick. Someone was flushed red, embarrassed, but still enjoying it.

He gave him a minute.

As the man’s balls tightened, he ordered him to stop.

“No more,” he said.

Tommy blinked.

He’d been so close.

“Let me,” Gene said, taking his erection in his hand, and stroking him.

Tommy moaned.

**God.**

He loved his hands on him.

“Stand there and let me show you what kind of pleasure I’ll give you if you’re obedient.”

Tommy said nothing.

That's when he felt the slap of cold leather on his ass. He gasped and opened his eyes.

"That's for not thanking your top," he said. "You need manners."

Tommy stared, caught off guard.

*Why?*

He liked it.

He loved the feel of the leather against his skin, and now, he knew Gene was aware too.

*How?*

His dick, which Gene was holding in his fist, got harder.

"Oh, someone likes that, huh?" he asked, stroking his hand up and down the man's erection.

When he didn't reply, Gene grabbed Tommy, pulled him over his lap, and used the belt again, landing it on his ass.

The man moaned.

"God, yes, Sir. I like it."

Gene figured as much. He stood him up again, and this time, he started stroking Tommy's erection.

Tommy whimpered.

As Gene stroked his dick, his hand slowly torturing Tommy, he decided to make him really get wild. With his free hand, after placing the belt down, he explored. When his fingers touched Tommy's ass, the man shook.

"Please," he whispered.

"Please what?" Gene asked, sliding closer and closer.

"Please fill me, Sir."

He gave him what he wanted.

Gene slid into his ass with his wandering fingers, getting the response he wanted.

“Oh, God,” Tommy whispered, his eyes crossing in pleasure.

Gene watched as his fiancé enjoyed the pleasure. He could see the artery in his neck thumping wildly, as was the one in his dick.

As he tormented him with his hands, Tommy whimpered.

“Good bottoms get rewarded. Bad bottoms get spanked,” he warned.

Tommy kinda liked both. He didn’t know he would, but being over Gene’s knee. There was something dirty and erotic about that.

“Don’t cum, Thomas,” he said, as he felt his dick getting harder.

“I’m so close,” he muttered.

That’s when Gene stopped. He pulled the man back across his knee and landed the belt across his ass.

Tommy moaned.

“Please,” he whispered.

He earned another stroke.

“Yesssssss,” he hissed, loving the feeling. This opened a door no one else had ever thought to open.

“Someone likes being manhandled in bed,” he said, his own dick now rock hard. One of the things he loved about Tommy was that he didn’t hold back in bed. He trusted him, and let him have this power.

“Yes, please.”

He earned another lash, and Gene liked how the red crisscrossing marks were still on his flesh.

“I’m going to like taking your ass, Thomas. Address me, or I’ll stop.”

He couldn’t see straight.

The pleasure was just too much.



“Yes, Sir. Please can I have more,” he whispered, his body filled with little shockwaves of pleasure. It was how he’d land a blow, and then run his big hand over the spot, soothing it. His dick was straining against his lap, and he wanted to cum in the worst way.

“Yes, you may,” he said.

With one more lash, Tommy moaned.

“Now, get on your knees and get me wet. If we had more time, Thomas, we’d be having a wilder adventure. I seem to need to fill your ass with cum.”

The bluntness got him harder.

If that was possible.

He went to his knees between Gene’s legs and waited for him to tell him what he wanted.

“Get me off,” he said. “Now.”

Tommy began blowing Gene, again, just to get him to the point he was wet enough. What he craved was the man buried in his ass.

Gene moaned, watching Tommy sloppily blow him, trying to get him as wet as possible.

He was learning.

Going in dry wasn’t as much fun.

As he worked him hard, he touched his own erection, and Gene stopped him.

“I didn’t give you permission to cum.”

Tommy didn’t hesitate. He stopped stroking himself, and instead, focused on Gene.

When he was wet, he knew what he needed.

“Stand,” he said, not wanting the blowjob to end, but knowing they had to work soon. He needed the edge off.

When he did, Gene pulled his face down to his, and their mouths found each other. The tangle of tongues was frenetic and wild.

There was nothing hotter than kissing.

As soon as he released him, they stared into each other's eyes.

"If I had more time, we'd be taking our time. Now, I want you to turn around, and get us both off."

Tommy was so overwhelmed with pleasure, that he wasn't sure he was going to survive this.

"Please, Sir," he whispered.

Oh, he'd be cumming soon enough.

When Tommy turned around, Gene pulled him backward to sit on his lap. Only, his erection was there to impale him.

He slipped into his body, and the whole time, Tommy moaned in pleasure as he was filled. As he sat on his lap, the man's dick buried in his ass, it took a minute to focus.

"Someone likes that," Gene said.

"Yes, Sir," he said, as he adjusted to feeling full.

"Now, get me off," he said.

Tommy wanted to get them both off. That need had him by the balls, and he couldn't even think.

As he began bouncing in his lap, he enjoyed the feeling of Gene's hands on his hips. The man was helping him slide up, and then letting him drop back down.

"God!" Tommy shouted, his whole body rock-hard. "Please, let me jerk off, Sir," he said, his body assaulted with so much pleasure.

"No. Not yet."

He kept both hands in plain sight.

"Thomas, I want to fill you with cum," Gene muttered, as he was forced to watch his fiancé death dropping onto his erection.

**It.**

**Was.**

**Hot.**

“So good,” Tommy muttered. “I love your dick, Sir.”

Gene was struggling.

“Oh, well, I love you on my dick, Thomas. Keep going,” he muttered.

Thank god he'd gotten off once already. If not, they'd have issues.

Tommy obeyed, and it was getting harder and harder to focus. So was Gene's erection.

“Please,” he whispered. “I need to cum, Sir!”

Gene was struggling, so it was time.

Pushing Tommy up, he caught him off guard before he jerked him backward so he was lying on his back on the bed where he'd been sitting.

Then, he crowded him.

“I need to fill my sexy bottom—or should I say your sexy bottom with my dick.”

And he did.

Before Tommy could speak, Gene was sliding into his ass as he spread him wide.

The man moaned, and his body bowed.

“Oh, God! More, please, Sir,” Tommy muttered.

Well, Gene gave it to him.

“Oh, Thomas, this ass is mine,” he said, sliding back into him so that this time, they were facing each other. Then, he used the belt by placing it over his chest and trapping him on the bed beneath him.

Immediately, his fiancé's dick went harder.

Someone liked being used in bed, and someone liked doing the using.

As he took him, his body pushed to the limits of control, Tommy was whimpering beneath him.

“Please let me cum!” he begged. “Please!”

Gene wasn't paying attention.

How could he?

He was balls deep in a tight ass.

“God!” he muttered as his whole being was wracked with such pleasure.

As Gene moved in and out of him, he stayed braced above him, and he was enjoying the sight of the man beneath him.

### **Trapped.**

He moved his body closer, trapping Tommy's erection between their bodies so the friction of him moving would get the man off.

“Yes! God!” he begged, his mouth so close to Gene's he could feel the warmth of his breath. The whole time, the mingling of cologne wrapped around him, and he was tingling.

As were his balls.

“I hope you're going to cum,” Gene muttered as he slammed home, over and over again. His hips were in control, and his bigger body trapped Tommy beneath him.

“I'm almost there,” he whimpered.

When Gene reached between them, he grabbed Tommy's dick and worked it just as hard as he was working his ass.

“Oh, Christ!” he muttered, as the room began spinning, and he was being fucked and manhandled.

Gene knew when he was about to lose it. He felt the pulse in his erection, and how his ass tightened down on his dick.

“Cum for me,” he muttered, as he prepared to unload cum in his fiancé's ass.

Tommy lost control when Gene bit him roughly on the neck, forcing his body into overload. His dick spasmed, and that heat exploded out of him, shooting all over his chest.

Gene watched him cum, and with one last slam of his hips, he let himself fall.

The heat poured from his body into his fiancé's.

“God! So good!” he muttered, resting his hands next to Tommy's head as he sank into that pleasure.

It took him a minute to compose himself, but when he had, he rolled off of his man and laid beside him.

Tommy found his hand and held it as they both stared at the ceiling.

“Was that to soothe me or make me crazy all night?” Gene asked.

Tommy grinned.

“Maybe I just like it when my man roughs me up in bed and fucks me. A duck is a duck is a duck, Gene.”

He laughed.

“Uh-huh.”

“Feel better?” Tommy asked as they lay side-by-side in the bed.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe enough to trust me tonight, and maybe just hover as we work?”

He gave him a kiss.

“Be patient with me,” Gene said.

Tommy reassured him.

“I will because when I was struggling with the Ethan thing, you were calm. We can get through anything, Gene, as long as we rely on each other. Look at the Major and her Captain. They are seamless. I want to be like that with you. I just need you to see me as an equal.”

He was honest.

“I don’t want you to be tarnished by this city,” Gene admitted. “I don’t want this for you.”

He rested on his elbow and stared at him.

“I’m not going to be tarnished. What I’m going to be is capable and a part of a team. I just need you to have faith in me.”

He was right.

Before he could say anything, Tommy had a compromise.

“How about this? We go, and if you think I’m not handling it well, you say our safe word and I’ll go wait in the car?”

Gene lifted a brow.

“You want me to say ‘*homicide*’ in a police precinct? Is that wise?” he asked, laughing.

Tommy winked.

“Where’s a better place? I’m not going to ask why that’s your safe word, you nut.”

He found him amusing.

“Do we have a deal?”

Gene nodded.

“We have a deal.”

When he kissed him, Gene forgot about the fear and nerves. He was thinking more about the man who had cupped his balls and was copping a feel.

When he broke the kiss, Tommy was grinning.

“Someone got handsy.”

Tommy shrugged smugly.

“Sue me. I was thinking about being spanked. I didn’t know that was hot.”

Oh, well, now, Gene was thinking about it too.

Instead of saying anything, Gene pushed off of the bed and picked up the belt that was beside them. When he made the leather crack, Tommy's dick stood back up.

And so did his.

"Oh, we have time," Gene said, kneeling on the bed to run the leather down the man's chest.

It sent goosebumps across his flesh.

"What do you say?" he asked. "Want to really get rough and let me have my way with that incredibly sexy runner's body of yours?"

**Sign.**

**Him.**

**Up.**

"God. Yes. Put marks on me," he whispered. "I want to be only yours."

And Gene did.

A few times.

*Why?*

Because he'd found his other half for the rest of his life.

***The Airport***

***Evening***

***Departure***

As soon as she stepped onto the jet, Cruz waved from the tarmac, smiling at her. He was overjoyed because of what was about to happen.

Another one was on her way.

This redhead was conned about two days ago, and she believed she was going to be doing a runway in Singapore.

What she was actually going to be doing was the sex trade in that city.

There was an Asian man who paid a king's ransom to have a natural redhead to add to his collection.

And she was it.

As the sleek jet taxied down the runway, it would be back tomorrow, and ready for another girl to head out the following day.

With another million in cash in the bank, as soon as that flight took off, they were set.

Life was good.

Pulling out his phone, Cruz sent a text.

***'Boss, she's in the air. Send the bill. I'm heading to the office to check on the schedule for the next one. Maybe***



*we'll have another viable model. I'll check in tomorrow.  
How does it feel to be richer?'*

He hit send and started walking toward the Mercedes parked not far away.

When he reached the door, he heard the chime.

It was cash hitting his account.

It was payday.

As he pulled out the phone, he checked the amount, and even at twenty percent, he'd made a cool two hundred K, and didn't have to break a sweat.

In the last month, he'd made two million dollars, and that was more than he made with El Gato.

"I love my job."

As he got the text, he smiled.

*'It feels damn good. Long live El Gato and his legacy here.'*

And he laughed.

Wasn't that the truth?



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## *Chapter Thirteen*

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### *Third Shift Switch*

### *Police Station*

### *Friday Night*

**T**wo hours later, and they were in place. For them, the only good thing about hitting a police precinct at night was that there were far fewer cops lingering. More than half the force had gone home.

The graveyard shift, even in a busy town like *New Orleans*, meant having a snowball's chance in hell of getting in and out unseen.

Since it was party time in the city that really never slept, most of the uniformed cops were out, and they would stay out.

If they had arrests, they'd take them right to holding for processing—not come back here.

That meant they'd stay away from the building until the morning shift change.

Now, unfortunately, the detectives were a totally different story. They tended to only go out if there was a case tossed their way, and they already had one problem.

*The two cops they'd offed...*

Well, they were missed.

With a police radio, taken from the detective's car, they were able to make sure that they stayed one step ahead in case the whole thing was about to blow up in their faces.

And that meant being damn careful.

Detectives Schultz and Sterling had gone out and didn't check-in. While a cop didn't need to do that, daily, it wasn't as common.

So now, they were worried that would bite them in the ass. They needed to make sure that everything was timed just right.

Pulling out his phone, Rogue put a call into Maura since they were going to be hitting the two places back-to-back.

He needed her plan, to ensure they stayed on target with all of this.

When she answered, in the blacked-out CIA escalate, it was clear that she was driving. Maura always drove. She was a control freak like that.

“Yo. What’s up?” she asked.

Rogue was honest.

“We have an issue.”

She lifted a brow.

*Already?*

They should still be watching the place.

“And that would be?” she asked.

He shared.

“We still have the police radio, but there’s chitchat between the cops. It seems they are missing two detectives, and that’s making them twitchy.”

**Ruh-roh.**

She knew who that would be.

She had to adjust the plan on the fly.

Well, it was a damn good thing she was always one step ahead in her plans.

“What do you want us to do?” Rogue asked as they continued to watch the place.

Well, that was easy.

“Distract them.”

Rogue got it.

He knew Maura well enough to keep up with her.

“So you want me to make sure we keep the cops far from here? Would you mind terribly if we used their radio, called in a call for help, and drew just about everyone to that scene? I don’t think we can wait for the homeowners to find the bodies. The heat is on.”

Yeah, that had been what she was thinking.

“That should buy you time. As for minding, do what you have to do. You heard Elizabeth. She’s got us on this one. Worst-case scenario, we call her, she swoops in, grabs your ass out of lockup, and we’re good.”

He was good with that.

Maura wasn’t done.

“As for the place, that’s not my house that’s about to be destroyed,” she said laughing. “We owe the Wilcox’s a new place. You know cops never pay for the damages.”

Gene and Tommy both snickered from the back seat. That was pretty damn accurate.

They used loopholes.

“Okay, well, do you by any chance have another copy of that video of Stellan before you offed him. You know, the one where he’s making the confession? You didn’t delete it, did you?”

She was curious.

The cops would find it at the scene. What did he need it for, exactly?

“Sure I have it. Why?”

Rogue explained.

“I can run it through some of Remington’s software from the spooks, and I can make a call to the cops. It’ll be his voice. I can draw them away and keep them busy.”

That worked for her.

“Go for it. I’ll have Jagger send it over, and delete it after the fact. We don’t want to get caught with it. That’s Z’s issue, not a Hunter one.”

He knew what she meant.

They didn’t want it traced back to them.

“Are you guys about to go in?” Rogue asked.

She needed recon first.

“Not quite yet. We’re heading there to start watching. We are going to check it out a bit before Mikey O’ goes in and kicks the hell out of everyone.”

“Okay, text me when you’re going in. We’re going on silent once we enter. I have the plans for the building. I’m going to deactivate every locked door. Key cards are convenient, but with some CIA shit, they are hella bad.”

Yeah, they were well aware.

“Just be careful. You go in with two cops, you’d better come out with them too. You know how it is.”

“Hey!” Gene said. “For your information, sunshine, I can hold my own. You make sure your thieves can do the job. We still have more cops to shakedown tomorrow, and they are going to be suspicious now.”

She was aware.

“Don’t worry. We’ll handle it. I have a feeling once they all find out about the other cops, they’re going to go MIA,” she admitted.

Jinx laughed.

“You’re probably right, but in case you aren’t, I just have to pump by ten, and then we can play with our lives,” she admitted.

Oh, the troubles they had.

It was all kinds of funny to everyone but Rogue, In fact, he was staring at his wife in horror.

“You will not say things like that, wife. That makes me twitchy. Let’s not go there, please. I like all of our current lives.”

She gave him a kiss.

“Carry on, wayward son,” Maura said, joking. “Let us know if you need backup. We can head that way and skip this club.”

While they’d love backup, this was better in a small team.

“We’ll be good. Listen for the fireworks. They are about to go down. NOLA is gonna be spicy,” he admitted.

“Be careful. If we don’t hear from you, we’ll regroup later.”

That worked for them.

He hung up, and seconds later, there was the ding of a text message.

It appeared Jagger had sent him a file.

**Perfect.**

It was time to get busy. Rogue hooked up a cable to his phone, uploaded the file to his software, and then quickly plugged it into a laptop.

The two cops watched from the back.

As the confession played, they weren’t sure how they were going to make this work.

**UNTIL** Rogue did his magic.

By magic, that was him using the tech they’d been given to use, and use, he would.

He typed in a sentence, of what he wanted the cops to hear over the radio, and then hit play so that they could test-run it.

***‘Help! This is Detective Sterling! We’re at ten oh five Crimson Road. We’re being held here. Oh, God! Cecil’s dead. I’m trying to escape but they...’***

He punctuated it with a scream. It didn’t have to match his voice.

No one would be thinking about it, and no one would be recording it to check later.

As soon as he turned to face the back seat, Gene laughed.

“That’s a hoot. They are going to lose it.”

Jinx turned and stared at him.

“What are you? Ninety?” she asked. “Who in their right mind says ‘hoot’?”

He pointed at her.

“I’m fifty-two, thank you very much, whippersnapper. I just hope your Marine skills are on point. Your husband is going to be in here playing techie, but you’re getting us in without detection.”

*Oh, her skills...*

They were notorious.

He didn’t need to worry about that.

She pulled her gun, screwed on a silencer, and smiled.

“You let me do my thing, and you just listen, stay behind me, and let me handle it. Put silencers on your guns, just in case.”

They could do that.

Rogue rewound the recording and got it ready to go to play it in real-time for the cops.

“We have one shot,” he said. “Cross your fingers and pray it works. We should see every cop in the district exiting



this building to hit that address about ten seconds after we use that message.”

And the media.

Oh, this was going to be all over the news. They fully expected Elizabeth to be riding ass.

**No.**

**Doubt.**

“Let’s do it then,” Tommy said. “I want to get this done, and get back.”

Gene’s hand slid up his thigh and was so close to his dick. His fiancé was why he wanted to get back home.

They needed more sexy bedroom fun.

“Let’s see what happens,” Rogue said. “Everyone be quiet. Phones on silent.”

As he held in the button on the radio, he hit the play on the screen, and the man’s plea for help came over it.

By the time he *‘screamed’* at the end, they already saw the dead detectives’ fellow cops running for it. They emptied out the building in droves.

“There were more than we thought,” Rogue said.

Yeah, this was going to be interesting.

“**DOWN!**” Jinx ordered, and they did just that as seven cop cars, and ten unmarked detective vehicles hauled ass out of there. Tires were screeching on the pavement, lights, sirens, and all kinds of mayhem began going down.

That would get everyone’s attention—even the media. Poor ‘Z’ was about to get popular.

**Fast.**

When they got back up from hiding, the police precinct was desolate.

A few cops remained, but nothing they couldn’t handle.

“Okay, we gotta move. We have maybe forty minutes,” Jinx said. “It’s fifteen minutes there both ways, and then ten for them to freak out after they discover the bodies. After that, we don’t know how long they’ll stay away.”

“I’d prefer not to kill more cops,” Tommy said.

“And I’d prefer my large husband’s offspring didn’t hurt coming out of my vagina, but I don’t get my wish, so don’t pin all your hopes and dreams on yours,” Jinx said without batting an eye.

Rogue laughed.

He was smart enough not to comment on the baby thing.

*Why?*

He wanted more.

“Good luck, Jinxy. Watch your ass.”

She gave him a quick kiss, and then, she and the ex-cops got out. Rogue backed their vehicle into some trees and began working.

They had earbuds, and Rogue had the schematics to help them get this done.

Yes, they had two cops familiar with the building, but if they couldn’t talk, or got pinned down, he would have to get them out.

“At the door,” Jinx said, “deactivate all the key cards,” she added.

Rogue did just that.

The light went green, and they went in to handle this job. Tate West was their target, and getting that book for Elizabeth was paramount.

They had women and children to save.

“The cameras are on a loop,” Rogue said into the com. “You have to move fast. I’m turning them on as soon as you

are out of their view, so no one goes back and reviews and gets suspicious.”

Jinx was focused, but she could do two things at once.

“Thank God Maura pointed this at Z. We might be in danger,” she joked.

He found that amusing.

As he was watching the schematics, he was taking visual cues from them.

“Head right,” he said, just as Tommy had pointed in that exact direction.

Jinx was ahead of them, clearing the way.

As of yet, there weren't any cops around to cause an issue.

“Left,” Rogue said at the next hallway he was seeing in the plan layout.

They went that way, and when Jinx saw a shadow, she shoved the two men into the room and waited for the man to pass.

When she reached out, pulled him in, and dealt with him, there was only the sound of a neck breaking.

“One down.”

The man fell to the floor at her feet, and Tommy stared in horror.

“I don't like this,” Tommy said.

Rogue pointed out the bottom line and tried to get the man on the same page.

He knew what would do it.

“Gene's the big target there. Everyone knows he was helping The Hunters. You just went missing. One cop sees him, and he's shot in the head.”

Like planned, that changed the man's tune.

“I take that back. Carry on. He’s not getting shot in the head, or anywhere else. I have a wedding to get to.”

Gene laughed.

“That was a change of heart.”

Yeah, it really was.

Jinx carried on and navigated them to the stairwell. Once it was open, she needed to know.

“Rogue, Babe, anyone in the stairwell going down to the basement?” she asked.

He was in the camera system and checked.

“No. You’re clear heading down. Someone is heading toward the door from the fifth floor. You need to move fast and silently.”

They all heard him and did just that. They moved, running down the stairs.

Rogue warned them.

“He’s opening the door.”

Instead of running, which might draw suspicion, they stopped moving and pressed themselves to the wall.

“He’s coming down. He’s going to the first floor,” he said, as the man opened that door.

As soon as the door closed behind him, he cleared them.

**“MOVE.”**

Oh, and they did.

Once they hit the basement level, not the morgue one, but the one that was underground where they kept all the evidence, guns, drugs, and anything the cops wanted locked up, she was wary.

“I don’t like the feeling I’m getting,” she admitted. Jinx had been trained for shit like this, and all her snake senses were screaming.

She pointed to a room.

“Gene and Tommy, get in there and wait. I’ll be back for you,” she said.

They didn’t argue.

*Why?*

This was literally her thing.

**Close-quarters operations.**

As soon as the door was closed behind them, and they were safe, Jinx moved, heading toward the evidence locker.

It was ten thousand square feet, and she knew she needed a bird’s eye view.

“Rogue, I’m climbing it. Tell me the alarms are off,” she whispered, knowing he’d be watching on the cameras to ensure she was safe.

He checked.

“They are. Be careful.”

She sprayed her fingers, once more, and then went up to the top.

As she silently maneuvered on the chain link fencing, surrounding the evidence, it was no easy task.

It made noise if she wasn’t careful. That was the last thing she needed.

As she reached the top, there was more fencing up there to create a lip over the impound area.

Jinx hoped no one looked up. If they did, she was caught.

Cautiously, she laid flat and watched.

“What do you see?” Rogue asked.

“People,” she barely whispered.

Then, she turned on the microphone on her com so Rogue would hear and she wouldn’t have to talk.

“Record,” she whispered, so her husband would understand. There might be something Maura needed to hear.

“Tate, we gotta move the drugs soon,” the one man said.

“I know, but I wasn’t aware the whole building would empty out. Had I, we would have used that to our advantage. It’s hard to move that much Addiction. I’m trying to get it back to the boss.”

Over the com, she heard Rogue curse.

“Oh, shit. There’s more out there,” he muttered.

She said nothing as the talking continued.

“Can you load it up?” the other man asked. “I’ll drive it out in the morning. I’ll take it to the location.”

Tate looked nervous.

“I can try, but you have to be here by five at the latest. The shift changes shortly after. I’ll keep them busy before I clock out, and you just drive the vehicle away, Aiden.”

Rogue kept talking.

“We have to intercept that vehicle. The cops must have confiscated Addiction somewhere. Maybe from one of Chevy’s dealers. We can’t let that shit get back there.”

Tommy and Gene heard him on their coms.

“What’s the plan?” Tommy asked. “What can we do to help?”

As she lay flat on the top of the cage, she couldn’t talk. She was too close to the men, and if she even sneezed, she was going to be sporting some holes.

Instead, she sent her husband a text so he could relay it to the men in the room.

***‘I’ll get the file after they load up the Addiction. Then, we have to get rid of Tate. Tomorrow, we’ll be here to***

*follow the guy to wherever he's taking the drugs, and ambush him. Maura won't want that shit out. Get out of the building, Gene and Tommy. I can do this myself. This is too dangerous for me to have to watch you both. Leave—Mamba.'*

She hit send, and crossed her fingers that they'd let her do what she did best.

When his phone blinked the message on the screen, Rogue read the text as he got it, and he didn't like it.

Still, immediately, he told the two guys what Jinx wanted done.

"Mamba wants you to bail. They are loading up the truck. We'll be here at four and follow it. Maybe it'll take us to Chevy. This isn't Jinx talking. It's Mamba. She doesn't think it's safe for you there. Go back out the same way you came. Can you do that?" he asked.

Gene didn't like it, but he wasn't arguing with a Snake. Mamba knew what she was doing.

"We can," Gene said. "But we'll go out the storage doors. They never change the code, and it's safer. It's one door instead of having to go back upstairs. That's dangerous."

That was a good plan.

"I opened all the doors," Rogue said. "You can have an easy way out."

That was great, but the door he was talking about wasn't that kind of door.

"It's a padlock with rotating numbers. I recall the code. I'll get us out that way."

He didn't care.

If Jinx thought this could go bad, he wanted them out of there. The last thing he wanted was for his wife distracted.

“Go,” Rogue said. “I can’t monitor you. You’re on your own. Get back to the car. Be careful.”

Oh, they would.

“Jinx, they are moving out,” he said, in case she wasn’t paying attention.

“Mmmhmm.”

As Jinx laid there, she watched. She also texted Maura and called her phone, warning her not to say a word but to listen.

As the call connected, she hooked up her microphone so she would also hear.

“Hurry,” Tate said. “Aiden, you get Jesse here tomorrow to help you. I mean it. This truck needs to get taken out before five. Make it look like a robbery. Throw a bunch of guns and money in the back. We have to cover this, or Chevy will have our ass.”

She turned off her microphone and whispered into the phone.

“Got that?”

Oh, Maura did.

She was listening as Jagger was getting a play-by-play from Rogue. Their bases were covered.

“I did. We’ll have people on him. They might take us to Chevy. If they do, then we’re going to have a much easier time with this. Just get the information so we can give Elizabeth the location of the victims. Then, get the hell out of there.”

She could do that.

That had been her plan.

Marines thought alike.

*Get in.*

*Get it done.*

*Get out.*



“Good job, Mamba. Handle Tate when the coast is clear. Leave no witnesses,” she advised, and that told her all she needed to know.

Someone was done.

Mamba hung up and watched.

She would bide her time like the Snake she was, and then, and only then, she’d handle it.

Unfortunately for the asshole below...

Tate was a deadman.

Because he deserved it.

*Meanwhile...*

Not far away, they were moving through the hallways to get as far away from whatever Jinx was about to do.

When they reached a door, Tommy had no idea where they were. He’d been the new homicide captain, and all of the space in the building hadn’t been his to wander.

He’d been busy.

*Working and worrying.*

Honestly, he rarely came down into the bowels of the building. He’d gone to the evidence locker a few times when his detectives needed him, and that’s how he’d met Tate.

“Where are we?” he whispered.

Gene clued him in.

“This doorway exits out the back, and we can get into the trees and work our way back to Rogue.”

He heard his name over the com as he was trying to offer them some help, as he did the same to Jinx.

“I’ve got the cameras down through the building on the lower floor and outside. You’re clear once you exit.”

He was grateful.

They moved quickly but quietly through the halls, and so far, it was deserted.

He liked the odds on this one.

Getting Tommy out was Gene’s only mission at this point. He knew Jinx could handle her own.

When they finally reached the steel door, there was indeed a combination padlock.

Tommy whispered in his ear.

“I hope you have a good memory, or we have to double back,” he said.

Oh, he did.

*How did he know?*

He’d put it on the door. They had someone break in once, stealing evidence related to a case. The commissioner had asked him to handle it, and he had.

Who was sawing through a padlock at the police precinct to get some weed? Without the tech, they had to do it the hard way.

**Cops stole.**

That was the norm.

Quietly picking up the lock, he put in the numbers and the lock opened automatically.

“We got lucky.”

Oh, well, that had been part of it too.

“Nah, Preston and I would hook up back here. I’d park and he’d come to visit. I like a good blowjob in the front seat of a car, apparently,” he said, keeping it light, even as he was myopically focused on getting his fiancé out.

“I’ll give you one if you get us back to Rogue without dying,” Tommy admitted.

Rogue heard them.

“Uh, I don’t want to watch you blow Gene. No offense, but I like tits. I’m sure he’s got a perfectly good dick, but I’m a breast man.”

As soon as it was out of his mouth, he knew he was screwed.

How?

He got a text.

As he read it, he knew he’d said too much.

*‘Oh, you like tits? Is that so, husband. As in multiple sets?’*

Rogue laughed.

“Let me clarify so Mamba doesn’t take me out when she’s done inside. I like my wife’s tits.”

That was better.

“No comment,” Gene said.

Gene quietly undid the lock and opened the door. When he stepped out to make sure the coast was clear, he wasn’t alone.

**Oh, hell.**

Immediately, the cop recognized him and pulled his gun before Gene could even reach for his. Someone had been a little distracted.

It served him right, thinking about blowjobs again.

“Gene Cantrell, what a sight you are. Look at you helping The Hunters and sneaking in here. I bet you have something to do with emptying out the building too. What are those asshole Hunters up to?”

**Oh, shit.**

This was bad.

If this guy was here, lurking, chances were he was going to do some bad deeds while the cops were out too.

**For Chevy.**

“Gene, who is it?” Rogue asked, unable to turn the cameras on. Then, anyone watching in security would see it too, and that was an issue.

He took the cue.

“Hey, Detective Jesse Lake,” he said, so Rogue would get the name.

It was important for two reasons. He wanted them to know who might be killing him, and that he was a suspect.

He was on the list of cops Elizabeth had given them.

“Oh, shit,” Jinx muttered. “These two just said a Jesse name too.”

Rogue was aware.

Gene was about to make up an explanation when the man clicked off the safety on his gun.

“You’re dead,” Jesse said. “When we find The Hunters, I’ll tell them you died as nothing more than a betraying criminal.”

Yeah, Gene was infinitely grateful Tommy was inside and had the common sense not to peek out the door.

He closed his eyes and heard a muffled pop.

Only, he didn't feel anything.

When he opened his eyes, his fiancé was putting away his gun.

“Well, so much for not killing cops. I don't like when assholes threaten my fiancé,” he said, touching Gene's arm. “You okay, Babe?”

*Was he okay?*

He'd nearly shit his britches.

*That his fiancé had handled it...*

**God.**

He loved him.

In fact, he loved him so much, he kissed him. It was a fast one on the mouth.

“Are you both okay?” Rogue asked.

“We're good,” Gene admitted, breaking the kiss. “Cleaning up now,” he said. “We'll be there soon.”

Tommy was grinning.

“So that's what I get for putting a bullet in the head of a dirty cop? Sign me up,” he said, getting his ass grabbed too.

“Yeah, well, you'll be signing up for a tombstone for me if we don't get moving. There will be more, but before we go, we gotta put his body in the trash compactor.”

Gene pointed at it.

“Gross,” Tommy said. “That squishes things.”

Gene stared at him as Rogue laughed over the com.

Did his fiancé just say *'squishes'*?

“You think, Tommy?” he asked.

Rogue was amused.

“You two are an interesting pair. How about you do it, and move fast. I can't keep these cameras off for long. Leave the lock open so it looks like theft.”

“Gotcha,” Gene said, as he began dragging the dead cop toward the trash compactor.

Tommy started helping.

Together, as they avoided the brains and grossness, they hefted him in, not letting him take his gun or badge to his makeshift grave.

Oh, there was no way that a cop wouldn't realize a crime happened back here.

There was a blood smear on the pavement and brain splatter.

Tommy had good aim.

Only, after destroying the body, it would take them a while to figure it out.

“The couple that kills together, stays together,” Tommy said, as Gene hit the button, and the machine went into action, pressing down all the cardboard boxes that were inside. When it got lower, they heard the crunching sound.

It was horrific.

“I don't want to go that way,” Gene said.

“You're at risk for going by bullet wound from a bad guy if you don't haul ass,” Rogue said. “The other cop is heading out of the area. Jinx is about to move.”

They got it.

They ran for the trees.

“Clear!” Tommy said as soon as they were inside the trees behind the precinct. “Turn on the cameras.”

Rogue did, and thankfully, there was no sign of the two men on the screen.

That was close.

So now, there was only one of them in danger.

Of course, it was his wife.

“Jinx, go,” he said, watching the cameras.

“I’m moving,” Jinx admitted as she kept the cop in the evidence locker in her view.

“Jinx, Baby, you got ten minutes. Thirty have passed, and the police scanner is going nuts. They’ve found the detectives. The coroner’s office is about to empty out, and you’re going to be spotted in the parking lot. Hustle.”

She got it.

When the cop picked up the phone to make a call, she moved closer to the edge and flipped over, so she was hanging. As soon as he wasn’t looking, she dropped soundlessly onto the floor below.

And stayed there.

She listened to the man on the phone.

“Chevy, we have the drugs loaded up, about twenty guns, and fifty thousand in cash. We’ll get it to you tomorrow. Yeah, the rendezvous spot. Okay see you then.”

When he hung up, she picked up some rope that was in a box nearby. It was likely used in a crime. Yeah, it was going to be used in another one.

Well, a suicide.

She touched the racks to see how much weight they’d hold, and they were bolted into the ground. Then, she made a noose, looped it through the one rack’s bars, and climbed back down.

As soon as Tate West sat down, she went into action, grabbing his sidearm, and dropping the noose around his neck.

It caught the man off guard, and she did what she needed to do.

She pulled down with all her might, getting the man a foot off the ground. He was thin, thankfully. As his feet kicked and he fought to get air, she moved to stand in front of him.

“Mikey O’ says fuck off,” she said, smiling. “You sold some children and their mothers. Now, we’re coming for all of you.”

He looked scared, but not because of what she'd said. He had other issues.

His face was bright red.

Immediately, she began rummaging through the desk and taped to the bottom, there was a little black journal. Inside, she found her answer.

“Asshole,” she said, as the man was desperately fighting for air. His eyes were bulging, and his lips were blue.

She jiggled his mouse, and when it came to life, she pulled up a word document.

Then wrote his suicide note.

Because why not?

*‘My fellow cops,*

*I’m so sorry. I’ve betrayed the people I’ve been sworn to protect. Check my bank account. I work for a drug dealer by the name of Chevy Chesary. He was El Gato’s right-hand man. I’ve been stealing and I’ve let people take evidence. I couldn’t live with myself anymore.*

*I had to pay.*

*Tate.’*

She turned off the monitor and knew what she needed to do. Tate was not breathing, and he was on his way to meet his maker for judgment.

Only, she knew how to set up a crime scene.

She’d done plenty of them.



Without hesitation, Jinx jumped onto his body, grabbing his shoulders to pull down. She heard his neck break.

Well, at least a coroner would think it was suicide.

That was that.

“Rogue, I’ve got the book. Are the guys back to you yet?”

“Yes. Go out the back. We’ll pick you up there. I’ll also lock down the evidence locker and deprogram it so no one can get into it until IT shows up in the morning. They’ll think it’s a tech issue.”

That was sneaky.

She liked it.

“Perfect.”

She put the man’s gun back into his holster and headed toward the back. As she went there, she grabbed even more guns and some more cash. She wiped the place out, tossing it all into the vehicle that had been stashed by Aiden and Tate.

A thief had to steal.

Then, she headed out, the mission done.

When she pushed the back door open and stepped outside, her husband’s blacked-out Charger pulled up, and she hopped into the back with Tommy.

“Let’s roll. We don’t have time.”

They headed out the back way, missing all the traffic and cops pulling in the front as they returned with the media following them.

That had been close.

**TOO.**

**CLOSE.**

Once out of the way, and clear, they called Maura.

“We’re safe,” she said, explaining what they set up. It didn’t take long. “No one will suspect he was offed.”

“Perfect. We’re going to be going into the bar shortly. Call the rest of the media and direct them to the Wilcox’s house. I want word to spread, and the cops to be tied up with this mess all night.”

Oh, they could do that.

Maura wasn’t done.

“In fact, play the recording for one of them and take credit as Z. We need to keep the cops and media busy. *New Orleans* is about to blow.”

They knew what that meant.

*The bar...*

It wasn’t going to be standing for long. And neither were the assholes in it.

**Thankfully.**

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## *Chapter Fourteen*

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*Washington, D.C.*

*The War Room*

*The White House*

*Top Secret Meeting*

**H**er life was anything but easy, but then again, Elizabeth had signed on willingly to this position. Taking the job meant taking the work and responsibility that went with it, and she knew that she could handle it.

*Why not?*

Something was going to be the death of her, so why not spin the wheel and take a chance.

*Her kids.*

*Her husbands.*

*Her job chasing crazies.*

Why not add DC politics to the list to really make it spicy?

She was holding the FBI up, and her division, thanks to her incredible ability to multitask.

Oh, and with the help of her team.

Callen was picking up the slack in *The Violent Crimes Unit*, sending out teams, and interviewing potentially new people. As for Elizabeth, she was holding it together.

**Somehow.**

Now, she was in Hell, listening to the Joint Chiefs of Staff talking about something that pertained to the CIA, and not the FBI.

Only, they liked to add more red tape whenever possible.

Her idea was to just blow shit up.

It worked.

This was exactly why she shouldn't be running this office. She was freaking insane.

Who in their right mind would think she could run the FBI?

**Gabe.**

That said it all.

Everyone knew that he was crazier than she was.

**Apparently.**

What wouldn't she give for an interruption? Where were all the terrorists when you needed them? Couldn't someone try to breach the White House lawn now? A crazy tourist who wanted a selfie with Olivia?

Maybe if she ordered a pizza...?

Well, those thoughts were all short-lived.

When Elizabeth got a call, there was no way she could answer it. She was still stuck in the middle of a meeting with the President, the DOJ, and a few other alphabet agencies that had way too much time on their hands.

Who did meetings this late on a Friday night? Did no one have a family but her? She had kids who were likely climbing the walls waiting for pizza.

When she sent the call to voicemail, she got a text right after.

Uh, that was suspicious, and in her world, suspicious meant one thing.

**NEW.**

**ORLEANS.**

Pulling up the text, she quickly scanned it, hoping it wasn't someone on her team needing her help. The only thing that could make this worse, right now, was a serial killer.

Lordy, but her life was questionable.

***‘Urgent. The Hunting trip was good. Listen to the voicemail or you’re coming to visit.’***

Well, she had to take this. There was no way she was going back tonight to deal with who knew what?

**No.**

**Freaking.**

**Way.**

It was time to intervene.

“Excuse me, Gentlemen, I have an FBI issue. Give me a few minutes,” she said, walking out of the war room at the White House and hitting a spot in the hall where there was no one lingering.

Instead of listening, immediately, she called the number back to get the quicker version.

As soon as one of The Hunters answered the phone, she went there.

“Talk fast. I’m playing *‘kiss me fuck me’* with the pentagon, and those assholes get mean when you don’t pay attention to their every monotonous word.”

Jinx told her what went down.

“We got the journal, and we have the names of twenty-seven women, plus where they were sent.”

Elizabeth was curious.

“And this could not be sent overnight to me instead of calling me during a meeting with the most powerful nuts in this country who are talking about coups and bullshit?”

Jinx knew what would have her attention.

“They sold kids too.”

That stopped Elizabeth in her tracks.

“Wait. What?”

Jinx explained.

“If a mother came in with a child, and they had no family, they took them both. Five kids aged five to thirteen were shipped out to different areas. They are too old to be black market adoptions. That means they are going to be...”

She didn't have to say the words.

**Oh, shit.**

Elizabeth knew that this just escalated. Adult women had a fighting chance, and while bad, children...

That was horrific.

She had to move.

“Get me a screen shot of the list.”

Jinx figured she would want it. Luckily, they had even more.

“I also have the buyer's names. We had a cop who took really good notes as he was getting paid to turn a blind eye. Who knew he'd be an asset?”

This turned her stomach.

Elizabeth loved kids and had a brood. She couldn't even imagine the fear those little ones felt.

It pissed her off.

“I hope that he met with an untimely death and suffered the entire time.”

She laughed.

“Oh, well, he felt guilty and committed suicide. That's a rough way to go—or so I hear. You're awake those last two minutes when you off yourself.”

Elizabeth clued her in.

“I hope he broke his neck, so the ME doesn't question it,” she said. “Because I'd hate to be investigating this at some

point because we didn't cross all our Ts."

"He did. Snapped like a twig when he dropped."

That worked for her.

It was funny how there were two sides to her. The FBI investigator, and the boss sending out people to do dirty deeds for the country's safety.

"Send me the intel. I'm in a meeting with the military. I'll get those buyers hunted down and see if we can get the kids back before anyone hurts them."

That was her hope.

"Uh, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you're about to have a serial killer by the name of Z who killed two detectives in a suburban home pretty brutally. They behave suspiciously like a band of Hunters I know. Z also pointed the intel at the media, so this should be blowing up spectacularly," Jinx offered.

She knew they moved fast, but they were really moving. That they were covering their tracks helped her mitigate this mess.

"Body count?" Elizabeth asked so she'd know what was coming her way. If they got called, her brother and his partner were up to handle this one, and by handle, she meant to make it disappear.

Jinx shared.

"Four cops so far. Tomorrow there will be more. We're working through your list."

She was curious.

"Is Gene okay?"

"Yes. Tommy took care of business. Maura is about to enter a bar and blow it to kingdom come. So...*New Orleans* is going to be on the news. Again, we leaked a recording to the media to cover our asses, so with the exploding bar...it's about to be chaos."

She listened.

“But everyone is safe?”

That was her concern. These were her people, and she knew shit was heading that way.

**Big.**

**Shit.**

“Yeah, and Adder is back. We’re working our way through it. Maura has a plan, but she hasn’t given us the deets yet. She’s biding her time until it’s needed.”

That was a problem.

*Why?*

Time was **NOT** on their side.

“Tell her to get her ass moving on it. I want Chevy found, taken down, and his little scummy friend Cruz too. I don’t want to send in anyone else. You guys are going to have to handle this as low-key as possible. If needed, point it at this new vigilante, Z. I’ll fabricate the backup story.”

She got it.

Jinx knew that if Elizabeth was telling them to rush, there was likely something they were **NOT** aware of coming down the pike.

“We’ll handle it, E. Just direct it away from us, and find those women and children. If they’re alive, please bring them home.”

She would.

Elizabeth would do anything for a child—even play dirty. Someone had to protect the little ones, and that someone would forever be her.

**To.**

**The.**

**End.**

“Be careful, J. Your brother will get bitchy if anything happens to you, and while I have money, I don’t have that



much that I can buy him off with cookies if his sister gets hurt. H will lose his nut.”

She laughed.

“Oh, H, absolutely will,” she said, not using his name because Elizabeth wasn’t. Jinx wasn’t aware of her security situation. “We are on it, Boss.”

Well, then, that meant she had to be too.

After hanging up with The Hunters, she knew there was one other option. Immediately, Elizabeth scrolled through her phone, she found a name, and she pushed the button to make that call.

His voice came on the line.

“Yo.”

“It’s LaRue. Are you busy?” she asked.

He laughed.

“Are you serious? Just tell me what you need done. I know this isn’t a friendly call. If it was, you would be talking about Axelle’s baby.”

Well, that was the truth.

“Remember that situation that we’ve talked about?” she asked.

Did he?

Everyone was talking about it, and the oncoming war. It was in all the bad circles.

“Uh, yeah. Vividly. Let’s just say that I’ve had a few offers,” he said.

Elizabeth knew that wasn’t happening. She had to contain this mess. If there was anyone who could do it, it was him.

“I need a cleaner.”

“To take the whole thing down a notch?”

“Yes. The Hunters are about to make a mess. Follow them and handle it. Clean it up and micromanage the situation for me.”

“And if they make it worse?”

She made the call.

“Clean it. I’ll get you an update by morning. Just be ready to handle it. War is coming, and we know you like a good battle.”

He found that amusing.

“I like walking into Hell, grabbing the Devil by the balls, and then dragging him out. War is an understatement. It’s how I get paid.”

“And you will be greatly reciprocated for your work in *New Orleans*. You have my word. We go way back.”

That they did.

“Consider it done, Deputy Director. Consider it done.”

Well, that was handled.

“Thank you,” she said. “Expect payment from the usual source.”

Then, she hung up.

What a tangled web she wove. Now, The Hunters and Snakes were about to have some new buddies.

*Who didn’t like Spiders?*

*Well, badass Marine ones.*

Heading back into the meeting, she took her seat and was playing the whole thing out in her head.

As she listened to the men talk, or tried to listen, it was Gabe who noticed that she wasn’t happy.

“You okay?” he whispered, knowing that the Joint Chiefs wouldn’t bust his balls. He was, after all, the President of the United States.

Because she had to be careful, she scribbled something on a piece of paper and passed it to him.

Gabe took it and read it.

***‘New Orleans is about to blow, and we have children who were sold by Chevy. I have their locations. I need to get them back and get the men who bought them. If I interrupt these windbags, I’m toast. Help a girl out.’***

Gabe read it and lifted a brow.

There was no way Elizabeth would ask him to stop the meeting unless she had absolute proof and needed to roll with it ASAP.

He trusted her with his life, the life of his children, and the whole country. There was no one more capable.

One might say she ran the FBI even better than Axelle, and that woman was damn good at it.

He looked at her.

*Priority one?* he asked, mouthing it.

She nodded.

*Five-year-olds.*

Well, then, that said it all.

Gabe wasn’t going to allow child trafficking to go down in his country and under his watch. So, he did what she needed.

“Gentlemen, something has come up. I need to speak to the head of the CIA, the Pentagon, and the general. Everyone else, we’ll have to do this another day. This is top priority over this meeting.”

You know you commanded a room when no one questioned why you were interrupting a meeting with very little left.

The people who weren't needed left, understanding that shit like this happened.

**A.**

**Lot.**

As soon as the room was theirs, Gabe gave Elizabeth the floor.

“The Deputy Director of the FBI has an issue,” he said, allowing her to take over.

She stood in her pristine designer suit, wedding bands glinting on her finger, and the gold badge on her hip. Normally, she didn't give two shits what she wore, but Gabe knew she was trying to command the room.

When in the White House, representing the FBI, she had to care. The men she was working with, and against, rode ass for the slightest imperfection.

She had to be impeccable.

Thank God for Callen's stylist.

Clearly, he was a miracle worker, and for that, Gabe was glad.

She was spot on.

Leaning on the table, she explained.

“Here's the situation. We have a sex trafficking ring in progress in *New Orleans*. The FBI needs help.”

The head of the CIA looked uninterested, which was normal because he was a boring piece of shit who only cared about his own career.

**EVERYONE** hated him.

“Problem?” she asked, reading him.

He nodded.

“Yes. It’s inland We can’t help. There’s nothing the CIA can do, so I’m not sure why I was asked to stay.”

She leaned across the table.

“Yo, Bob, listen with your ears, not your piehole. The ring is selling American women to foreign men in other countries. That makes this a joint issue. I have to deal with the sale here, and you have to worry about the purchase there. I’m not here to look pretty for you. I’m here to handle shit.”

Well, that first part had his attention, and the last part had his irritation when she called him out.

That was her job.

*To irritate the status quo in DC.*

**Clearly.**

“Worse, we just got word that children from the age of five to thirteen were also sold. Now, it’s more than a problem, it’s a nightmare. Do you want it getting out that we didn’t handle it?”

Everyone looked ill.

Gabe looked pissed.

“Five-year-olds?” Bob asked.

Well, he was a dick on a good day, but at least he had some sort of morals. Not many, but enough to be repulsed like a decent human being.

“Yeah, child sex. We have to stop it.”

The general leaned back in his chair, willing to do whatever needed to be done.

If the military liked anything, it was a firefight, a coup, and the general war machine. If you wanted to see Americans at their best, give the Marines a job, step back, and watch them blow shit up.

Because that was their specialty.

**Oohrah.**

“We can get the kids out if they are alive, and we can handle the buyers, but I need names. If it’s a child sex ring, I have to move fast.”

As if, finally, the universe was in her favor, her phone chimed.

“And there’s your list. MATE, transfer data from my phone to the screen. Use the incoming texts, priority one, Blackhawk, Deputy Director Elizabeth.”

The screen lit up, and on it, there were screenshots of the journal that The Hunters had just sent her.

Of course, the CIA was suspicious because next to her, they were hyper-aware that people were watching. After all, they were generally the people doing that.

“Where did you get that?” Bob asked. “That’s a very specific list. Do you have an inside man?”

She wasn’t telling him shit.

Why?

The Hunters were Ethan’s baby, made to protect her from Gabe, who now got his way, and forced her to take it on as her pet project.

The universe...it sucked.

Only, she’d protect them.

“Santa fucking Claus,” she said. “I was a good girl all year, and he slipped it down my text message chimney. It didn’t come wrapped. He must not have had time because it’s children, so this whole questioning doesn’t need to happen.”

Bob was being Bob.

“We have to verify...”

She shut him down and bypassed the CIA by just ignoring his presence in the room. She was done playing nice.

Now, she was ready to play dirty.

“General, can you locate these people, get people on the ground, and find those kids, and all of the women before

they're killed or resold?" she asked.

He didn't hesitate.

"We can. I have some Marines who love shit like this, Director."

**Good.**

From where he sat, Bob sputtered.

"You have to verify all information multiple times. We can't just roll into Venezuela and knock on someone's door to ask them if they are pedophiles."

She smiled.

"Really? When I was in Columbia, and you had agents working in the states, you didn't mind playing then. You didn't verify when you had your agents toss me to the wolves."

Then, because she'd hold off for a lot of things, but never children, she went there.

"Here's a name you might know. Artemis Dubois. I hope I don't find her in *New Orleans* and send her ass to Germany because what I hear is you made a mess there. The Chancellor isn't happy."

That shut him right up.

Gabe watched it happen, and he thoroughly enjoyed it when Elizabeth just ran something. This was exactly why he wanted her to play this role.

**She.**

**Was.**

**Brutal.**

Immediately, Bob stood up.

"I'll get my people to survey the house. Don't cross me, Blackhawk. You're only in that position temporarily. Axelle will be back soon enough, and when she is, she'll see that you made a mess. You'll be back to chasing killers and away from the control."

*She laughed.*

*And laughed.*

*And laughed.*

Someone was in for a shock.

Elizabeth glanced over at Gabe.

“Mr. President? Do you want to tell him, or should I?” she asked.

Gabe handled this.

“Oops. Did we not tell you? This is her permanent position. I really hope you didn’t burn her in the past, Bob. She’s got a good memory, and she gets mean. Oh, wait. You did burn her in Columbia—and me too.”

The man looked horrified.

She smiled.

“I know. Who woulda thunk?” she asked, letting the drawl out. “Little ol’ me running the FBI with my sister-in-law, who you burned too. This is going to be a fun one. Neither one of us can be swayed by politics. That sucks for... you political boot lickers.”

At her words, Bob hauled ass.

General Bishop shook his head.

“I thought it was fun dealing with Ethan. I can see that you’re even meaner and trickier. Are you sure you weren’t a Marine in a previous life?”

She shrugged.

“Birds of a feather flock together,” she said. “Just get those kids back, and find their mothers. We can’t allow American citizens to be shipped out of here like cattle, just like we can’t let foreign women be shipped in like that either.”

No one argued.

She wasn’t wrong.

“This needs to be kept quiet. Do you have someone going in?”



“Yes. We have Spiders creating their web. I borrowed Reaper. He’ll handle it.”

The General nodded.

“Good plan. He’s effective as a cleaner.”

That he was.

“We’re covered from our end,” Elizabeth said. “We have this. Do your part.”

General Bishop stood.

“We’ll be in touch,” he said, as he and Joint Chiefs stood beside him.

When they left, Gabe laughed.

“Someone likes the power,” he said. “Welcome to the job.”

“Oh, stuff it, Baldini. Now, I know why Ethan never slept, and Axelle is angry all of the time. I know shit I shouldn’t know. I’m never sleeping again.”

**Likely not.**

She was just lucky she wasn’t the president. He knew even more scary things. Instead of saying anything to scare her more, he gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Drive it like you stole it.”

*What choice did she have?*

She had Hunters and Feds to protect.

And now, alphabet agencies gunning for her ass.

This was not fun.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

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## *Chapter Fifteen*

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*Bar*

*Across New Orleans*

*Seedy Part Of Town*

*Friday Nine P.M.*

Oh, it was sketchy as hell. The team watched the location long enough to know that they needed to get in there and soon. It was busy enough that there might be a chance they'd get lucky.

Granted, no one saw Chevy enter, but then again, they didn't know what he looked like to be able to ID him. All they needed was one person who did, and they were set.

Finding his face might be helpful, and going forward, that was a good angle for any and all questions.

Only, who were they going to ask?

It wasn't like they had a ton of leads on this one. Somehow, Chevy either paid off all the miscreants in the city, or he had a trick up his sleeve.

They'd yet to figure out which.

They were going to be heading in with Dakota, Zayn, Eve, Maura, and Jagger. The first team had breeched the police station and had gotten the goods.

Now, it was their turn to get results.

It was a long shot, but they might get lucky. Why? Oh, maybe because they weren't going in as Hunters. They were going in as Mikey O's people.

He'd been low-key the last three months, and maybe with his return to the scene, he could shake something loose.

They had to risk it.

*What was another risk?*

### **The Major making an appearance.**

The only reason Maura was going was everyone in there...

Well, to be blunt, they were dead—or were going to be when they were done with them.

It was dangerous, but they had to take a chance if it meant putting an end to this.

The team knew that with Artemis buying up mercenaries, and the Russian mob coming, something was brewing.

And it wouldn't be good.

Getting this handled was the priority.

Jagger knew his wife had to assess the situation on the fly, and that she had a plan that would definitely get them Chevy and possibly Cruz.

She always had a plan B.

Only, with this particular one, she was holding it back until she could make sure there were no other options.

That should have told everyone how bad it was going to be. Since he was privy, he was worried.

When it came down to it, what choice was there, really?

Storming one of the modeling agencies, or using one of Calyx's *'friends'* was equally as dangerous. If they didn't have allies, they were screwed.

Hookers were not trustworthy, and they were all betting that's who Calyx would give them.

None of them could go undercover since they were all too old. Plus, everyone knew the Major in this game.

On top of that, the bad guys knew Calyx. She was the owner of the underground.

*So this...*

This meant doing it the right way.

“Ready?” Maura asked, itching to get this started. The sooner it was over, the sooner they were going to get home.

Her people got their guns ready. They were double-plated when it came to body armor, and ready to go. Really, that mattered. This was like shooting fish in the barrel, and in this scenario, they were the fish.

**Unfortunately.**

“I’m good,” Dakota said, planning to hover over the woman beside him as much as possible. He wasn’t letting Eve out of his sight.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

“Ready,” Zayn said, checking to make sure his gun was locked and loaded.

“Eve?” Maura asked.

She popped a bubble with the gum she was chewing and grinned.

“Point me at them, and let me do my worst,” she said, acutely aware that Dakota was going to be on her like camo on a soldier. He was breathing down her neck.

**LITERALLY.**

Maura was glad to have her.

The only Hunter not with them was Remmy because they used him on the DL. He was also their connection to the dirty side of NOLA.

They had to keep that lifeline. They weren’t taking a chance someone would ID him. He had, after all, been the Deputy Director of the FBI.

“Okay, then keep in mind that they are going to be gunning for us,” Maura said.

Jagger handed her a mask she could pull on over her face. She stared at it.

“Uh, I’m going in…”

Her husband shut that right down.

“You are going in incognito. No arguments. I want you, Eve, and Dakota with your faces covered. Everyone knows that Zayn works for me, but we don’t need hits put out on anyone else.”

Dakota wasn’t arguing.

He would put Eve in the car—a locked trunk—if he could.

“Well, who are we to argue with the boss. That works for me,” he blurted out as he pulled the mask down over Eve’s face so fast that she laughed.

“My dude, are you insane? Was that a drive-by masking?” she asked.

He tried not to laugh.

“Yes. Yes, it was, and the next step is you wear me as a backpack. Be grateful I have some control.”

She snorted as she readjusted her mask over her face. Honestly, she didn’t mind him hovering. His arm had been over her shoulder the whole time, and all she could smell was his cologne.

It made her giddy.

From the front seat, Maura passed the rest of the masks out.

When she pulled hers on, it was the same one they used all those years ago when they went into the jungle to get El Gato.

It was also the same one she’d had on when they drove through El Gato’s gate, taking him down, and years earlier, when she blew up his compound.

Her whole team had worn them with the skeleton faces on them. It had been their team’s callsign, of sorts.

Old habits die hard.

Go with what you knew.

That was her motto.

“Ready?” Jagger asked when his wife and Dakota had gotten into their masks.

“Yes,” they said, together.

Getting out of their blacked-out ride, they moved toward the bar, and just as they approached, a guy was coming out of the door.

The second that he saw Jagger, the dumbass went for his gun.

Only, he wasn't the fastest shooter this side of *New Orleans*. Adder was.

Eve shot him before he could even pull it from beneath his coat. Immediately, he dropped like a bag of bones.

“And that is why you always carry one with a silencer,” she said, tucking the gun back into her gear.

“It's going to be a long night,” Dakota muttered, getting patted on the back by Zayn.

“Don't worry. Quickdraw McAdder has it under control. More or less. I hope she doesn't get tired of you hovering and shoot you in the ass.”

Dakota flipped him off.

“I'm gonna shoot you in the...”

Maura pointed.

“Shut it down. Focus. I want to get Chevy—not shot!” she warned.

Both men did as she said. No one was willing to backtalk the Major.

**No.**

**One.**

“Watch your backs,” Jagger said, fixing his tie and rolling his neck. They heard the pops of his bones as the

tension had also shown up for the party.

Maura and Zayn flanked him, making sure he was safe as he entered the building.

As they finally got inside, the place was semi-filled, and there was clearly an illegal gambling ring going on. They had a scoreboard up, and money was exchanging hands.

Yeah, no.

Not in *New Orleans* on his turf.

As soon as they saw them, everyone went for guns, and Zayn mowed down the one section with his AR-Fifteen and the copious amount of bad attitude.

Bad guy bodies hit the floor.

**One.**

**By.**

**One.**

They weren't alone. The shell casings rained down, bouncing on the booze-soaked floor.

As the dust settled, Mikey O' stepped through the chaos and took his place in the room—where everyone could see him.

It was time to announce his return, and how he was **NOT** putting up with shit here.

**He.**

**Was.**

**Done.**

“Okay, we all know who I am, so let's make this fast. I have assholes to kill,” he said, looking around. “The first person to tell me where I can find Cruz Santiago, Chevy Chesary, or produce a picture of Chevy's spiffy new face, gets one million in cash,” he added, tossing the duffle bag onto the one table near the dead mercenaries.

Yeah, he wanted them to know one thing.



He was not messing around.

At his words, a hush fell over the entire room, as they all looked back and forth at each other.

One guy raised his hand from the floor.

“Stand up,” Jagger said. “You have ten seconds.”

“Cruz isn’t here. He doesn’t come in often. As for Chevy, he hangs out with a lot of cops. He’s always meeting with them. I just don’t know where.”

That didn’t help them out. Clearly, the man didn’t understand the premise of giving them something useful.

*So...*

Maura shot him.

Jagger didn’t miss a beat.

“Clearly, Assholes, that’s not good enough. I need to know where to find either of them or his face. Next, and let me say that if you end it with *‘I don’t know where’*, you’re dead. Are we on the same shitty page?”

Dakota turned his head, and he saw something from his peripheral. When he realized the scumbag was trying to slip a gun from his pants to shoot at them, he stepped in front of Eve and shot the man.

**Pointblank.**

His brains showered the people behind him as his head exploded.

Everyone jumped, including Eve.

She looked over fast.

The tension in Dakota’s body said it all. He wasn’t there to play when it came to her life.

That was sexy.

Jagger got pissy.

“And if anyone tries that shit, again, you all die,” he said. “Am I crystal fucking clear? I take a little vacation to

Boston, and all of a sudden, you shitheads think that you can do stupid things in my absence. **WRONG**. Now, let's handle this before I get shoot-y."

There were murmurs as they began conferring with each other.

Honestly, he didn't care.

As long as they got some resolution, they could talk amongst themselves. Maybe they could rub their single brain cells together, and come up with a clue.

Granted, he wasn't betting on it.

"This is the last time," he said. "You've had time. Where can I find Cruz Santiago? I hear he owns a few modeling agencies. If he's not here, where is he hiding out? And don't say with Chevy. That's a given to get you shot in the head!"

A man said something from the floor.

"Yes? What?" Jagger asked, hoping for his sake he had something to add to the conversation.

He was getting irritated.

When the guy lifted his head, Jagger waited with his eyebrow raised for this little gem.

"He owns Models INC," he said.

Before he could say anything else or ask him anything else, Zayn shot him.

Everyone jumped.

When Jagger looked over not sure what the man was thinking since there could have been more, the big Native shrugged.

"He did me dirty once on a job. I've been looking for that fucker for a while," he said, shooting him again in the body. "You can't trust a word he says."

Then, he shot another guy.

And another.

Eve just laughed.

“Someone needs a psych eval,” she said, as Zayn tossed his hair over his shoulder when he was done.

“Nah, I just have a thing for sideburns,” he said. “They creep me out. Men need to manscape more.”

Maura tried not to laugh.

It was so difficult too. Zayn was a loose cannon, but he was amusing as hell when he was in the moment.

Jagger saw that this was going nowhere. Artemis’ big lead was running them out of time, and not getting them intel. This just might be a bust.

Maybe that was the point.

“Okay, so no one knows where I can find them?” he asked.

The waitress raised her hand.

“I do, Sir.”

He glanced over.

Well, she looked innocent enough, but if Jagger had learned anything, it’s that the enemy threw people at you who would make you drop your guard.

Look at the Snakes.

“He’s got a meeting with some models tomorrow around six at his one agency,” she said. “I heard him take a phone call. I haven’t seen the Chevy guy, but I’ve heard Cruz call him ‘*El Capitan*’,” she admitted. “They tend to come here on Saturday nights. You’re a day early.”

And that was what he wanted.

Only, the Saturday night thing was not going to happen. This bar wouldn’t be here.

It seemed they were finally beginning to get legitimate information that could help them find the men.

Maybe he could use this to his advantage. Jagger didn’t like killing women, and maybe if he gave her the money, it

would get the others to talk.

Because this was getting him nowhere.

He pointed at the duffle bag.

“Take your money and go,” he said. “Keep your mouth shut, or I’ll find you.”

She lifted a brow, clearly surprised that he was keeping his word.

“Really?” she asked.

“Yep. I’m a man of my word. Thank you for your help,” he said.

When she grabbed the bag and headed out, Jagger jerked his head, and Eve knew exactly what he wanted.

He wasn’t really a man of his word when it came to people who knew women and children were being sold. He wanted to see what she did.

Trust no one in *New Orleans*, but his family.

That was his motto.

“Now, for the bonus round. Who can tell me how he gets the women out? It will get you the same reward as the young lady is getting.”

That was all it took to loosen lips.

Apparently, Jagger’s gamble had paid off.

They saw a woman walk out, and with cash, so another man raised his hand. That had been Jagger’s plan.

“Yes?” he asked.

The man stood up.

“He uses a private plane to ship them out on jobs. I’ve seen it. I work at the airstrip where the plane is kept. It’s one of those fancy jets.”

Well, this might help.

He needed more.

“What are the serial numbers on it?” he asked, waiting patiently.

The man rattled them off.

“N-C-D-one-five-five-niner.”

He memorized it.

Someone was getting a little visit at the airport, and they were going to find out who owned that jet and have a little talky-talk.

“Anyone else have something we can add to that to help me locate these assholes?” he asked, patiently.

No one else spoke.

Well, the guy who’d just given him the intel had. He was more than happy to run his mouth to get rich.

“Do I get my reward?” the man asked. “You know, like the waitress?”

Jagger smiled.

“Absolutely, my friend. We want you to get what you deserve. You know...since you watched a scumbag load up women to be sold off. Pay him, Zayn,” Jagger said.

The Native mowed down the last fifteen people, just as Eve was coming in with the duffel bag.

When the room was cleared, she handed it back to Jagger.

“She was calling someone in her car,” she said, handing him the phone. “Just like you expected. She was going to rat us out. Now, she’s going to be rat food.”

**Good.**

He was done with the assholes in this city.

Taking the phone, he tucked it away.

“We’ll have Merry look for the number she was trying to call. I’ll get that location at some point, and maybe it’s the next piece to the puzzle.”

Since everyone was dead, and they'd handled security, Maura pulled off the thick mask.

"Let's see if we can find anything," she said.

"Zayn, stay by the door and shoot anyone that comes in. If they smell like a cop, shoot them twice. This whole city is foul, and I'm not a fan."

"Got it," he said, heading that way.

*That's when they searched.*

*And searched.*

*And searched.*

Oh, they found a lot of ill-gotten goods, some phones, and a shit ton of gambling money.

As for what would give them a heads-up as to where to find Chevy and his new ID...

That was a bust.

Unfortunately for them, they came up with one, and only one conclusion.

Cruz was being very careful.

It was crystal clear that Chevy had taught the man to play hide-and-seek.

**Way.**

**Too.**

**Well.**

It was Marine-esque.

**And annoying as hell.**



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## *Chapter Sixteen*

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*Friday Evening*

*Chartres Street*

*Post-Job*

*The End Of A Long Day*

**T**here was nothing worse than hitting a place to get intel, and only receiving the shit you already knew. That was exactly what had happened to The Hunters. To make it worse, the blowing up of the bar...

It wasn't nearly as satisfying.

You could only make things go **BOOM** so many times before it got boring as hell.

They really needed to find a new way to make shit disappear in this city. At some point, people, mainly the local authorities, were going to get hella suspicious that there were so many gas leaks.

Well, until they did...

When in *New Orleans*, do what you did.

To add a little jazz to this one, they spraypainted a big 'Z' on the side of one of the vehicles, so when the cops did show, they'd think it was the new mercenary in town.

When in Rome, screw with the dirty cops to make them look over their shoulders.

As they dropped their gear inside Chartres, Violet immediately headed toward her mom.

"You're safe," she said, hugging her.

"Do you know me? I'm too mean to get hurt," she said, letting the girl hug her. She gave her a kiss on the temple.

"I'm tired, Mom. Can we go home? Uncle Tommy was bad."



Eve lifted an eyebrow.

“Was he now?” she asked, focusing on him.

He explained before he was Adder’d.

“I told her not to eat too many cookies. She’s got a sick belly, and that is what happens when you are a cookie thief,” he stated. “I give her an hour and she’ll want more. Kids have resilient bellies.”

At his words, Eve relaxed and just shook her head.

“I get it, Violet. I have cookie impulse control issues too.”

Tommy headed her way with a brown paper bag.

“I also made the mother-to-be some to take home for herself. You know, in case you get the urge to have something sweet.”

She took them.

“Thank you, Tommy. I’ll hide these so one of us doesn’t get sicker.”

Violet laughed.

“It’s worth it. Cookies are so good,” she admitted.

No one was shocked that she ate the cookies like there was no tomorrow. Growing up, she’d been deprived of food, and now, they were making up for it.

Violet was a sweet kid.

Not far away, Eve saw Dakota hovering, and while they were better, she wasn’t one hundred percent sure how to do this. Did she tell him to get his shit and move in?

Did she just let him decide?

In her world, you took what you wanted, and she wasn’t sure exactly if now was a good time to ask him to marry her—like the other Hunters suggested.

So, she was going to let him do this.

She had to.

Eve was clueless when it came to relationships, and she didn't want to blow it by moving too fast for Dakota.

He was a wildcard.

“What’s the plans for tomorrow?” she asked, as Jagger helped his wife out of her gear.

“We are going to be following that truck before dawn, to see if it leads us to Chevy’s hidey-hole.”

“I’m in,” she said.

Immediately, Maura stopped her.

Yeah, no.

She wasn’t.

“You have a doctor’s appointment in the morning. You need to get to it. There’s no way we’re letting you miss it. That’s a pretty important appointment.”

**Shit.**

She’d forgotten.

Dakota was standing there, not sure how to proceed with all of this. He tended to screw things up, but he wanted to be with her at that appointment.

**DESPERATELY.**

It was, after all, his first child.

“Do you want a ride there?” he asked, hoping she’d say yes. He was trying to navigate this, and Eve didn’t say anything about going back to her place.

There had yet to be an invite.

Honestly, his fingers were crossed. That’s where he wanted to be.

**With her.**

**And Violet.**

She didn’t miss a beat.

“I’d like that,” she said. “Thank you.”

Everyone stared at Dakota, waiting for him to do the next part of the dance—where he snagged himself an invite back with her.

Only, he didn't.

When no one spoke, Eve finally opted to do it.

“Well, then, I'll show up here after the appointment,” she offered. “Can I bring Violet with me so she's safe?” she asked.

That was a no-brainer.

Immediately, Maura hugged her.

“Girl, this angel of yours is welcome here anytime you want. If you need a safe place, we can transport her to the house where we stay. There is a gun-toting nanny there who is taking care of Sawyer.”

She thanked her.

“I appreciate that. All I want is for my children to be safe.”

When Dakota still said nothing, Eve took that as her hint that they were not going to leave together.

Yeah, this was a minefield that she did **NOT** know how to navigate.

“I'll see you guys in the morning after my appointment then. Dakota, goodnight,” she said.

Eve grabbed her things, leaving the body armor behind. Then, she walked out the door with Violet, leaving the silent man behind.

Immediately, when the front door closed, Zayn slapped Dakota on the back of the head.

“What was that, dumbass?” he asked.

Dakota rubbed his head and gave Zayn a dirty look that said it all.

“Why do you feel like slapping me in the head is an appropriate starter for every sentence?”

“Because you just let the love of your freaking life leave alone. She left the door open for you, and you stood there with your head up your ass.”

Rogue sighed.

“I need a vacation. This is a full-time job getting Dakota laid and married.”

Stella laughed.

“Hey, he’s not scowling. We’re one step closer to it today. Maybe tomorrow he’ll figure it out.”

Ehhhh, likely not.

They knew the man too well.

“Can you guys not talk about me like I’m not here? She didn’t invite me back. What was I supposed to say? Want a roommate?”

“**YES!**” they all said together.

He stared at them as if he wasn’t able to put the pieces together on his own.

So, they clued him in.

“Dude, she rejoined the team. She’s got plenty of money, and a nice place for her and her kids. She doesn’t need to do this. She came back for you. So you need to follow her home, bring a bottle of something nice, and **ROMANCE** her,” Jagger said.

“Non-alcoholic,” Stella added since Dakota could screw up tying his own shoes.

Dakota stared at her.

“His sweet Stella, I think I know that part. It’s the rest that confuses me.”

Boone sat on the couch.

“We know. Getting you married is becoming a mission in itself. Major, plan something. Please. We’re all getting old and need to get him settled before we retire.”

Dakota hooked his finger on the back of the eyepatch, held on behind his head, and flicked it up. It shot off like a slingshot, hitting Stella.

She laughed.

“I think you lost this,” she admitted, tossing it back to him.

Dakota didn’t need his ass busted.

“It’s been a rough day for me. How about you guys help me out with this one?” he asked.

Maura felt bad for him.

“She didn’t eat dinner. Cookies are nice, but food is better. Take a bunch of food and a bottle of sparkling grape juice with you and have an apartment picnic. That screams romantic.”

He stared at her.

“And that will work?” he asked.

Lordy, but this one was difficult.

The Major’s man explained.

“You’re feeding her and the baby. Take a shower, put on street clothes, and go,” Jagger said. “Pregnant women like a few things. Food, backrubs, and men who don’t act like assholes.”

He could do that.

“And marry her,” Rogue said. “She’s waiting for you to make a move.”

He hesitated.

“I can’t ask her to marry me until I...”

They all stared at him as if daring the man to go back on his word to just do what they said.

Finally, he got it.

“Okay, I’ll shower and pack a picnic.”

Stella stood up.

“I’m pregnant. I’ll pack it since I know what I would eat. Go shower, Dak. You need a little help, and the men are good at direction, but lack in producing a result.”

Zayn wasn’t having it.

“My sweet Stella, that sounded like an insult, and you know that I deliver. You are pregnant with our third baby.”

She stared at him.

“And clearly done with my bullshit.”

She smiled and headed into the kitchen.

As soon as she was gone, Dakota rushed out to do what they said.

While he was off doing that, The Hunters sat, talking over what went down.

Maura needed to get her ducks in a row so that she could plan tomorrow’s work. They had to follow that vehicle from the police station, and pray that no one found Jinx’s little present of a suicidal cop hanging in the building.

“Okay, we are going to be handling tomorrow carefully,” Maura said. “From what Jinx has told us, we know that van is moving out early.”

Jinx clued them in.

“It’s got the rest of Addiction on it. I’m betting it’s the contraband that Chevy stole from Teague right before we went into that warehouse and blew it to pieces.”

Maura agreed.

“We’ll be down Dakota and Eve tomorrow. So, I want to hit them with those of us who are good at being sneaky.”

They all looked at Rogue.

“That’s a compliment, so I’ll take it. I’m definitely in. I’ll see if I can get some of Remmy’s tech and use it to track it, in case the cop, Aiden, loses us.”

Maura was good with that.

“The driver is one of the other cops on the list that Elizabeth gave us. We might not get all five, but we’ll get as many as we can. That should drive the remaining cops under if they see their compadres going down. Cops aren’t stupid. They’ll read the room.”

That was good with them.

Merry raised her hand.

“You wanted those names run on the cops, right?” she asked.

Maura nodded.

“Well, I have good and bad news.”

They waited.

“They are all clean on paper. Chevy is getting smarter and smarter. If he’s paying them, it’s not in cash. I did notice something about all the cops, and that includes the man that had a terrible neck injury tonight,” she said.

“What?”

Merry explained.

“They all have pretty big cryptocurrency accounts.”

“And what is the bad news?”

“I can’t track that. It’s digital, and it’s something that’s so new, that there’s not a specific place it’s stored. You lock it in a digital vault, and finding the location and the super long crypto key to open that account...”

They got it.

What needed to happen was Chevy had to be found before he exceeded their skill in hunting.

He was close.

Maura put her boots on the edge of the coffee table.

“And here is the dilemma of playing chase with an ex-Marine. He’s smarter than Teague ever was. That makes our job harder because he was trained for deep cover ops.”

Jagger knew what she was thinking about.

**Her plan.**

Maura was doing everything **NOT** to have to use it, and they were running out of options.

**Fast.**

“Merry, you and Boone are going to have to work on that tomorrow. I want to figure out where the mercenaries are keeping their money. I know you said it’s almost impossible, but we still have to cover our bases. Because we don’t know where or how much he’s paying them. That’s going to be an issue with what we know is coming. We don’t need a bunch of rich killers running amuck.”

Yeah, that would be bad.

“We have Russian mercenaries heading here, and they aren’t coming to take in the sights. I don’t doubt that this is all connected somehow.”

No one argued that.

“We’ll keep digging,” Merry said. “Tomorrow morning, we’ll get it handled. Are we staying here?” she asked, talking to her husband.

“If the team is, yes.”

“We are,” Maura said, answering that.

Jinx was concerned.

“I have to breastfeed our son,” Jinx said. “Then, I’ll come back.”

Rogue kissed his wife on the temple.

“Sawyer is already on his way here with the nanny. I called her on our way back in. Then, you’ll be able to take care of him.”

She leaned against her husband.

“I knew I married you for a reason.”

Zayn took his shot.



“Yeah, his Playboy looks because his personality is shit,” Zayn said, busting his ass.

He didn’t even look over.

“Says the guy with that chip on his shoulder and the twenty-pound weight gain from the last Stella pregnancy. Someone tell him the mother gains the weight, not the man.”

He gasped.

“Did you just call me fat?”

Rogue didn’t hesitate.

“Yes. What gave it away?”

He laughed.

How could he not?

They busted ass all the time, and he did just start his shit first.

Before they could continue, Maura’s phone rang, and it was a weird chime. Before she could answer it, the screen on the wall turned on.

They all jumped.

Sometimes, it felt as if the house was alive and had its own personality.

“I hate that,” Zayn said. “No one likes living in a haunted house,” he admitted.

The irony was that the whole town was technically haunted, and they knew it.

Before anyone could say more, MATE announced her arrival.

Well, video arrival.

“Deputy Director Blackhawk. Incoming video call. Screen two.”

Zayn sighed.

“Yep. The house is haunted by a wicked bitch.”

Her face appeared on the screen and unfortunately for Zayn, she'd heard him.

“So is that hollow jack-o-lantern head of yours, Zayn. It's got the ghosts of knowledge never obtained.”

Jagger laughed.

“She gets you every time. Use your inside-the-head voice to yourself. It's less embarrassing for you.”

Ehhh, no thank you.

Busting Blackhawk ass was part of the fun.

“What's up?” Maura asked, noticing that she was in her home office.

*How did they know?*

There was a piece of furniture with a ton of pictures of all of her kids behind her.

And a little one in her lap.

**Dolly.**

“What isn't up?” Elizabeth asked, as the little mop-haired girl colored in a book on the desk. “I just got home, and I received a call. I thought I'd update you.”

“In front of the little one?” Zayn asked. “Are you trying to scare her before bed?”

She tapped Dolly on the shoulder, and the little girl looked up at her.

Then, she began signing and speaking so that The Hunters could hear what she was telling the child.

“Dolly, say hello to the nice people that are momma's friends.”

The little girl smiled brightly, and she signed something.

“Dolly said it's nice to meet you. Got cookies?” she asked.

Zayn's big, old, mean heart melted.

How could it not?

He was a fighter for the underdog, and this little one had been handed a disability. That broke his dad heart.

“She’s beautiful.”

Elizabeth hugged her child. She needed to because she had just received news that made her sick. Not much horrified her, but this...

This did.

“Thank you,” she said, and then clued them in. It wasn’t often that she discussed her kids, but she trusted The Hunters. “We adopted her a year ago. She’s Ethan and my child. I found her at an orphanage, and we fell in love with her.”

Maura waved at her, and Dolly held up her coloring book to show her what she was doing. It was a coloring book of puppies, and she was so proud of her work.

“Can you tell her that’s beautiful?” Maura asked.

Elizabeth did, and the little girl blew them all a kiss.

It melted many a mercenary heart.

“Okay, I want to steal her,” Rogue said. “She’s beyond precious.”

She stopped that then and there.

“Hey now. That’s my gig,” Elizabeth said, laughing. “No napping my kiddos.”

As if on cue, she looked off the camera to someone else.

When a little boy appeared, she signed to him too. Then, she helped Dolly off of her lap, and they went off together.

Because she knew they were curious, everyone always was, she explained.

“That was DJ. He’s also deaf, and my son with Christopher. His mother was killed by a serial killer, and he

was asleep in his bed. It's the only reason he survived.”

“Jesus,” Zayn muttered. “I don't want to like you, but you make it damn hard not to.”

She smiled.

“Did you just say you love me? I think you did. Are we besties?” she asked, grinning at him.

He sputtered.

“No freaking way.”

She continued to bust his ass.

“Too late. I'm getting us matching keychains and t-shirts.”

He snorted.

Yeah, no freaking way.

“Okay, we're clear,” she said.

When the office door closed behind her children, the switch was flipped, and she became a completely different person.

It was time to be the bearer of shitastic news.

“The military made access to three of the locations, Columbia, Venezuela, and Russia, looking for the children. We went with them first, simply because children can't defend themselves as much as a grown woman.”

They were glad.

They knew time was limited.

“We haven't gotten access to China, as you can imagine that's not easy.”

Oh, they were aware.

It took weeks to get in, have an op set up, and to successfully handle it.

“Luckily for us, we had CIA undercover in Bogotá and East Caracas in Venezuela.”

Maura had been in charge of extricating. She knew that from the tone in Elizabeth's voice.

It wasn't good.

"But?" she asked.

She told them.

"They took out the men on the list who purchased the children. They are no longer."

That sounded like good news.

"Again, but?" Jagger asked this time.

She held nothing back, and unfortunately, Elizabeth's face said it all.

"They found bodies that were buried. Two of the children aren't coming back. The graves were pretty fresh. They were..."

She hated saying it.

"Lost in action," she said because the words hurt her heart.

That was all Maura had to hear.

She got up, walked toward the wall, and put her fist through it, surprising everyone.

It wasn't often she lost her temper.

That was generally a Zayn kind of thing.

"God! I fucking hate people!" she said, walking out of the room.

When Maura was gone, Jagger got up.

"I'll go help her through this. Rogue, get any intel we need. I'm sorry," Jagger said to Elizabeth, knowing she'd understand. Any parent would.

"Not as sorry as I am, Jagger. Trust me. We'll keep going until we find a child who is still alive."

He believed her.

If anything, Elizabeth would keep fighting for a child who was lost.

When he walked out, she continued.

“We’re cleaning it up, and we’re bringing the two we’ve found home. The Marines on the ground are taking care of them now. They’ll be arriving at the Airforce base in Germany, and will be transported back here. My team will take care of them, in hopes we can find their mothers alive.”

They all knew what would be coming back.

Remains.

That’s who her team handled.

Zayn actually wiped his eyes because there were tears in them. It took a lot to make the big man cry, and this was at the top of the list.

He thought about his own children.

“I need answers.”

Yeah, so did she.

The biggest question she had was why did people do shit like this to other people?

So far, with twenty-plus years in the FBI, no one could answer it for her.

“Yes?”

“Did they suffer?” he asked.

She didn’t give him the answer she knew he wanted. Her gut was raw, and she knew no one would believe her lie. There was no way that the children they’d found hadn’t been scared before they died.

Or in pain.

So, she tried her best.

“Let’s just say that the men did suffer, and will continue to. I can promise you that. The Marines did what they’d been sent in to do. Let’s just say they won’t be buying children anymore.”

He stopped her.

“I meant the kids.”

“I know,” she said.

That told them all they needed to know. She wasn't going to give them the details so they didn't carry that burden. That was her cross to bear.

“Thank you,” Jinx said.

She nodded somberly.

“I'll get the rest back. I'll also ignore that there was an explosion in *New Orleans* tonight and someone tagged it as a surprise player in the game.”

Merry shrugged.

“That's funny. We were all right here having a little family get-together. I hope you guys catch that Z fellow. He's raising plenty of hell. He might be worse than us.”

She laughed.

Oh, and for reasons they weren't aware of too.

“Yeah, I'm aware. I hope you guys don't have to deal with him too much,” she said, amused.

“Yeah, us too,” Zayn said.

Elizabeth had a few minutes until she was going to be tucking in her kids. Once she left this office, she was off duty to be a mom.

“Care to update me on that bar?” she asked.

Zayn did.

He shared everything that went down, minus the killing. He told her all about what they'd learned about the men who called that place their '*office*' of sorts and then about the van leaving the police station.

“I'm sure the Major has it under control,” Elizabeth admitted. “If she needs help, let me know.”

They all knew what that meant.

“We will,” Rogue said.

Jinx told her about their concerns with someone finding Tate West before they could track the van in the morning.

She listened.

“Well, then, I think I can help you there. I’ll have one of the local FBI agents head there early morning to control the scene once they do find out. We’ll get one of our MEs to do the autopsy. It will appear that Tate West committed suicide, and it won’t be discovered until after you head out. Text me when you guys do.”

Rogue was grateful.

They knew she’d skew it in their favor.

“Thank you.”

Honestly, Elizabeth didn’t want thanks. What she wanted was to find the women and children, and get them back.

**Alive.**

She also wanted to go hug and kiss her kids, then climb all over her husbands to forget what she saw and knew. Her belly was raw, and she needed some soothing of her own.

Was that too much to ask?

“Just be safe out there, Hunters,” she said. Then, she remembered what else they were dealing with. “How’s Dakota holding up?”

**They.**

**All.**

**Laughed.**

Well, that said it all, now didn’t it?

“We’re trying to get him to marry the girl. It’s never going to happen at this rate,” Zayn said. “He’s too stubborn to just listen.”



“Fifty says he’s married by the end of next week,” Elizabeth said, holding up some money.

Zayn laughed.

“Are you insane? Dakota? **HIM**? I’ll definitely take that bet. We need some new guns. Put the money away. If you lose, you get us some gear. The Russians are coming,” he said.

Rogue agreed.

“I want some new CIA tech if we’re right. Because he’s the slowest mover on the planet.”

“Deal,” she said. “If I win, you owe me one,” she added. “As in I call in that favor whenever, even if it’s to have Zayn come to my kid’s birthday dressed as a clown.”

He laughed.

“That’s never happening. You won’t be winning, so I’ll take that bet.”

It was done.

“Good luck, Hunters. Call if you need me—just not until morning. I need a palate cleanser. This had been a rough day.”

Amen to that.

When she nodded, the call went dead.

Zayn was the first to speak.

“I want to go on the record and say that the hole that was just put in the wall...you bitches aren’t blaming me for it later.”

They were all still shaken up. Maura didn’t do shit like that, and if she was...

Rogue leaned back and closed his eyes.

“This city,” he said. “There are days I wish it would get swallowed.”

Yeah, they were all aware.

“I’ll go make some coffee,” Merry said. “We’re going to have a long night of tracking cryptocurrency for the Major.”

Wasn’t that the truth?

*And an even longer night...*

**Forgetting.**

*In The Adjoining House...*

If anything, he knew why she was so upset, and Maura had every right to be.

They’d fought for years trying to take down men who took too much power over women, children, their citizens, and anyone they could bully.

They’d leveled the playing field, and now, the knowledge that there were still assholes out there was a hard pill to swallow.

That’s why he wasn’t shocked to find her in their bathroom, puking.

This was an insult to the years of service they’d both put in, and it made him feel just as nauseous.

How could it not?

To soothe his wife, he knelt beside her and ran his hand up and down her back.

“I know, Baby. I know. It turns my stomach too. We try so hard, and they keep winning when we’re fighting another war. Elizabeth will get them handled.”

She wiped her mouth and sat on the floor. Jagger handed her some water and joined his wife.

Unfortunately, they’d seen shit like this way too many times in their military careers.

People were assholes.

“We’ll get him. I’ll make him pay. Don’t take it too hard. We can’t win them all. You told me that once, and I always kept it in mind.”

She wished it was that simple.

Instead, she shook her head.

“I don’t know if this is a good or bad time, J, but I think that I’m pregnant.”

Slowly, he turned his head.

The words wouldn’t even come out, so all he did was stare at her. Finally, he was able to string a sentence together. He couldn’t believe what she’d just said to him.

“You wouldn’t play with me, right? Because we lost that baby, and I’ve been a mess.”

She shook her head.

“I’m very serious. Today, I’ve felt off the whole day, and now, I’m puking. I don’t puke a whole lot, J. You know that.”

She had a point.

“Get a test.”

That was all he had to hear. He began digging through a bathroom drawer and finally found one.

He handed it to her, and then pulled his wife to her feet so she could take the test.

As she headed toward the part of the bathroom where the toilet was, he walked into the back of her.

“Jagger...are you going to watch me pee?”

He didn't hesitate.

**“YES.”**

She actually laughed.

“Are you insane?”

Oh, that was a question he'd been trying to answer for a long-ass time.

“I have to make sure the process is right. You can't skip a step. It'll kill me,” he admitted.

She knew that he wasn't exaggerating. The man had struggled with their miscarriage possibly even more than she had. He blamed himself for it.

When it wasn't anyone's fault.

“J, it's literally peeing on a stick. There is only one step. We don't dance around it like it's Voodoo and chant shit. It's piss and wait.”

He was curious.

“Would that work?” he asked, pulling beads from his pocket that Boone had made.

She patted her pocket, where she'd put the ones she'd taken from the men to stop their earlier jackassery. She still had them.

That meant one thing.

Immediately, his wife stared at him.

“Are you insane? Have you been keeping beads from our resident Voodoo practitioner on your person when we have sex?”

He laughed.

“Maybe?”

She shook her head.

“You can yell at me later. Go in there and get it done, soldier,” he said. “Piss for me, baby.”

She pointed.

“Out. We’re getting you some mental health tests as soon as I take this one.”

They might have to. Jagger wanted this baby more than anything.

Because he knew his wife wasn’t playing, and if she caught him peeking under the bathroom door, through the crack, she’d strangle him, he gave her space.

He began pacing.

Fortunately, Maura wasn’t in there long.

When she came out, he stared at her.

“Well?”

“It’s not ready yet. We need two minutes. You know the process.”

This was the worst part.

Jagger wanted to run in and get the test. He wanted to have this come true more than anything. He wanted more children, and he wanted that piece of normalcy.

“I have a question,” she said.

He stopped pacing.

“Yes?”

She went there.

“Are you going to get overprotective and make me insane if we are expecting?”

He didn’t hesitate.

“Yes.”

She stared at him.

“You couldn’t even lie to me?”

He shrugged.

“I gotta be me. Now, I have a question,” he said, hoping she’d answer.

“Yes?”

“Do you think that you’re pregnant? Because you haven’t said a word about it, and I’ve really tried hard to knock you up.”

She was aware.

“Honestly, I feel pregnant.”

He had even more hope.

“If you are, I can stop humping you like a horny moose.”

She stopped that line of conversation.

“Well, Mr. Moose, I wouldn’t go that far. I happen to like your humping. Maybe just take it down from wife-molesting to making love.”

He could do that.

When she glanced down at her watch, she knew it was time.

“I can’t do it, J. You do it. I’m too scared to look. I don’t want to disappoint you.”

He reassured her.

“You won’t ever disappoint me. If you aren’t, Mr. Moose has a solution,” he offered, wiggling his eyebrows.

Deep down, he was nervous as hell, and his heart wasn’t sure if he could take a negative test.

He felt like crying.

Since she knew her husband, she hugged him.

“Okay, we’ve got this,” she reassured. “Let’s get it over with.”

It was Maura’s turn to wait. When Jagger went in, he was in there for a while.

Well, longer than he should be.

While she was trying to be patient, it was so damn difficult.

“Are you lost?” she called to him. “You can’t re-pee on it. That won’t change it.”

When he came out, there were tears on his cheeks, and immediately, she expected the worst.

“Oh, no,” she whispered. “J, I’m sorry.”

He held it out, showing her.

Maura saw two lines, catching her off guard.

“Mar, you’re having my baby again. We’ve been given a second chance.”

And then, surprising her further, Jagger collapsed onto his knees and the floodgates opened.

Maura knew the weight he carried on his shoulders over this.

“Oh, God,” he whispered, that emotion swamping him so fast and furiously.

Maura couldn’t pinpoint what had broken him.

Was it the fact that they had created a new life, and he was happy?

Or because now came the fear all over again, and her poor husband was about to relive it again.

All that she could do was hold him.

So that’s what she did.

Pulling him against her, they sat together on that bathroom floor, thinking about the future.

Once more, everything would change.

*For him.*

*For her.*

*For the Hunters.*

Only, it didn’t really matter. For them, they had no choice but to keep moving forward.

The next adventure for them was about to begin.

**Scary.**

**Or.**

**Not.**

So she did what she knew was best.

Maura held him.

And together, they both cried.



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## *Chapter Seventeen*

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*The Knight Residence*

*Same Time*

*Down The Street*

Getting back to their home, Eve was busy with getting Violet some medicine to calm her stomach, and thinking about the man who didn't even try to follow them back. She began thinking maybe she and he were **NOT** on the same page.

*Why wouldn't he follow?*

*Had she not been clear?*

This whole relationship thing was one hell of a maze, and she was clearly not able to figure it out.

So, instead of stressing it, since he did tell her that he wanted to take her to the doctor's appointment in the morning, she instead took a hot shower to get ready for bed.

A part of her was disappointed she wasn't going to be following a van in the morning, but mom things came first.

As she had made sure Violet was in bed, reading, she heard the knock on the door.

She paused.

*What was this?*

It was evening, and while the city was just waking up, no one came to her door at this time.

Heading there, she saw the security tablet, and her heart skipped a beat.

It was Dakota.

He'd shown up after all.

Immediately, she ran.

Yeah, she wasn't proud of it, but she still did it anyway. Just seeing him did one thing.

Her heart was thumping in her chest.

As she opened the door, the sexiest man she'd ever seen was standing there. He was in jeans, a plaid shirt, and his boots. The boyish grin...

**God.**

It took every ounce of control to keep from jumping on him. Yeah, someone had it bad.

"Am I bothering you?" he asked, hoping she would be receptive to asking him in.

Oh, she wished he absolutely was bothering her.

**IN.**

**BED.**

"No, Dakota, you're fine. I was just checking on Violet. Are you okay?" she asked.

He paused.

"No. I'm not."

She lifted a brow.

"What's wrong?"

He was honest.

"I'm hungry," he said, lifting the bottle of sparkling apple juice, and the picnic basket that was in his other hand. "I figured if I was hungry, someone growing a child might be too. Interested in a later-at-night picnic?"

Oh, she had it bad.

Eve was screwed.

"I think that would be really nice. Care to have it in the living room? Violet is in bed."

Well, then, he was more than happy to have it in her living room. His plan was to escort the ladies across the street to the park, but inside was safer.

“I hope I’m not interrupting you,” he said.

“Not at all. I was a little surprised when you didn’t ask to come back with me before.”

His heart skipped.

“Would you have said yes?”

She laughed.

“Dakota, our child gets you an invite whenever you want. We made a baby. My house versus your house is pretty moot at this point.”

Well, that made him happy.

She was defining the parameters, and he was being given an invite.

That meant his friends were right.

There was no doubt in his mind that they were going to gloat later. Honestly, he wouldn’t be shocked if they were taking bets.

They were assholes.

“It took me longer because I had to shower and Google foods that a pregnant woman can’t eat. I’ll learn fast.”

She laughed and locked the door behind him.

“Well, I can say that the baby and I appreciate that.”

His eyes went to her midsection, and still, he couldn’t believe that his child was in her, growing.

He covered.

“I thought we could spend some time talking and finding our footing. I want this transition to be comfortable for both of us.”

She paused.

She didn’t like that word.

**At.**

**All.**

“Transition?”

“Well, I wanted to say relationship because that’s what I want, but I don’t want to be bossy. I’m already a caveman. I don’t want to scare you away.”

That warmth flooded her.

He did want her.

He was just trying to navigate this like she was, and it just so happened they were both bad at it. His honesty made her incredibly happy.

How could it not?

“Perhaps we call this a date?” he asked, getting bolder, now that he could see that she wasn’t against the idea.

“Mr. Rakin, that sounds inviting. I’d love a living room picnic date.”

Immediately, he held out his arm like a gentleman so she could take it.

She didn’t hesitate and as they walked through her house, she was curious.

“Is this the real you? Or is this the *‘I’m afraid to let me see the real you because there’s so much on the line’*.”

He laughed.

Oh, this was the man he didn’t show anyone but the person he was with.

When you hung with Marines, you had to put up that facade to keep your ass from being ridden. Now, she was seeing *‘dating’* Dakota.

“Want to know a secret?”

“Yes.”

“This is the real me. I’m actually fun when I’m not killing people or trying not to lose my mind over a woman I love when she’s in danger.”

“So me?” she asked, her heart racing that he’d freely admitted that he loved her.

He laughed.

“Yeah, definitely you. This is the Dakota I am when I’m calm, and not ready to go to war. I’m calm when I’m with you. Is this the real you?”

She nodded.

“This is ‘*Eve in her downtime*’. I like movies, junk food, and naps. I’m not as exciting as Adder.”

He disagreed.

“I happen to think this you is much more exciting. It’s a part of you that I’ll get to learn about. Maybe relaxed Dakota and chill Eve can figure this out.”

“I hope so,” she said.

Because she really did.

When they reached the living room, he grabbed a blanket off of the back of the couch and pushed the coffee table out of the way so they’d have space.

Then, he spread out the blanket.

Dakota toed off his boots and began setting up their picnic.

There were fruits, veggies, cheeses, and crackers.

It tickled her to see him so aware of her well-being and wanting to help her through the pregnancy.

It was nice.

When he pulled out a bottle of prenatal vitamins, she laughed.

“I see that you came prepared.”

He did.

Dakota had a houseful of pregnant women at any given point. There was always a stockpile of vitamins that the men were trying to feed to their wives.

He took the hint.

“Let’s call it a gift for the expectant mother.”

She took it and opened it.

Then, she ate two.

“Gummies. My favorite.”

The small action made him feel so damn good. He was taking care of his woman and child. That fed the caveman in him, and he liked it.

Patting the blanket, he sat and held out his hand until she could join him. When she was parked beside him, in her pajamas, he uncorked the sparkling grape juice.

“A toast to the new life we made,” he said, after pouring them both glasses.

She clinked hers off of his.

“May he or she be healthy,” he added.

Eve sipped the drink, and she was ridiculously touched by his sweetness.

“Will you be staying over?” she asked, as he handed her an empty plate.

He paused.

“Are you inviting me?”

She nodded.

It was clear that they were in a relationship, and he was giving her a million percent of himself. They’d both had long days, but here he was, still trying to romance her.

She liked it.

**A lot.**

“Then, I’m staying. I can crash on the couch.”

She laughed.

“I’m pretty sure that won’t be necessary. You already deflowered the woman.”

He grinned wickedly, letting his guard down for the first time in a very long time. He hadn’t been lying when he said he felt safe with her.

“Skills,” he said. “It takes a special tactical skill to get a snake pregnant. They bite.”

She corrected him.

“Well, we bite when we are angry. I’m not feeling very bite-y right now. I’m feeling more happy and blissful. It’s been a good day.”

He was glad.

All he wanted was to give her a plethora of happy moments going forward.

Dakota put food on her plate, made up his own, and they started eating.

“Thank you for tonight,” he said.

“I wasn’t sure you wanted to come here.”

He laughed.

“Oh, Evie, I really wanted to come here. I’m just afraid to make you angry. I know I’m on my last chance.”

She was honest.

“Just don’t hurt me. I don’t get angry easily, Dakota. I’m trained to stay calm. I don’t want you living in fear that any moment I’m going to kick you out of this child’s, or my life.”

“So if we don’t work out?” he asked. “I ask because I’m not easy to love.”

She wasn’t so sure about that.

She’d fallen fast.

“You’re still this child’s father. That’s not changing. Violet said something that resonated with me.”

“What?” he asked, curiously.

“Why would I punish a child if both parents wanted to be in its life? Why would I take a parent away?”

His heart thumped.

“She’s a very wise soul. She’s smarter than I am.”

Yeah, her too.

“So if this doesn’t work, which I doubt it won’t, you’re still expected to do everything you said in your letter. If we have a boy, you’d better be ready to coach baseball. If we have a girl, you’ll need to show her how a man needs to treat her if he wants her heart. You’ll be the first man who loves her, and trust me when I say that matters. I wish my father had been around.”

A tear slipped down his cheek.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Dakota was honest.

“I never thought I’d be in this position.”

She waited, holding her breath.

“And now I never want to not be in it. The whole idea of a little one scares me, but it also fills that hole. I didn’t know what was missing, Eve. Now I do. It was a family of my own.”

She was honest.

“You have a family and they love you,” she admitted.  
“You’re very fortunate.”

He was aware.

“**BUT**...they aren’t the same thing. Like my brothers have their own circle inside the circle, I want that too.”

She was curious.

“When you were with Sarah, what did it feel like?” she asked.

He was honest.

“This is going to make me sound like a huge dick, but I know you can tell if I’m lying or not.”

“I can.”

He was aware.

So, he went there.



“It felt like an obligation.”

She stared into his face.

“Why?”

“She followed me here. She gave up her career, and I was convinced I had to be that guy. I didn’t want to marry her. I mean, on the outside, I did, but I put it off and almost didn’t show up for the wedding.”

“Why did you?”

“Again, obligation.”

That made her wonder.

“Do you feel an obligation to me?” she asked.

He didn’t lie.

“No. I feel an obligation to our child, but I want to be with you. There’s a difference. We made a choice and the child deserves to be loved and protected. That’s **OUR** obligation. We don’t have to be a couple to do that. We can do it separately.”

She waited.

“I don’t want to do it separately. I want to do it with you. I want to be with you, Evie.”

She calmed down.

She wanted that too.

Only, before she could say anything, they heard it. Once more, their moment was being interrupted—like it had in the bunker.

Footsteps were coming down the hall.

Immediately, she apologized.

“I’m sorry. It’s Violet.”

He reassured her.

“She’s always welcome. There’s nothing to apologize for, Evie.”

The girl popped her head into the room and looked around.

“Am I bothering you guys?” she asked.

“Nope. Hungry?” Dakota asked. “Want to have something to eat?”

She hesitated.

“Can I? The sugar rush passed, and I do like food, but I don’t want to be in the way.”

Eve was watching him carefully. She needed to make sure he understood.

They were a package deal.

He moved over on the blanket, making space for her. Then, he moved the fruit closer.

“First, Violet, you’re never in the way. Second, I came bearing berries just for you. Come join us. I was just going to have a talk with your mom, and there’s nothing you can’t hear.”

“Mom?” she asked.

“You heard the man. Berries are a girl’s best friend,” she said, patting the blanket.

When she came in, she sat beside Dakota—not her. Eve didn’t miss it. That told her all she needed to know.

Her other child felt safe with him.

The best judge of characters were kids and animals, and she knew Odin, The Hunter dog, liked Dakota too.

The bottom line was that Violet didn’t take to every man. Many times, she kept her distance, but it was clear that she had an attachment to this one.

And honestly, so did she.

“What about?” Violet asked as he handed her a plate so she could get some snacks.

Dakota had never done this in his life. He was thinking back to what his brothers told him to do.

So, he was putting his faith in them, and not complicating it.

“I was just about to ask your mother to marry me.”

Eve actually dropped the glass in her hand, and thankfully, it had been empty.

“What?” she asked.

He didn’t hesitate.

“I was going to ask you to marry me. I’m an old-fashioned kind of guy, and I want to marry you so we can do this right.”

Violet started giggling.

“Oh, this should be fun,” she said. “She’s not an old-fashioned kind of woman.”

He was aware, but he didn’t care.

They could make it work.

Besides, he liked seeing that Eve was caught off guard. His brothers told him to do it, and he was.

“What?” she asked again, still stunned.

He put his glass down and stared over at her. She was the best thing in his life. At one point, he’d believed it to be Elizabeth, and then Sarah, but now that he was feeling the things he hadn’t for them, he knew.

She was the one.

Sarah had been right when she’d raged at him, telling Dakota he didn’t love her with all he had. He’d kept Elizabeth in his heart not because he’d wanted her to be his, but as a place card for the woman who would one day have it all.

**Eve Knight.**

Now, he could let Elizabeth go.

He could let Sarah go.

“Because the second I met you, I fell in love. When I dated Elizabeth, I loved her too. Only, not like this. When I

was seeing Sarah, I married her because I thought that was what I needed to do. I hesitated for a reason. She wasn't meant to be my person. Then, I met you, and the reason I fought so hard, was because I wanted it so badly. You were always meant to be mine."

Eve just stared at him.

"I mean, we're ridiculous together. I'm a retired lawman, and you're Adder. I'm a good eighteen inches taller than you, but you could whip my ass around this room blindfolded. I'm twenty years older than you, but you're an old soul, and I can see that."

She let him talk.

"I never wanted kids until I did. Now, I want Violet and this baby. You changed me, and now, I understand what each of my brothers meant. Zayn saw Stella as they were trying to traffic her, and he wanted nothing more than to save her. His heart knew."

Violet was staring at her mother.

**Praying.**

She knew this man was good for both of them.

"When Rogue married Cordelia, his first wife, we all knew it was trouble. When he was found by Jinx, there was that click. When Jagger and Maura's spouses died, they found each other, and just knew. I guess I was waiting for the one I would know would make me happy. That's you."

Eve's heart pounded.

"So, what I'm asking you is this, Eve. Will you be my wife? I want this life with you. While you working as a Hunter scares me, I know that you're the one. I want to be there to see you kick ass, and give life to our child."

"And if I said yes?"

"Then, I'm making a call, and we're going to find a judge and make it happen—unless you want a church wedding, Virgin Mary."

She actually laughed.

“Can you give me and the daughter a minute? We’re a package deal. So we have to discuss it.”

He was aware.

“Want me to step out?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“No. Anything we say in private can be said in front of you.”

He waited.

“What do you think, V. Do we let the ridiculously handsome cowboy move into our nest with us?” she asked. “I know we said it was the Girl’s Only clubhouse, but...”

Violet shrugged.

“I mean, piano lessons, Mom. He does play pretty well, and he already knocked your ass up. You should saddle him with us for a long time to teach him a lesson. Contraception is your friend.”

He had been worried.

Now, he wasn’t.

“Oh, goodie. She received your sarcasm by just living with you. I can’t wait to see what the baby is like. If the universe cares about my sanity, you’re having a boy.”

She laughed.

Then, she looked over at Dakota.

“Yeah. Let’s do it, Cowboy. Let’s get married right now. Shouldn’t you call your family?” she asked.

He laughed.

“You think I wasn’t going to? Do you know the Major? Stella? Merry? If I don’t invite them, they will ride my ass. Or better yet. I have an idea.”

She was curious.

“What?”

When he told her, she laughed.

“Do it. I want to see their faces. Oh, and Dakota?” she asked.

He waited.

“I love you. I’m glad you figured it out. I was going to propose myself, but it entailed hitting you over the head and dragging you to the courthouse.”

He grinned.

“Kinky. I like it, Adder. Maybe the first part later.”

She snorted.

Then, she focused on Violet.

“Go get redressed. We’re taking a ride. Dakota, make it happen,” she said, moving toward him and kissing him while he was sitting on that blanket.

It wasn’t lost on her that this had been what she’d craved months ago when she broke into Mamba’s room to warn her that she was in danger.

**A ridiculously happy pregnant woman.**

She’d coveted that.

And now it was hers.

Her mouth plundered, stole, and drove the heat up. The whole time, his heart was racing, and he knew the truth.

He was in love.

And the only thing he wanted was Adder.

**As.**

**His.**

**Wife.**

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

*Friday*

*Eleven P.M.*

*Ninety Minutes Later*

*Chartres Street*

Maura and Jagger were working in the kitchen when they heard the alarm chime.

The gate was being opened, and there was only one person who could do that. Well, they all could, but everyone was there.

It appeared that Dakota was back.

That didn't bode well for his night of romance. There was no way he should be returning.

When Zayn came in, to check the security, he sighed. It was clear he thought the same thing too.

“What did that bonehead do now?” he asked. “I swear. I want Dakota hazard pay. The man is a menace. We literally told him how to do this. How does one jack that up?”

Jagger wasn't sure.

With Dakota, anything was possible.

**Clearly.**

“Let’s get into the living room. He’s going to need our help somehow,” Maura said.

*Wasn’t that the truth?*

When they arrived in the room, they could hear footfalls across the floor. When Dakota appeared, he wasn’t alone.

Eve was with him.

And so was Violet.

**Oh, and a stranger.**

Well, someone was going to die. Was Dakota out of his mind? Who brought someone into their workspace. Dakota had better have a damn good reason.

“What the hell, Dak?” Jagger asked.

The family was congregating, hearing the commotion.

“Oh, him?” he asked. “He’s my guest. In fact, all of you are,” he said.

Rogue was confused.

They’d been getting ready to plan out the morning assault on that police evidence truck.

“For what? Your mental health hearing?” he asked.

Dakota laughed.

“No, dumbass. My wedding. He’s a judge, she’s the bride, and you slackers are the guests.”

Zayn actually sat down.

“I don’t know how to process this. First, he listens and goes to apologize, and now, we say marry her, and he actually does this. Someone get him checked out. I think the Feds switched him out. This can’t be asshole Dakota. He’s too compliant.”

Eve laughed.



“How about I try?” she asked. “Would you guys be our witness? Dakota asked, and I said yes.”

Would they?

**Hell.**

**Yes.**

They never thought they’d see this day.

“Are you kidding?” Rogue asked.

“No. I asked, and she and Violet agreed to marry me and be my kid. I know I’m getting the better deal, and I’m not letting it slip away. You guys were right.”

Now, Boone sat down.

“He’s not well. This isn’t Voodoo.”

Merry laughed when the judge looked vastly uncomfortable. It was clear that he recognized one particular person.

**Mikey O’.**

“I’m in. We need a wedding. Now. Stat. Ladies?” she asked.

Dakota went to stop them, but the women took over. There was no way he was stopping them.

“I’m good with...”

They shut that down. Eve was not marrying him without some hoopla.

**Hell no.**

Before she could say anything, the women dragged her away, leaving Dakota standing there.

“Someone get the judge a drink, and his paycheck,” Jagger said. “Welcome to my home, your honor. Can I offer you a whiskey and a sizably large sum of money to never mention that you’ve seen us here?” he asked.

The judge nodded.

“Make it a double.”

He smiled.

“Come with me.”

Rogue knew what he needed to do. This was, after all, Dakota.

“Let’s see the ring.”

Dakota stared at him.

“I don’t have one. This was spur of the moment. Do I need one?”

That’s all it took.

He slapped him.

And this was why every man needed a thief for a brother and friend.

“Come with me,” he said, leading the man away so they could have some privacy.

As some of them kept the judge busy, Rogue, Boone, and Zayn got the man into the office. Immediately, Rogue opened the safe that was in the floor. When he pulled out a black box. Dakota stared at him.

“What are you doi...?” he began until he saw what was inside of it.

Someone had been busy looting the rich homes in *New Orleans*.

**Holy shit!**

There were so many.

“You gotta have a ring. Pick one,” Rogue said. “And yes, they are all stolen, which is perfect for this situation since she’s a killer, and we’re not exactly the good guys.”

Again, he was listening to them, so Dakota did just that.

With Sarah, he’d been given a ring by Rogue and that never sat well with him.

He wanted to pick one out.

He'd been planning to go buy one in the morning for Eve after their appointment.

Well, this would work.

If she didn't like it, he'd get her one she did like.

As he toiled through them, Jagger came in, carrying five drinks.

One for each of them.

"This one," Dakota said, picking up the band with gorgeous rocks on it. There was no single center stone—simply five single carats across the band.

It flashed fire.

"Eve is feminine, outside her Adder persona. This would suit her."

They checked it out.

"I agree," Rogue said, going back into the floor safe and pulling out a bracelet that matched.

Then, he handed it to him.

"The day she gives birth to your child, you'll be able to give her this," he said, showing him.

"Jesus. How expensive is that thing?" he asked.

"Don't ask, Dak. You'll piss yourself. That's the whole reason I stole it. We don't steal cheap shit."

He laughed.

"I won't."

Jagger handed them each a drink.

"Here's to the shotgun wedding for our brother and best friend. My toast to you, Dakota, is this. We wish you love, peace, and joy in your new marriage. We can see that she's the one for you, and we support your choice to add her to our family. Not only are we proud of our brother, but we're glad to have an amazing sister added to this."

They each clinked their glass off of his.

“Slainte,” he said.

They each drank.

When Dakota was done, he was smiling.

“Feels right, huh?” Zayn asked.

He couldn’t deny it.

“It does.”

And that was how they knew.

Dakota, while an asshole, and difficult, wasn’t dragging his feet like he had with Sarah. The man knew, and they did too.

At the door, Tommy peeked his head in.

“The ladies are ready,” he said. “They want this wedding done fast.”

“Why fast?” Dakota asked.

He laughed.

“Apparently, someone told the bride that you’re a flight risk.”

They all found that amusing.

Only, he was done running away. He was running toward her.

He wanted to be with Eve.

**Forever.**

As they headed out, the judge was standing there, and Gene was keeping him busy. When the ladies came down, they stood at the door, keeping Eve outside the room.

“Are you ready Dakota?” Stella asked.

He was.

He’d never been more ready in all of his life for this moment.

“Please let me see my wife-to-be.”

And that said it all.

When the doors opened, it wasn't just Eve. Violet was holding her hand, and both women were in pretty dresses and looked ready to do this.

Dakota smiled.

When the music started, from Stella's phone, to give them a wedding march, the smile changed.

The tears came.

He'd never wanted anything more than this. He now had the family he never thought would be possible.

As Eve and Violet began walking, he knew in his heart that she was meant to be his wife.

*I love you*, he mouthed as she got closer.

She had tears too.

He looked handsome, and she couldn't wait to start this journey with him. From his Marshal belt buckle to the five o'clock shadow, she was at home, happy, and finally done fighting that war.

Her children would be safe.

She could trust them with these people.

As she stopped in front of him, he gave her a kiss, and then Violet one on the forehead.

"My girls," he said, softly, and it made the tears slip from Violet's lashes and down her cheek.

She was finally someone's too.

Violet had two parents who would keep her safe. She was claimed.

As the music was stopped, the judge did what he'd been paid to do by Mikey O'.

He did a wedding.

**QUICKLY.**

“Tonight, we gather to join Dakota Rakin and Evelyn Knight in marriage.”

Dakota grinned.

*Evelyn?*

He loved learning new things about her. This was going to be an adventure and nothing like his first marriage.

“I’m going to assume you both want to keep this short and simple,” he said.

“I do,” Dakota admitted.

Eve laughed.

“I do too.”

He winked at her.

“Well, then, give your partner your vows.”

Eve went first.

“I promise to listen, respect, and believe in your ability to keep your family safe. I vow to only love you, and to always remember what it was like not having you in my life. I promise that I will love you forever, and be the wife who stands by you, and occasionally saves your ass from trouble.”

The judge blinked.

All around them, the whole family laughed because truer words had never been said.

Going forward, someone had her work cut out for her.

That was for sure.

“I promise to be the mother of our children and to never forget that love is precious, and hard to find. I love you, Cowboy, and I always will.”

His heart skipped.

Then, it skipped even more when she held up a ring.

He laughed because apparently, his thief of a sister, Jinx, had done the same thing that her husband had. They were hooking both of them up.

Dakota wanted the ring on his finger in the worst way. He held out his hand, glad to have a ring back on it, and even happier that it was hers.

He took Sarah's off and put it away after he'd met this woman.

And for a reason.

This was his new journey.

**With Eve.**

When she slid it onto his hand, it was perfect.

The judge took that as his cue.

"Your turn, Mr. Rakin."

Dakota hadn't prepared anything, but instead, went with his heart.

"I promise to not assume. I promise to not put up those walls, and I promise to be your knight in shining armor, even when I know you don't need me to do it. I vow to protect you, this baby, and Violet with my life. I will never stray, cheat, or break you. You were my goal and will always be it. I'll work hard every day to show you that I'm the man you deserve. I will be your greatest supporter and your biggest cheerleader. You, Evelyn, are valuable, and my treasure. I'll spend every day making sure you know it too."

Her heart skipped.

Only, he wasn't done.

He faced Violet and held out his hand.

She put her fingers in his.

"Violet, I swear to protect you, and to show you that not all men hurt women. I promise to love you and your mother, giving you my heart, my love, and my time. When you need me, I'll be there. I'll teach you how to drive, put your college furniture together, and be the person who keeps your secrets."

The girl's eyes filled with tears.

It was clear that it meant so much to her.

“I’ll teach you that you are wanted, loved, and cherished by every man and woman in this room. As your new family, and your father, I’ll worry about you when you go out into the world. We might not be blood, Violet, but I’ll be your father, giving you my protection.”

She wiped her eyes.

“I choose you both because I know you both choose me. We’re a circle within another circle, and I love you both. Forever.”

Violet hugged him.

When she set him free, he pulled the ring from his pocket and showed Eve what he had for her.

“Will you wear my ring, pretty lady?” he asked, grinning wickedly.

She couldn’t help herself.

Eve was giddy.

“Oh, absolutely. It’s perfect.”

He slid the ring onto her finger and was overwhelmed with emotion.

It was done.

They were a family.

From where he stood, the judge smiled.

“Well, those were beautiful vows. By the power vested in me by the state of Louisiana, and the city of *New Orleans*, I now pronounce you a family. Kiss your wife and kid.”

And he did.

He hugged Violet and left a kiss on the top of her head.

“I will protect you, Kiddo, I swear on my life.”

She held onto him, crying.

That was all she wanted in life.



**THIS.**

When he finally set her free, he wiped her tears on his shirt and then focused on Eve.

“And I’ll love you as my wife until the day I die. You’re mine to protect, Evie.”

He lifted her chin and kissed her on the mouth. As he did, his whole family started clapping.

There were whistles and applause for a man who finally figured it out. It took years, but he’d gotten it right when the right woman came into his world.

His family congratulated him.

“I’m so damn glad Elizabeth didn’t hear about this,” Zayn said. “We all lost the bet to her.”

From behind him, someone cleared their throat.

That’s when he knew the truth.

“Oh, for shit’s sake. She’s on the screen behind me, isn’t she?” he asked.

Jagger laughed because she was, and Zayn had an uncanny ability to say the worst stuff at the wrong times.

“You had to know we were calling her,” he said.

“I would have kicked your asses had you not,” Elizabeth said, smiling from the screen.

Yeah, she’d told them not to bother her, but for this... yeah, it was worth it.

Know who wasn’t smiling but instead, was staring with his mouth open?

The judge.

“What? Never seen the Deputy Director on the TV screen of a mob man?” she asked. “Close the piehole, your honor. You’re catching flies.”

Oh, this guy had to be so damn confused.

Jagger laughed as he reassured him.

“Don’t ask because it’s complicated. Instead, take the money and run,” he said.

That was the best advice they could give the judge.

Before he could say anything, Elizabeth continued.

“Dakota Rakin, **FINALLY**,” she said. “We want to be the second ones to congratulate you,” she said, panning her tablet to show him that she wasn’t the only one watching.

Her husbands were too.

“And we want to be the first to say keep your mouth off our wife,” Callen said, smiling. “Or we’re telling yours.”

He laughed.

“Thank you, Lyzbeth, and Blackhawks.”

She pointed at Zayn.

“And now, boys, it’s time for payment,” she said. “I do believe that this cowgirl picked that cowboy’s marriage by the end of next week. Pay up.”

Zayn sighed.

“Fine. **I OWE YOU ONE.**”

Rogue laughed.

“Ditto, Blackhawk.”

Jagger shrugged.

“I’m good with it.”

She smiled.

“Thank you for your contributions to my ‘*save for a rainy day when I need a favor*’ fund. I will be utilizing all of them at some point. May God have mercy on your screwed souls.”

They all laughed.

“We are boned,” Zayn admitted. “We know better too.”

They certainly did.

“I don’t owe you, simply because I didn’t bet against you,” Dakota said, holding his new wife’s hand. “I’m not the biggest dumbass, apparently.”

She stopped him.

“Actually, you do owe me via seven degrees of separation,” she said.

He was confused.

“What does that mean?”

She explained.

“Fifteen years ago, I went on a mission and was connected with the Major and Jagger. Jagger and Maura later went on to do protection duty for Oracle, who don’t ask, Zayn, because it’s classified.”

He laughed.

Of course, it was.

“Then, Oracle retired, moving into a house I own, displacing Jagger and Maura, who were in search of his wife and child.”

They all listened.

“Unbeknownst to him, right before, my husband created a band of merry mercenaries, and set them up in *New Orleans*, only to be led by you, Dakota, my ex.”

Chris laughed.

“You should have just taken the IOU and let it go,” he said. “You’ve proved her evil genius and how she’s likely been planning this for years.”

She ignored him.

The spider had a web to keep spinning.

“Then, we connected the dots to Merry and Boone, who both were part of my world, and gifted to yours. I fell in love with Heath Leroux, who happens to be Jinx’s brother, and adopted him as mine.”

“And this connects to me how?” Dakota asked, amused.

“Heath works for the Crofts, who happen to be friends, and allowed me to connect with Rogue’s wife. I sent Jinx here to rehab, and because of a killer tied to Maura and me, a rabid Snake, and Eve’s need to protect Mamba, you were given a wife. You’re welcome. Seven degrees of separation.”

He snorted.

“You’re insane.”

“And this,” she said, pointing at them, “is all connected to me, by proxy, so you owe me one too.”

“Okay, I owe you,” he said, amused. He was in too good of a mood not to be.

“Anything I want?” she asked, smiling.

“Uh-oh,” Ethan said. “Run.”

He stared her in the eyes.

**“YOU ARE NOT GETTING OUR BABY.”**

She began laughing.

“Drats. Foiled again. Now, Hunters, there’s a surprise on your porch. Eat, drink, and be merry. And for the love of everything holy, do not wake me up! Unless it’s to tell me you’ve taken out Chevy!”

She winked at them.

“Blackhawks, out.”

The screen went black, and the call was officially over. Zayn headed to the front door and when he opened it, there were pizzas and boxes of coffee to go. On the one, there was a note.

*‘The champagne is on me once you take care of business once and for all. EB.’*

He carried it in, holding the door for the judge who ran out so fast, he nearly took Zayn out.

Someone was running for his life.

Once back inside, Zayn put the food down.

“Blackhawk delivered,” he said, smelling the food. There was nothing like a late-night wedding pizza break.

Maura opted to help the newlyweds out.

“You guys can head out and leave Violet with us, if you’d like,” Maura offered. “It’s your wedding night, and we have to work through our plans for the morning.”

Violet started giggling, knowing what would be going down later for her mom and Dakota.

From where he stood, Dakota grinned. Oh, there was time, but first...

“We’ll head out after dinner. We rushed the picnic. If it’s late, we’ll crash here. God knows you have space.”

That they did.

Jagger settled down next to his wife, enjoying how Dakota took the other couch and put one of his girls on each side of him as he grinned like an idiot.

That alone was worth a late night.

“Major, what’s the plan for tomorrow?” he asked. “Do your thing.”

And she did.

Because deep down, she knew one thing.

Going forward, it was going to be dangerous.

For all of them.

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

*Saturday*

*Two A.M.*

*Across Town*

*The Underground*

When he'd gotten the text from Jagger to come back to the house for an impromptu wedding, he'd opted not to go. He simply told him he was busy following someone.

*Which wasn't a lie.*

He had been watching her all night.

Remington had popped back into the bar, hid among the patrons, and was doing what he could to ensure she was safe.

He didn't like that Artemis was up to her eyeballs in something and he knew that woman well. She was sneaky, conniving, and dangerous.

The last person he wanted her pointed at was Calyx.

Now that the bar had closed, he'd gone from watching her inside to the roof of the building across from hers.

She had the upper apartment, and he still felt protective of her.

*And horny.*

If he was going to be honest about why he was watching her, it was because he was attracted to Calyx, and wanted nothing more than to sleep with her.

*After the kiss...*

It made it even more difficult to not be focused on his need and her body.

The part in control was good as long as he kept a distance between them.

Like the distance between two buildings.

He knew her schedule and was acutely aware of her nighttime routine.

Remy would like to say this was the first time he sat up here watching until early morning, even napping there in case she needed him, but it wasn't.

It wasn't even the twentieth time.

As she came in, he knew exactly what she'd do first. She'd lock up, pour herself a glass of wine, disappear into the bathroom, shower, and then come out to go to bed.

Only, tonight, he realized one thing.

She deviated.

Instead of the wine first, she walked through her apartment, leaving the lights on as she reached the bathroom. Since the building he was on only came up to her floor, he was staring straight across at her.

It gave him quite the view.

*How did he know?*

Well, because Calyx walked into her bathroom, shedding clothes as she went.

**Holy.**

**Shit.**

When she was in panties and a bra, and then dropped the hooter holster, his heart raced.

Oh, all he saw was her back, and that was plenty.

She had the mother of all tattoos crisscrossing her shoulders and torso. It was of a Renaissance knight on a black horse. It looked so real, and it fascinated him.

As she disappeared, he saw the panties being tossed and land on the floor.

His body reacted, as he wished to God he could see more. This was the erotic peep show that all men craved, and only the lucky ones got.

He knew for a fact that she was well aware of him being there. This was too much of a show.

Ten minutes later, she came out of the shower, and set her hair free, dropping down around her shoulders.

It was to her ass, if not longer, and laid against the towel she had wrapped around her body.

His mouth was so dry.

**God.**

He was suddenly so thirsty and hungry.

When she undid the knot and dropped the towel as she stood in front of the window, back far enough that he could see her, but the neighbors couldn't, his erection was almost too painful.

“Oh, God,” he whispered, as he let his gaze drop down her body, cascading lower down her pale skin.

Well, that answered that.

Like his deceased wife, Calyx was a real redhead. The carpets absolutely match the drapes.

While she walked naked through her home, he didn't stop watching, even though he should. Remmy simply



couldn't help himself.

Now, he was incredibly turned on.

This woman, while looking like his wife, was **NOTHING** like Karen. She was brash, bold, and was more than fine with proving it.

His erection throbbed unmercifully between his legs, and he wanted to touch himself in the worst way. That was a feat in itself.

No one had made him feel like this for as long as he could remember.

**Even his wife.**

As she poured a glass of wine, grabbed a notebook, and returned back to the window, Calyx had his full attention.

He never looked away, fearing if he did, she'd vanish, and he'd not see her again.

She was a siren, and he was helpless.

He saw that now.

There was also something blatantly clear.

He was a pervert.

As she stood there, sipping her wine, she stared across the vast darkness, focused on where she knew he would be. Oh, she didn't see him.

**No.**

She felt his gaze and traced it back to where a predator like him would hide in the shadows.

While this should terrify her, it didn't. He'd saved her from El Gato's men, and he'd never hurt her. The only time he scared her was with that scorching kiss.

It scared her simply because she wanted more.

*And more.*

*And more.*

As she leaned against the window, the cold of the glass pressed to her body, she pictured him suffering across the street, watching her.

She knew what she wanted.

Calyx wanted him.

As someone who worked the streets to survive, played the game, and saved her money, she never had the desire to be with anyone.

It was akin to working all day building boxes. You didn't go home and crave building more, and yet, here she was.

Craving this man.

*This mercenary.*

*This broken soul.*

A part of her longed to heal him in hopes that he could do the same for her.

When she teased him enough, she picked up a thick marker and wrote on the paper. Then, she held it up to the window.

***'Remmy, you know how to pick a lock.'***

That was all it took.

The second he saw it, his body reacted, and he knew he needed to leave.

There was one woman who could make him break that vow of celibacy.

There was one woman who tempted him.

It was her.

And that meant she could destroy him.

Remmy had been there once, losing his wife and daughter. He'd taken that oath to never allow himself to love again because it could, and likely would be, his destruction.

The last thing that he wanted was to let that happen again.

With every ounce of strength he had, he stood from the place he'd tucked himself, knowing she'd be able to finally see him.

Oh, and she did.

Calyx stared over at him, a gun slung over his back, and his face hidden once more beneath his customary hoodie. When he bowed, gallantly, she knew he was not taking her up on the offer.

**Damn him.**

Her tormenting of him only became her own torture.

Someone was leaving.

Just like that, he proved her right.

Instead of going toward her, he backed into the shadows to disappear.

Yeah, he left her there, craving the one man she wasn't sure she could get to partake in the forbidden fruit.

**Love.**

Yeah, that was frustrating.

Once more, Remington Bowman slipped through her fingers, leaving her befuddled.

How did one capture a ghost that was hellbent on never hurting again?

She had no clue.

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## *Chapter Eighteen*

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*Operation Follow The Cop*

*Saturday Morning*

*Ungodly Early*

**W**ith the premise of *'we'll sleep when we're dead'*, The Hunters were already on the move, making sure they were able to get to the police precinct before the shit hit the fan. Once Tate West's *'suicide'* was discovered at the change of shift that morning...

Yeah, it was about to get spicy in The Big Easy.

Already, there were news stories circulating that there was a vigilante in town, taking the lives of people and causing mayhem.

**Uh-oh.**

Z had quite the reputation.

They were all pretty proud of that, and coming up with someone to be the fall guy, other than Mikey O', who the cops feared, and The Hunters, who the mercenaries didn't, was genius.

Now, they could move around, taking care of business.

**Like now.**

Because they'd been up late, working and celebrating, basically only getting a catnap for an hour, they were chugging caffeine like it was going to save their asses.

The only lucky one was Dakota.

Eve had been exhausted after they'd had their makeshift celebration, and he'd carried her up to bed late. So, because they loved Dakota, they let him sleep in.

**Lucky him.**

They hoped he appreciated it.

Because so far, this *'follow the leader'* bullshit was netting them absofuckingloutely nothing.

Aiden Bloom, one of the cops on Elizabeth's list, was driving in circles, making sure he was not being followed.

The irony was that he was being followed and that when he stopped that vehicle, he was a deadman.

Clearly, he was paranoid, and he knew plenty about Chevy.

Merry had used the absconded waitress' phone to do a little search, and she found something interesting. At one point, the waitress had been in the modeling agencies.

Now, was that because she wanted to be a model, or was it because she was meeting with Cruz to get instructions?

That was yet to be seen, but they did know she made a lot of calls to a phone that pinged a cell tower not far from an abandoned airstrip.

An airstrip that seemed to be Aiden's final destination. There was nothing else out here, so that had to be where he was meeting up with someone to give them the van or get his next instructions.

What was also clear was that Chevy was being super careful and that he'd trained his people well.

*How did Maura know?*

The technique that Aiden was using was very familiar. It was the one she used all the damn time when they were being followed.

Chevy was using her book of plays.

First El Gato, and now him.

This wasn't looking good for her—not because she couldn't outthink Chevy, but because that meant she was going to have to use her plan, and she really didn't want to do that.

Yeah, it was that damn dangerous.

Risking anyone's life but her own was not something she took lightly, and that made her edgy.

For now, she'd put that aside. If they could get their hands on Aiden, and question him, maybe they wouldn't have to utilize her plan.

**Fingers.**

**Were.**

**Crossed.**

"He's good at this," Zayn said, as he sat in the middle row of Maura's blacked-out CIA Escalade. "A little too good."

Jagger knew why.

"We taught Chevy this. While they teach you to lose tails, this is how Maura and I do it. This is very specific."

Well, that didn't reassure anyone.

"This asshole is on my last nerve," Rogue said. "I could be at home with my wife, instead, I'm here."

Gene laughed.

"Ditto."

Zayn was trying to lighten the mood. They were all tired and cranky. If they didn't get some sleep today, it was going to be a long-ass day.

And when you were tired, you jacked shit up.

"I'm telling Tommy you wish you were in bed with Rogue's wife," he said. "All those titties."

Rogue punched Zayn.

"Are you going to be a dick this early in the morning?" he asked.

Gene shuddered, keeping the entertainment going.

"Do we really have to discuss titties? They creep me out."

Jagger laughed.

“You’re all insane,” he said, as Maura drove them, making sure to keep a good distance behind the man.

“One cup of coffee is not making me cheery,” she said. “Anyone want to postulate whose ass I’m going to ride if you guys don’t shut up?” she asked.

That seemed to work.

“He’s taking the turnoff ahead,” Jagger said. “He is going to the airstrip. We have to get to the woods and haul ass.”

She knew he was right.

Once the cop turned off, her lights went on, and she put the pedal to the metal.

They found some trees to hide the vehicle, and now, they were going in on foot.

Out of the vehicle, they each grabbed guns from the back and a little present from the CIA. It was updated night vision gear that had attached earpieces. Pulling them on, she pointed.

“Follow the leader. We find him, and we wait for my signal. Am I clear?” she asked. “We don’t know what’s in that airstrip. I don’t like going in without recon. So keep your asses hidden.”

No one wanted to get shot, so they were going to do exactly what the Major said.

With Jagger all over her, since she was pregnant, they headed into the trees.

They weren’t too thick, and that was likely good.

*New Orleans* bayous had snakes, spiders, and shit that would eat you if you let your guard down.

**Gators.**

Lots of them too.

As they moved through, they saw the taillights. Maura needed them to be ready for anything.



“Zayn, climb a tree,” she said.

The man saluted and disappeared into the thicket without a single word. If you wanted to sneak up on someone, send a Native.

He was silent.

As they hunkered down, Maura was thinking that not bringing Jinx might have been a misstep. She wanted to give Boone, Jinx, and Tommy some sleep—in case she had to use them later.

“Let’s see what this douchebag does,” she whispered, their coms all picking it up.

Now, it was time to see who would show up to meet him.

And would it be the end of the game?

**Or not?**

*Meanwhile...*

Aiden was sitting in the van, waiting for the call to come in.

That’s how it always worked.

You went to the location, and a call would come in. Then, and only then, you’d receive your orders.

This would be no different.

As soon as he turned off his lights, then back on again, his phone began ringing.

Aiden answered it.

“Chevy?”

“Yeah, do you have everything?” he asked. “Is the Addiction there?”

“Yes, Sir. Tate packed it up with me last night, along with a shit ton of guns and money. We thought you’d like it.”

Chevy laughed.

“Oh, I would. Those clean cops took what was left of my stash. Let me ask you this. Were you followed?”

The man laughed.

“Hell, no! I drove around for an hour like you said, and I even stopped, got some coffee, went the backway, and made sure I didn’t see lights.”

“Are you sure? Because I’m telling you, Aiden, Jagger Armstrong is not a slacker. He could be duct taped to the axle of that vehicle. I’ve seen him do crazy shit to handle a job, and he’s hellbent on killing me.”

Oh, they all knew why.

Chevy had offed the man’s wife.

“Sir, I’m telling you, he’s not here.”

“Good. Sit still, and do me a favor. Pull the sim card from your phone, toss it in the back of the vehicle, and then get out. I have a transfer vehicle for you. Your money is in the back of that vehicle.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“What about Cecil and Stellan. Someone killed them, and that sucks. They were instrumental.”

Oh, he was aware.

“What do you know about it?”

He told him.

“Some vigilante is on the move. His name is Z, and he’s making The Hunters look friendly.”

That didn’t make Chevy happy.

He had his plate full with The Hunter assholes. He really didn’t need more.

“I’ll look into it. Just do what I asked, and get ready. We have to move fast. I’m not risking getting caught by Armstrong.”

“Yes, Sir,” he said, as the phone disconnected. It appeared he was going to get paid, and soon.

Now, he could get home, and wait for the next assignment.

Because he was raking in the cash.

**Finally.**

The Major watched and saw movement.

“We have someone exiting the van,” Maura said, her scope on the target. “We need him alive. So no one do anything rash, Zayn.”

His voice came over the com.

“Why is it always me? I don’t know if you realized this, Major, but the Marine you’re bunking with has temper issues.”

Jagger didn't miss a beat.

“My anger issues are about to be your problem if you don't shut that piehole of yours, Captain.”

He laughed.

They all watched as the man stood by the van.

Only, before they could get ready to move on him, the worst-case scenario happened.

They heard one shot, as it echoed through the field of the airstrip, hitting the man dead center in the forehead. As he was falling, there was one more sound, and Maura knew what it was.

“Everyone close your eyes! **NOW!**” she said, as a rocket broke the darkness, hitting the van, and exploding in color and fire.

Luckily, everyone listened.

The light that was emitted would have blinded them all with night vision on.

Pulling her gear off, she looked over at her husband.

“Are you okay?” she asked as the van exploded again as the gasoline went up.

He was honest.

“Yeah, I closed my eyes.”

“Report,” she said and heard her team. They were her concern.

“I'm good,” Rogue said.

“Same,” Gene admitted.

**Well, holy shit.**

This was a problem.

Chevy just took out the last of his Addiction, one of the cops—likely who could ID him, and the van.

This meant one thing, and they all knew it.

“Somehow, Chevy knew that we were following him,”  
Jagger said.

This wasn't good.

*Not for Maura.*

*Not for the team.*

Chevy was cleaning up any loose ends, and that was  
making this almost impossible to catch him.

She knew then that there was no choice.

She was going to have to implement the plan.

And that sucked.

**\* \* \* HUNTERS \* \* \***

***Chartres Street***

***Home Base***

## *Six A.M.*

As Jinx paced, she was worried. What she had wanted to do was go with the team, but the Major gave her orders, and she was specific.

She didn't know what she was planning for later, but it was crystal clear that they were going to be doing something.

*What?*

It was anyone's guess.

What she did know was that Remington had shown up before dawn, and he looked like hell.

Now, he was drinking coffee and saying absolutely nothing.

"Uh, are you okay?" she asked, as she waited for the call from her husband to tell her they were good.

"Sure," he said.

Jinx sat next to him.

She knew he was lying.

When you were broken, you could spot another broken person a mile away.

This man was a mess.

Oh, he might look pulled together, but she knew he was doing battle with something deep inside of him.

"If you'd like to talk about it..."

He stopped her.

"I don't."

She shrugged.

"Understood, but let me just put this out there. It'll be the last thing I say about it."

He listened.

“You’re here to heal. You’re not going to be able to do that if you don’t trust someone. Any one of us will be there for you, but you have to put your faith in us like we did in you when you showed up.”

Jinx sipped her coffee.

Then, she continued.

“We’re a family, and once you stop fighting us, we can help you fight whatever it is that you’re waging a war against, Remmy. We’re your best asset, and we’ve all been through some shit. If you need a friend, I’m there.”

He glanced over.

“I’m not a good person,” he said.

She waited, but he said nothing else.

“Because you killed Teague?” she asked.

He laughed sardonically.

“No, that makes me a good person. He was a foul piece of shit. I meant something else.”

“Like?”

He closed his mouth.

“I killed a pregnant woman once,” she said. “The military sent me on a mission in the Philippines. The woman was the target, and so was her husband. Only, they needed him alive—not dead. So, I didn’t question it. I found her, I saw her out shopping, and pulled the trigger. It ended her in seconds, and it ended the child too.”

He said nothing.

“She was trafficking people. She was kidnapping children and selling them into child labor to businesses that wanted a cheap workforce. She also sold her own children to make a buck.”

He was horrified.

“Jesus.”

“Only, I didn’t know it at the time. As a Snake, we’re told the job, given the dossier, and we do it. We don’t question. We don’t wait. We just do it.”

He was curious.

“Without any knowledge?”

She shook her head.

“No. None. It wasn’t my job to ask why. It was my job to do and let the chips fall where they might. One might call me a murderer,” she said. “Only, I saved countless people, and I saved that child from a loveless life where he or she was nothing more than a slave.”

“Did you sleep after?”

Jinx considered her answer, and went with honesty.

“No. I didn’t. That’s how you know if you’re a good person or not. Viper...she could kill and sleep just fine. I had nightmares and was a mess. It’s why I was sent here. I was broken after being captured. This place healed me. These people healed me. Maybe one day, you’ll open the door and let that happen.”

He closed his eyes.

And took a chance.

“I cheated on her.”

Remmy pushed to get through it, and it wasn’t easy.

“Before she was killed, I had an affair with Artemis Dubois. She tricked me into bed, drugging me, and when I woke up...”

“That’s not your fault.”

He glanced over.

“I wasn’t drugged the following morning when I did it all over again.”

And now she saw why he was also still suffering. He’d gotten his revenge, but he was still carrying that guilt.



“I was coming home to confess when I found them dead. I cheated on my wife, and then she dies because of me. I’m stuck in this loop.”

Jinx put her hand on his.

“We can help you. You just have to let us.”

“She was my wife, and I betrayed her. I took an oath of celibacy.”

And now she got it.

“Calyx.”

He laughed and rested his head on the cool countertop. He felt warm like he was burning up. It was the fire of rage burning in him.

“She looks like her,” he said, pulling out his wallet and pulling the last picture he had of him and his wife.

He showed her.

Remmy wasn’t exaggerating.

She did look like the barkeep.

“And you are attracted to her?”

He nodded.

“I don’t know if it’s because of her, my wife, or that I haven’t had sex in ten years. I don’t know which way is up, down, or anything else. I’m lost. I’m confused. I’m a mess.”

She took his wallet and tucked the photo back into it where he kept it.

“You’re not going to heal unless you let us help you. I can give you advice, but you’re not going to like it. The words...they will piss you off, and that’s not my intention, Remmy, but like with Dakota, we see it from a different perspective.”

He hurt inside.

His heart ached.

“What are they?”

She turned his face, so he was staring into her eyes. She palmed his cheek to soothe him through the reality of it all.

“Sometimes, people aren’t meant to be the whole journey. Sometimes, they are the bridge. They get you to where you need to be. Maybe Karen and your daughter weren’t supposed to be yours forever. They were supposed to put you on a path that led to someone else.”

That ache was profound in his body.

“If you want to begin to heal, Remmy, you need to forgive yourself. You need to let them go, and that’s not going to be easy. Wherever they are right now, whether you believe in Heaven, or not, they are being pulled back here each time you punish yourself. Set them free so you can begin to heal.”

Tears filled his eyes.

“I hate myself for being tempted and cheating on my wife. I hate that they died instead of me. This is my life sentence.”

“You’ve been paroled,” she said. “You just have to decide when you want to start living again, Remmy.”

He put his hand over hers on his cheek.

“Thank you, but I’m not ready.”

Then, she was honest.

“We’ll be here when you are.”

He simply nodded.

When her phone rang, she reached over and picked it up. It wasn’t her husband.

It was the Major.

“Yes, Maura?” she asked.

“We had to abort. The man in the van was ambushed and taken out.”

Her heart raced.

“Are you guys safe?” she asked. “I can come get you.”

Maura reassured her.

“We’re good. The van and its contents were blown to kingdom come. We’re heading back, and then we’re going to crash for a bit. If Remington is around, tell him we need his assistance on the next part.”

“He’s here.”

“We’re going to make sure no one follows us back. Give us about two hours to get in. Chevy knew we were coming.”

**Oh, shit.**

That was bad.

“Okay, Major.”

Without another word, the call went dead.

“I don’t like the tone in her voice,” Remmy admitted.  
“She sounded off.”

Yeah, she’d caught that too.

“Bad shit is coming,” Jinx said.

Yeah, and that was a problem.

**For.**

**Them.**



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## *Chapter Nineteen*

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*Seven A.M.*

*Chartres Street*

*Saturday Morning*

To say that it was the best night's sleep he'd had in a long time would be an understatement. Even if they'd only gotten four hours of sleep, Dakota was still revitalized and feeling like a million bucks.

What a difference a wedding could make.

It was insane that they'd tied the knot last night, had a pizza party to commemorate it, and then fell into bed absolutely content.

No, they hadn't had sex.

While he wanted to, his wife, Eve, had been tired. She was growing a human, so he was acutely aware of her needs. His needs had begun this ride, and hers would come first until the day he died.

He was happy.

His soul didn't feel shredded and destroyed.

For the first time since seeing his partner killed and taken apart by Lottie Tipton, he wasn't empty.

That said a lot about the last four years of his life.

Now, he was in bed, spooning his woodland fairy, and he couldn't be happier.

When his phone chimed, he reached across her body to the nightstand where he'd placed it. Eve was tucked against him, her back to his chest.

As he picked up the phone, he read the message.

*‘We’re coming in for a brief meeting in an hour. We’ve got an issue and need to regroup. This morning was a shitshow. Chevy got the upper hand. Be ready before your doctor’s appointment—J.’*

Well, that wasn’t good.

“What’s wrong?” Eve asked, her voice clear and aware of her surroundings. She’d been awake the last hour, enjoying the feel of his body against hers.

Eve had always wondered what it would feel like to have his salt-and-pepper chest hair tickling her flesh as they slept together.

Now, she knew.

And she liked it.

“Chevy shit went down, and not in the way they planned. I don’t have more information. We have a meeting in an hour before our doctor’s appointment.”

She looked at the military-grade watch on her wrist.

When her husband started leaving kisses across her shoulder, her body woke up.

“I dreamed about us,” he said.

She rolled over.

“What did you dream?” she asked, curiously. She could feel his erection against her hip, and he was wide awake.

**Very wide awake.**

He smiled.

“I’ll let you guess. It involved me finally catching a specific woodland fairy that I’m obsessed with,” he admitted.

She ran her hand through his chest hair.

“Is this real?” she asked. “Us?”

He lowered his mouth and found hers in a sweet, gentle kiss.

When he broke it, he was honest.

“If it’s not, I don’t want to wake up. I love you, Evie. My heart is full.”

Hers skipped.

She could see the love and truth in his eyes. There was so much gentleness and adoration there. This man had changed. The anger that always stared back at her was gone, and in its place, was their future.

“I don’t either. I like this Dakota.”

“This is me,” he said, nuzzling her. “I don’t know what happened,” he admitted. “I saw you carrying our child, and something changed in me. That hate I was feeling for the world disappeared. You saved me, Eve. Thank you.”

She touched his lips with her fingertips.

“You saved me too, Dakota. This baby saved me.”

He was aware.

“We have an hour before the meeting, and we have to head out to the doctor,” he said. “Are you in the mood to christen our marriage?” he asked, leaving kisses across her chest just above the blanket.

She grinned.

“Well, if my new husband feels like making me feel all warm and satiated, who am I to say no? It’s not like you can knock me up.”

He laughed, and it was warm and soothing.

When he’d been with Sarah, it was always a storm, and now, he didn’t want the rage.

He wanted the love.

“Well, let me see what I can do,” he said, finding her mouth again with his.

As he plumbed the depths of her mouth, letting the kiss heat the rest of him, Dakota was in a whole new frame of mind. This was his nirvana.

**He.**

**Was.**

**Blessed.**

He never wanted to not feel this way.

While Eve was pressed against him, he felt her shoving down his boxers.

Oh, he liked that.

What did he like even more?

Eve was following them. She pushed him from her body and was in control.

“I thought I was going to make you feel good.”

She smiled down at him.

“You do make me feel good. I happen to like giving my new husband a blowjob.”

Well, sign him up.

**Holy shit.**

Marriage was a damn good thing.

As he glanced down, his wife had his boxers off, and now, he was bare.

His erection was standing at attention as his very wicked wife grinned up at him.

“I’ve never had sex as a wife,” she admitted.

“Me either.”

It made her laugh.

*This man...*

He was nothing like he’d been, and she loved every second of learning about him. Honestly, everyone should just jump in and marry this fast.



“Do you like to be teased or do you want it fast, rough, and like before?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“I want it with my wife, not a random hookup. I want to feel everything, finally.”

She smiled.

Her too.

When Eve slid his erection into her mouth and began worshiping his dick, the guttural moan from Dakota said it all. Someone was liking it.

**A.**

**Lot.**

That urged her on to be truly wicked.

“Jesus,” he muttered. “Evie!”

She ran her teeth up the long length of him, and then went back to bobbing her head up and down his erection.

Dakota couldn't breathe.

He could say that he'd never wanted anyone this badly. Yeah, during sex, he craved, but this was...

**It was insane.**

He moaned, and Dakota really believed that he'd found the pinnacle of his whole life.

It was that damn good.

Head wasn't head with each partner. The woman made it different, and he liked how she worked his erection in and out of her mouth.

The pleasure was making it so damn hard to focus. Eve was being gentle, but completely shredding his control.

**His wife.**

**God.**

He'd never been so happy. In fact, it made him want to weep in gratitude.

As he glanced down his torso, Eve was working her magic, and this woodland fairy could have her wicked way with him any day.

Yeah, this was Dakota's happy place.

It was hard not to notice that Eve's breasts were fuller, bigger and that she was sliding her own panties off as she blew him.

He was grateful for a woman who could multitask. This was some deliciously erotic stuff in his book. In that moment, everything else fell away.

It was just them.

When she stopped blowing him, and instead stroked his erection with her very capable hands, he was lost in the moment.

"Like that?" she asked.

Uh, well, maybe.

"I can't think," he said. "The minute you focused on my lower brain, the upper went dead. They don't work at the same time."

It made her laugh.

Moving up his body, she did something wicked.

She turned around, facing his dick, and lowering her girly parts over his mouth.

Dakota's dick jumped in anticipation of them giving each other the ultimate pleasure.

"Evie," he whispered, pulling her hips down so he could devour her clit.

And he did.

Eve's body shook, as she wrapped her fingers around his erection and began slowly stroking him.

It was hard to focus.

Her very handsome husband had his hands wrapped around her thighs, locking her body to his mouth.

He was feasting, and she was barely holding on. It was time to show him exactly how turned-on she was.

Eve began blowing him, and his whole body shook as she slid him in and out of her mouth. When she took him all the way down her throat, he moaned.

Oh, but he kept feasting on his wife.

There was no way he was going to stop.

When she teased the tip of his erection sucking it roughly into her mouth, his body bucked, and he was forced to stop dining on his wife.

“Eve!” he hissed as she made his eyes cross.

She didn’t stop.

Eve was curious how wild she could make him. Oh, she’d seen out-of-control Dakota, but that was them fornicating.

This was making love.

“Killing me, Evie,” he muttered, as she bobbed her head and hand up and down his dick, stroking him to delirium. “Today I might die.”

She laughed as she kept working his erection.

Oh, did she find it funny?

Well, he had news for her.

He dove back in, flicking his tongue over her clit to make her insane.

Oh, and it backfired.

He picked up the pace, and so did she.

Now, his balls protested, as he was about to explode down her throat.

He couldn’t keep going.

His body was poised on the edge.

As he set her thighs free, he knew he was about to lose control. There was no holding back.

“Evie. I’m going to cum,” he said, breathlessly. “I can’t hold on,” he said.

Oh, and she wanted that.

Eve wanted him calm, relaxed, and ready for more. She wasn’t even close to being done, and she knew that she had to push him to the edge.

As she drove him all the way down her throat, he felt the tightness and it did him in.

“Cumming,” he muttered, as she shoved him off the edge, and he exploded.

His whole body shook.

Dakota couldn’t fight the pleasure any longer and tumbled from the edge.

*His body bucked.*

*His balls ached.*

Oh, and he exploded down his wife’s throat, and she swallowed all of him.

As he floated in that pleasure, he was barely aware of the bed moving. It was when she slid him into her body, that he moaned and opened his eyes.

Someone was insatiable.

Oh, he loved his life.

“Time to get me off, husband,” she said, pulling him up and pressing her body to his.

The hair on his chest tickled her nipples, sending shockwaves through her body.

“I think I’ll use my sexy man this morning.”

**Oh, God.**

**Yes, please.**

Dakota was still tingling from the orgasm, and he wanted nothing more than to watch Eve cum on his dick. There was something so damn erotic about that.

As he leaned back a bit to watch her riding him, it drove him wild.

Oh, he was rock-hard all over again and watching his own engorged erection filling her.

And it was a tight fit.

“You were made for me,” he whispered, as he watched her riding him.

He never wanted this to end.

**Ever.**

As he watched her ride him, his whole being shook. There was something magical about how she moved. Her hands were on his chest, and she slowly worked her way up and down his erection.

By god, he was ready to cum all over again. Having his wife ride him...

There was no doubt that he could die this way and be completely happy.

“Evie,” he whispered, as he watched the goosebumps crisscross her body.

It was clear she was close.

“Dakota,” she said, her body shaking.

“Cum for me, Baby. Let me see you cum,” he begged, desperate to see her enjoy his body as much as he’d enjoyed hers.

When he jerked his hips up, catching her off guard, Eve took the tumble. She began falling, unable to help herself.

It felt so good.

As the orgasm overtook her, he held her upright, leaving kisses across her throat and neck. Those kisses became more desperate, wanton, and needy.

When she lifted her head, his hands were in her hair,  
and he pulled her mouth to his.

The kiss was nuclear.

That passion and need exploded from him, and  
honestly, Eve had never felt anything like it in her life.

Someone had unleashed the true man beneath the battle  
scars, and she loved what she saw.

This was her husband.

And she'd die for him.

As he stared into her eyes, Dakota saw something he  
knew he'd never get again from anyone else.

**Loyalty.**

This woman was his warrior.

She loved all of him, even when he was in pieces, and  
she'd fight until the death for what they'd begun.

"I'll love you until the day I die, Evie. I swear to you."

She caressed his cheek with her fingers.

"And I'll love you forever. You're my hero," she said.  
"You saved my heart."

**God.**

He couldn't want or love her more.

It was impossible.

"One more time," he said, needing to cum in his wife.  
She was pressed to him, and he could feel the bump of the life  
they'd created, and he wanted to join them together.

Here was his path.

Everyone else was a way to get to her. Without  
Elizabeth, and her breaking his heart, or Sarah, and her  
destroying his soul, there would be no phoenix from the ashes.

There would be no them.

And for all that pain, he was infinitely grateful.

Rolling, he placed her beneath him and caged her to the bed. His mouth moved over her flesh, and a peace he'd never felt before settled over him.

**He was home.**

His family was complete.

He had his brothers and sisters, and they had a purpose in their lives, but now...

He had a life.

It's what had been missing, and what he'd never understood. He'd lived for the job, and now, he'd live for his family, and do the job to keep them safe.

"Mine," he whispered, as he sank into her body, filling her.

He made no bones about it.

**She.**

**Was.**

**His.**

This woman, this warrior that was feared, was the key to his survival. She was the reason he could be who he was. He was her protector, and he'd live the rest of his life watching over his family.

**Eve.**

**Violet.**

**This baby.**

Dakota suddenly had a purpose that was unmatched by anything. He had a reason to be, and he'd never let that go.

He'd fight to the death for it.

As he slid into his wife, her eyes filled with love and peace. Dakota knew that they'd do everything together from here on out. His only sadness was he was twenty years older.

He wished he wasn't.

He wanted to grow old with her.

As he began moving, Eve slid her hands into his hair and pulled his mouth down to hers as she felt him moving in and out of her body with urgency but tenderness.

The climb began.

As he brought them both so much pleasure, Eve was filled with peace and joy. What began four days ago as fear of the unknown was now culminating in happiness.

“Dakota,” she whispered, as his erection slid against her clit, making her body shake.

“More,” he said. “I want all.”

Oh, and she wanted to give him that and so much more. Her legs wrapped around his hips, and she moved in the erotic dance. They took the climb, breathless, revitalized, and wanting more.

“I love you,” she whispered, as tears filled her eyes. “I love you so much.”

His heart skipped.

Dakota never felt this much love before, and it overwhelmed him.

“I love you, My Eve,” he said.

As his body destroyed her control, and hers did the same to him, Dakota knew he was poised on the precipice.

“Almost there,” he whispered, as her body gripped his so tightly, it was making it hard to think.

Let alone not cum.

“Same,” she whispered, as her smaller body bowed, and she lost control.

The eruption came.

It tore through Eve, exploding into Dakota. He felt it from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet.

The colors swirled.

The heat rushed through them.



And as they both fell through that pleasure, he was still aware of her body, and precious cargo, beneath him.

He braced his arms on the bed as he fought through the blinding pleasure to surface.

When he did, the loveliest of woodland fairies was still beneath him, her hair haloed out around her head in a silken crown.

“My wife,” he said, a tear dripping from his cheek onto hers.

When she opened her eyes, it was the beautiful smile that stole his breath, and always would.

What wouldn't he do for this woman?

“My husband,” she said.

Dakota rolled, taking her with him. When she pulled the blanket up, covering them, and then cuddled into his body, there was peace.

They laid there in silence for a few minutes.

“What are you thinking?” she finally asked.

“What we're going to name the baby, and why I suddenly don't think I want to stop at one.”

She stared at him.

“Uh, Dude, let's get this one out before you start putting that out in the universe.”

He laughed.

“For some reason, you make me a different person,” he admitted.

She understood that.

“You do the same for me.”

He nuzzled her forehead with his chin.

“Can I ask you something?”

He stared down at her.

“Sure. What? Do you need something?” he asked, making sure he gave her space.

“I’m good, but I was curious. If you were going to have a girl, what would you name it?” she asked.

He considered it.

“Well, we already have a Violet. Flower names are Zayn’s thing, and apparently Rogue’s thing too. Well, the woman who gave birth to Peony. I would pick a name that had meaning.”

She waited.

“I like Faith. I lost it for a while, and then, suddenly, I found it. You restored it.”

She liked that.

“I could do Faith. What if you had a son?”

He thought about it.

“I’d either name him after my brothers, but there are too many to pick. They’d ride each other’s asses over being my favorite when I think they’re all dicks.”

She laughed.

Oh, she knew he loved them to death.

“I’d name a child after my stepfather. He taught me to be a man. I’d honor him with that. He died a decade ago.”

“What was his name?”

“Cash Landon Rakin.”

She gave him a kiss.

“Well, then, I think we have our names. Faith Rose Rakin, and Cash Landon Rakin.”

He grinned.

“I get to name the baby?” he asked.

She cuddled into him.

“Absolutely. You have good taste. You ended up with me, didn’t you?”

He grinned.

He certainly had.

And he’d be with her until the end.

**Dakota knew it in his heart.**

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## *Chapter Twenty*

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*Chartres Street*

*Update*

*Meeting Time*

**W**hen they rolled in, everyone who hadn't been out was aware that the operation hadn't gone well. Mainly, because Maura looked absolutely tortured. While no one would say anything to her, Jagger knew why.

With each failure to get Chevy, it meant utilizing her plan, and he was well aware that was the last thing she wanted.

She was suffering from it too.

So, as the family gathered, they took a quick coffee break, seeing if they could maybe get a lead.

When Jinx handed the Major caffeine, she took it gratefully.

"Was it bad?" Tommy asked, being brave enough to ask the question. They weren't talking about it, and he suspected it was a bust. "Did you guys lose him?"

Every Marine stared over at him.

Gene protected him.

**Just.**

**In.**

**Case.**

Marines got cranky when they couldn't complete a mission, and these Marines were no different.

"We didn't lose him. He was set up. Apparently, Chevy is covering his tracks."

She told them all about the man's murder and ambush by the rocket that blew up the vehicle.

"Well, at least the Addiction is gone," Stella said.

“Yeah, along with our chances of finding Chevy that way,” she added.

Eve sat on the couch, tucked under Dakota’s arm. He’d run back to the house for her to get her some street clothes for the doctor’s appointment, and now, he was hovering.

She’d be lying if she said she didn’t like the gorgeous ring on her finger.

She really did.

“We’ll get him. I’ll be back from my doctor’s appointment. In fact, if you need me now, I can cancel.”

Dakota agreed.

“We can do that.”

Maura reassured them. She knew they were both looking forward to the appointment. Sometimes, you had to put the family first, and that was exactly what she was doing.

“No, go. We’ve got this. We’re going to the airport where the one guy said the women flew out.”

She glanced over at Merry, who knew what was coming. She’d been to this rodeo with Elizabeth many times.

“I know you want to know who owns the jet.”

**Well, yeah.**

“Who?”

Merry warned them.

“You’re not going to like it.”

She closed her eyes.

Honestly, Maura didn’t like anything about this case. If she didn’t get a nap, or Chevy soon, she was going to get downright punchy.

“Who?” she asked again.

“We missed an asset. It’s registered to El Gato.”

She opened her eyes.

*What?*

“How the hell is that possible? We literally used CIA software to pull up anything he owned and take it out. We took out apartments, warehouses, boats, cars...how the hell did we miss a private jet?”

Boone clued her in.

“We searched here. The CIA doesn’t have a full list from every country, Mar. If Chevy knew where El Gato was stashing things, like in Germany, he could have used that. We tried.”

Now, she needed to know.

“Is this a new asset or an old one?”

No one answered, and that told her the answer.

They didn’t have a clue.

“Oh, she’s gonna blow,” Zayn admitted.

No, she wouldn’t. She was just tired.

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m cranky.”

Jagger took the time to explain so that they were all on the same page. They’d planned on not saying anything until they could confirm it with a doctor, but...

The family had to know what was at stake for him.

“She’s also pregnant,” he said.

That took a whole two seconds to register before the family was all staring at her and Jagger.

“Well, holy shit. The little soldier’s even littler soldiers got the job done. They had to use ladders to reach that egg, but hey...,” Zayn said.

Jagger laughed and flipped him off.

“You’re ridiculous.”

Yeah, he was.

“Mar, congrats!” Rogue said, getting up to go hug her. She accepted it, and he picked her off the ground in a bear

hug. “We’re thrilled for you guys.”

They all were.

They’d been heartbroken when they found out they’d miscarried and worried about how much Jagger could take before he had a mental breakdown.

They took turns hugging her.

When Jagger slipped the beads into Boone’s hand when he shook it, he winked.

Only, he didn’t get away with it.

“Oh, hell, no,” Merry said, walking over to her husband, holding out her hand, and taking them from him. “I’m stopping this right now. We don’t need me and Jinx pregnant too. We already have three women with children. We’ll open a vortex,” she said, walking to the kitchen.

They all heard the garbage disposal go on.

Oh, and then the beads meeting their demise.

“She’s mean. Watch your junk,” Zayn whispered to Boone as he did just that.

Maura laughed.

“Yeah, yeah, Jagger is about to get really cautious and overbearing. You won’t all be thanking me then,” she said.

“About to be?” Rogue asked. “Then what’s this persona he’s been showing the world the last three months?”

Jagger shrugged.

“That’s my winning personality.”

They all laughed.

The point was made.

“Anyway, go to your appointment. We’re hitting that airport, and hopefully, El Gato doesn’t own anything else.”

Merry knew what she was going to do.

“I’ll start looking for anything else in case something popped up that we missed.”

Maura appreciated that.

She looked at Remmy.

“I need you to *‘borrow’* Calyx,” she said.

Immediately, he lifted a brow.

“What exactly do you mean by *‘borrow’* her. That sounds sketchy.”

She explained.

“I need you to get her, abduct her without anyone seeing, and bring her here, blindfolded. We’re going to need her help.”

Well, that was at least not the most unpleasant job he could have to do.

“Please?”

“On it,” he said, standing up. “Text me when you want her here. I’ll abscond the owner of The Underground for you,” he said.

Then, walked out.

When he was gone, they were all thinking the same thing.

“Someone has it bad for Calyx,” Rogue said.

Oh, he wasn’t kidding.

Only, they’d have to solve that problem later. Dakota had been the one mission, and now that it was done, taking down Chevy was priority.

Remmy was up next.

Jagger knew they needed to get going, and he had to make sure he handled the next part. Hopefully, his wife wouldn’t kill him.

“Maura won’t be going out with us to the airport,” he said, smiling as if almost daring her to go there.

“Why won’t I be?” she asked.

Everyone braced for it.



**He.**

**Was.**

**Dead.**

“Because you need some downtime to work out the details of the plan in case we don’t find anything there.”

She laughed.

“You barely saved your ass on that one.”

Oh, he was aware.

Only, he’d do what he could.

It wasn’t like they were going to a busy airport. This was a privately owned strip that was likely going to have Chevy’s assholes all over it.

The further away she was, the better.

“I say all the men go out, and we leave the ladies here,” Rogue said.

Before he could say more, his wife had him on his back, and her foot precariously close to his junk.

Immediately, he rephrased that.

“I say we let Mamba go alone because she’s amazing and we might slow her down.”

She laughed.

Then, helped him up.

“Good save, Rogue.”

Jagger glanced over at his wife.

“Marines?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Zayn, Mamba, and Jagger will take the airport. Everyone else will get some downtime. When they get back, we’ll figure out if I have to implement this plan.”

Tommy was curious.

“How bad is the plan?”

Jagger laughed.

Oh, and that said it all.

**Unfortunately.**

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

*Thirty Minutes Later*

*Downtown New Orleans*

*OBGYN Office*

Dakota tried not to be paranoid, but truth be told, The Hunters had learned that they were marked pretty early on in *New Orleans*.

Walking around in the daylight was not something they did often.

And with reason.

It got you killed.

Someone was always gunning for them, and now, here he was, sitting in a doctor's office, waiting for them to be called back.

Luckily, the office wasn't far from Eve's home, and within walking distance.

Oh, they didn't walk.

**Hell.**

**No.**

They drove in a blacked-out ride, parked nearby, and then rushed into the office. Well, he rushed them. Eve just stared at him like he was insane.

Now, he was surrounded by all women in various stages of pregnancy, and a few men who were with them.

"Did you research this doctor?" he asked.

She tried not to laugh.

"No, I threw a dart at a phone book."

He blinked.

"Do we still have phone books, smart ass?" he asked, then gave her a kiss on the temple.

She patted his leg.

"He delivered Maura's baby."

He paused.

"I'm sorry. Did you say **HE**? As in a man is going to be looking at The Garden of Good and Mine?" he asked. "You know. Eve's **EDEN**."

She actually laughed out loud, and everyone looked over at her. She elbowed Dakota.

He was amusing.

Yeah, she liked this version of him.

**No.**

She loved it.

“He literally is the best in the city, and you want me to worry that he’s looking at my vagina? This baby is going to be huge. I’m going to be cut open. You don’t have to doubt that.”

He had the smug look on his face.

“Okay, he can stay, but one peek under the curtain, and I’m going to shoot him.”

She snorted.

“I love you.”

He held her hand.

“I love you too, Evie.”

When the door opened, the nurse called her name and got her attention.

“Evelyn Rakin?” she called.

Dakota grinned like an idiot.

He couldn’t help himself.

As they headed toward the nurse, Eve held his hand and was giddy herself. What had seemed so horrible four days ago was now her greatest joy.

She was weighed in, and the nurse took her blood pressure and did the normal stuff. When she was done, she left the room, and they waited for the doctor.

Dakota leaned against the wall, and Eve saw something that made her laugh.

“Are you legit wearing a gun to our OBGYN appointment?” she whispered.

“Uh, yeah. It’s people-y out there. People shoot at us a lot.”

She rolled her eyes.

“I think we’re safe here.”

Yeah, he wasn’t taking any chances.

When the door opened, a man peeked his head in. He was handsome and young.

And Dakota didn't like him already.

Before Eve, while protective, he wasn't a caveman.  
Now that she was carrying his child...

All bets were off.

That territorial protectiveness had risen up, and he was going to do what it took to make sure his child was born.

**No.**

**Matter.**

**What.**

Dakota couldn't control that feeling, so this was going to be fun in a *'get dragged behind a car over potholes'* kind of a way.

"Evelyn?" the doctor asked, shaking her hand.

She smiled.

"That's me, Doctor Murry."

He took a seat not seeing the man behind the door leaning against the wall.

"You're in for your first appointment, and an ultrasound, right?"

She nodded.

The man adjusted the table.

"Lay back. You're in good hands. They're a little chilly, and I apologize for that."

Before she could say anything, Dakota cleared his throat, making the man jump since he didn't see him there.

"Jesus! You're quiet."

Dakota was staring at him and not saying a word. He was thinking murderous things.

She could tell.

Eve laughed.

"Dakota. Chill."

Yeah, no.

He clued the man in.

“I’m also her husband.”

The man shook his hand.

“Well, it’s a pleasure. We’re just going to do an exam, and get her an ultrasound to check the baby and everything.”

Dakota was watching him.

**Like.**

**A.**

**Predator.**

“My friend, Mikey O’, recommended you,” Dakota said, making sure they were on the same page. “I hope he was right.”

At the name, the doctor’s eyes went huge. Oh, he’d been to that rodeo before, and it had been terrifying. There was nothing scarier than delivering a mob man’s baby.

The pressure was insane.

Dakota wasn’t done.

“He’s my brother—as in family. That’s his niece or nephew onboard. Let’s make sure we do this right.”

At that, the man backed up from her and Dakota. The entire time, Eve was staring at her husband like he’d lost his mind.

Because he had.

**Clearly.**

“How about we get that ultrasound now, and I’ll have the nurse practitioner handle the physical, so everyone is more comfortable?”

Dakota smiled.

He won that round.

“Good plan, Doctor.”

The man hauled ass out of there, the door slamming behind him.

“Are you insane?” Eve asked, pretty sure that Dakota was trying to make her laugh, but she wasn’t one hundred percent sure.

This was not the man three months ago.

That was for damn sure.

Now that some dude wasn’t going to be going near her girl parts, he relaxed and focused on his wife. The smile was gentle and soothing.

“Yes. I’m insanely in love with my spiffy new wife, and I don’t trust anyone. You know how sneaky people can be. I want to make sure my woman and child are safe. Everyone fears Jagger.”

She rolled her eyes.

The irony was that they should fear her more. She was more likely to kill someone.

“Come stand here and give me your hand,” she said. “I’m going to keep you from doing anything crazy to whoever comes through the door.”

He didn’t mind.

Leaning over, Dakota gave her a kiss, and the second their mouths touched, she forgot what she was saying. Kissing Dakota should be illegal in every state.

*His mouth...*

**Yowza.**

This cowboy was trouble.

When the door opened, a woman rolled an ultrasound machine in and smiled at them.

“I’m Beth. Ready to find out what you’re having?” she asked.

They both nodded.

Dakota was much calmer now. Probably because it was a woman. Then again, Eve was a woman, too, so that didn't mean they were safe.

Beth got Eve all set up, and when she squirted the goo on her belly and hit the lights, they were about to begin.

It didn't take long.

"Oh, look. I see your little one," she said. "Want to get closer, Daddy?" she asked.

Did he?

**Hell.**

**Yes.**

Dakota moved closer, and she pointed out the baby's profile on the screen.

Now, he wasn't going to lie.

It looked like an alien. How the hell was she reading this whole screen and seeing anything?

The woman was taking measurements, clicking on things, and then, she said the magic words.

"Do you want to know the gender?" she asked.

**"YES!"** they both said.

She pointed at some of the black area, and they both saw **NOTHING**.

"Uh, it's a baby?" Eve asked.

Beth laughed.

"It's a boy."

Dakota's heart began racing in his chest. That was the most amazing thing.

He touched the screen and then went around to kiss his wife.

"Eve, baby, we're having a boy. You're giving me a son," he said, his whole being calm and at peace.



This was the best day of his life, minus last night. He couldn't imagine it getting any better.

He had a wife.

*A chance.*

*And now, a child.*

He took her face in his hands, and the tears came. Dakota Rakin, the rough-and-tumble badass, just turned into some mush.

Cash Landon Rakin was going to change his life.

**For the better.**

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

*Somewhere*

*In New Orleans*

*Same Time*

When Cruz found his boss, he was sitting in the one office, dealing with some paperwork.

And he didn't look happy.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

“Uh, who pissed in your cereal this morning, Boss?” he asked.

Chevy sat back in his chair.

“Well, first off, The Hunters. I was following Aiden, and guess who I spotted. There was a blacked-out vehicle tailing him. It was Jagger. I know it.”

Cruz knew how much the man disliked that Marine. He spent most of his time moving around so Jagger Armstrong couldn't find him.

Well, they'd blown up his wife, so...

“Aiden didn't see him?”

He shook his head.

“As a cop, you'd think he'd know better. So, I had to blow up the van, and take him out before they got any information out of him. He's seen me, and he's spoken to me while I was in our hidey-hole. It was too risky.”

Cruz knew how dangerous that was.

“I'm sorry, Boss.”

Chevy shrugged.

He didn't get worked up like El Gato had. He was making money left and right, and he wasn't going to be stopped.

All he had to do was outthink a Marine who had been trained the same way he had.

*But first...*

“What did you need?”

Cruz had bad news.

“It was just on the local news. A cop committed suicide at the station, so I reached out to some of the men you have on the payroll.”

He lifted a brow.

“And?”

“Tate West hung himself, and left an incriminating note talking about his sins.”

Chevy didn't like this.

“And any other cops we have who worked with Tate?”

He was honest.

“There was only one left, and he's gone MIA. I think he ran for it, and I don't blame him.”

Well, that was for the best. At least The Hunters couldn't grab that cop up. Now, to worry about the note.

“Anything about what we're doing?”

“I don't know. The note is sealed for now, and I'm working on figuring it out. Someone we pay will see it. Right now, the whole evidence locker is shut down and word on the street is the FBI is coming in to handle it. This might take some time.”

Chevy sat back.

“And you say he committed suicide?”

He nodded.

**Yeah, no.**

Chevy knew better.

This was a little too coincidental for him. The guy he paid who controlled the evidence locker loads up a bunch of money, guns, and what is left of Addiction, and then offs himself? Right after a cop drives the van out of the station to bring it to him?

**Nope.**

That was not a coincidence at all.

“That’s going to be Jagger. He somehow found out about the cops on our payroll. He figured it out. First, the two detectives are killed in that house, and now this. I know that man. He’s good at being ruthless. He’s gunning for me since I killed his bitch. We have to rethink this.”

Cruz was curious.

“Sir, who is Z?” he asked. “That’s what was carved into the dead detectives. It was also on the outside of my bar that got blown up last night.”

**Jesus.**

Chevy forgot about the bar.

“God almighty. Jagger is making my life hell. That’s way too many gas leaks gone awry in this city. Add that to the rest, and it’s clear. He’s getting closer.”

As for ‘Z’?

Chevy had no idea.

“I hope they’re just fucking with me,” he said, “but I can’t be sure. Start asking around to make sure. I want to figure this out before Jagger gets any closer.”

The man nodded.

Only, Chevy wasn’t done.

“If you see or hear anything related to Jagger Armstrong, I want to know. I’m willing to pay a huge-ass bounty for him. I want him so I can torture the shit out of him. I want to make him bleed. His wife is gone, and he won’t leave me alone until I end his life.”

Cruz got it.

“I’ll keep listening, Sir.”

Chevy sipped his coffee.

“There’s a five-million-dollar bounty in cryptocurrency for the person who brings him to me.”

Cruz grinned.

“I’ll work on it, Sir.”

Chevy didn't like being out in the open, and he was feeling off.

“I'm getting out of here. I'll meet you tonight at the location. Since the bar was blown, we'll rendezvous there to discuss the next step. I hear that we have guns coming in, and that's our next play. I have a feeling that we're going to need them. We'll discuss this later. Pass it on. Whoever gets Jagger Armstrong gets a bonus and a position advancement to my partner.”

And that was all he had to hear.

Cruz wanted that.

**In the worst way.**

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## *Chapter Twenty-One*

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*Airport*

*In The Brush*

*Saturday Noon*

It wasn't often that Jagger was in charge of a mission, but today, now that the Major was in the office, working on her plan, he was handling this little assault on the airport. Oh, and he was glad she was locked down.

The last thing that he wanted was his wife or child in peril. With what he knew was likely coming, if they didn't get a hold of some viable information, the further away from this, the better.

Maura was his only concern when she was carrying his child. While he missed Dianna and Michael so much, he knew they were safe and protected.

They would be home if he could ever get this shit handled.

"What do you see?" Jagger asked Jinx.

She was using the binoculars as she sat between him and Zayn.

They were running with just the three of them for a reason. There could be no mistakes.

Jagger knew that if they got caught there, or someone got hurt, they were down a vital player in Maura's plan.

"All I can get confirmation on are the two guys in the hanger working on a jet."

Jagger was curious.

"Are the call numbers the same?" he asked, rattling them off.

She nodded.

"Yep."

“We have to disable that jet,” Zayn said. “If they have anyone else going out tonight, we have to make sure they don’t take off.”

He was aware.

“Are the guys packing?” he asked Jinx, who assessed the situation.

“Yes. Handguns. Both have one each. We won’t be able to get to them without them seeing us. The hanger isn’t protected by any trees.”

Jagger looked at the ramshackle building and the shiny, pricy jet.

“Well, then, we need a distraction.”

The other two Marines looked over.

“A loud one?” Zayn asked, grinning. “One that goes **BOOM?**”

They both stared at him.

“I wonder about you sometimes,” Jagger said.

He laughed.

“Dude, I wonder about me all the time. Jinx, give me your gun. I’ll make the shot.”

She gasped.

“You think I’m letting you put your hands on my girl? Fuck no, Marine.”

Zayn stared at her.

“There’s one shot, and it has to be through that tiny-ass hole.”

She stared at him.

“And you think me, Mamba, can’t take the shot?” she asked.

“I was going to climb the tree and shoot down. That’s an easier angle.”

Jagger stopped them.

“Honestly, I don’t give a shit which one of you does it, but we need to blow that jet and get the two men to run from the explosion—our way.”

Jinx got down with her gun in position.

“I’ve got this.”

Zayn sighed.

“You have to hit the fuselage just right. If you miss...”

She smiled.

“If I miss, you can name my next kid, and be the godparent.”

He grinned.

“Okay, princess. If you hit it, and then disable those two guys when they come running, I’ll let you name mine, and I’ll also give my next girl your name as her middle name.”

She smiled.

“Deal.”

“Uh, any day now, children,” Jagger said. “Because the **MAJOR** wants this done, and I’m the one who has to answer for Captain Bad Attitude, and Mamba, if this goes sideways. She’s pregnant and testy as it is.”

Jinx wasn’t worried.

She got into position, and Zayn read off the windspeed, spotting for her.

“Don’t forget to...”

“Zayn, shut up,” she said. “Look pretty and close that mouth of yours for two seconds,” she added, adjusting her scope and locking into that tiny-ass hole the size of the top of a soda can.

“She’s gonna miss,” Zayn said.

Jagger pointed at him to shut him up.

“Honey, take the shot,” Jagger said, and as soon as he did, she pulled the trigger, and the bullet exploded from her



gun, heading at the jet. It went through the hole, hitting the fuselage of the plane, making it blow.

The men were blown back, and when they got up, they began running.

She reloaded so quickly, that she was able to get the first guy in the knee, and the second in the stomach.

They both went down hard.

“And that’s going to be Dandelion Jinx Thundercloud’s legacy,” she said, busting his ass. “A weed for you, doubter.”

He gasped.

“You wouldn’t!”

She smiled, and they got moving toward the two downed men.

Jagger would deal with them later. For now, he had two guys to handle.

As they reached the men, the one with the hole in his gut was already hemorrhaging. The hole went clear through, and he wasn’t going to be saying much.

His time on this earth was done.

**Oh.**

**Well.**

Don’t sell women and help assholes do dirty deeds, and you wouldn’t get shot in the gut.

The guy missing half of his knee was screaming in agony.

Immediately, they disarmed them, and then the fun began. Jagger dragged the one away from the fire, and he crouched down.

“Please help,” he said.

“First, a few questions. When is the next woman scheduled to be shipped out of here?” he asked.

The man’s eyes went huge.

The guy beside him that Zayn had dragged over was screaming. It was annoying.

Jagger pulled his nine-millimeter and shot him in the head.

*To shut him up.*

“When?” he asked again.

The man shook his head.

“All I know is Cruz said to get it ready for tomorrow morning.”

“Where can I find Cruz and Chevy?” he asked.

The man moaned in pain.

“I don’t know a Chevy! I swear, Mikey O’! I only know a Cruz and a man named El Gato.”

That made him wonder. This guy shouldn’t know about El Gato. They’d taken him out three months ago.

He was already dead.

Yet, here they were with his name moving around in the seedy circles, and a jet he owned that they missed. There was no way he was back from the dead.

What the hell was going on?

Jagger knew that this was getting him nowhere.

“End him,” Jagger said, as Jinx pulled her sidearm.

“Please don’t!” he begged. “Please! I have a family that needs me.”

Jagger moved fast, pulling the man up to be nose-to-nose with him, and stared into his eyes. His were filled with disgust and rage.

“And you sent women and children in that jet to God only knows where to be assaulted and raped. **CHILDREN.** You think I give a shit what you have at home? You think I believe you should be raising children or being allowed to live?”

The man began sobbing.

Zayn pulled his gun, and put the man down.

“Sorry, Jinx, but he was annoying. You can have the next one. This one needed to be shut up.”

She gave him a fist bump.

“It’s all good. I’ll even babysit Dandelion for you,” she said, busting his balls.

“You can’t name my kid after a weed! Stella will kick my balls into next week.”

She smiled.

“Then you shouldn’t have made the bet. Auntie Jinxy is going to get her monogrammed things soon. I’m just putting a picture of that weed on everything.”

“Jagger! Tell her she can’t!”

The man shook his head.

“Let’s get out of here. That explosion is going to get some attention, and Chevy is going to know it’s me—especially after we were spotted following the cop van.”

He walked away.

And all he was thinking was one thing.

Maura was going to have to implement her plan.

And that wasn’t going to make her happy.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

***Calyx's Apartment***

***Same Time***

Yeah, this was a piece of cake, and he wasn't sure that was a good thing.

Remington had an easy time getting into her space. After all, he knew how she worked.

At noon, she ran down, bringing the money for the tills, and then she would go back to her apartment, have some lunch, take a nap, and prepare for a long night at The Underground.

Well, he timed it right, making sure she had left before he snuck in, waiting for her.

A part of him was rock-hard, thinking about this. He was tucked into her bedroom closet, and he could smell her perfume.

**God.**

He wanted her.

He'd be lying if he said he didn't want to just spend time with her. Only, Remington knew that would be bad for Calyx and him.

There was no way he could let himself fall for anyone. It was a death sentence, and he'd committed plenty crimes in

his life.

As he'd arrived there, he'd placed little, tiny cameras all over the place. While Jagger didn't ask him to, they were super aware that they needed to be cautious.

*Would Calyx betray them?*

**No.**

This was more about keeping her safe. She was helping Mikey O', and if that got out...

She was dead.

As he stood there, thinking about her, he heard her enter the apartment, and his pulse began thumping in his chest. Oh, and not because he was about to abduct a woman.

**No.**

This was definitely more about being this close to her. When he watched her walk by the door to the closet, her back to him, he knew he needed to move.

**FAST.**

Timing it just right and stepping out, he threw a pillowcase over her head, and immediately grabbed her.

Well, she began fighting like a tiger to get away.

Only, he was a good one hundred and fifty pounds heavier than her. Calyx was maybe one twenty soaking wet.

**"NO!"** she screamed, as she fought.

He kept her pinned to the bed, that he was using as leverage to get her cuffed and bound.

As she fought against him, he was acutely aware of how hard he was, and that he was pressed to her ass.

**Jesus.**

This was brutal.

When he lifted the pillowcase to slap some duct tape over her mouth, he managed to get her contained.

She started whimpering as he hoisted her up, over his shoulder and began carrying her out.

The whole time, Remington felt horrible.

All the way down the stairs, he made sure he kept his hand on her to keep from dropping her. She was hanging over his shoulder, and the fight was gone.

He heard her crying.

His heart broke.

Outside, as he got her to the back of the van, he climbed in, and closed the doors. Then, he gently laid her on the floor, and moved the hood up a little bit. The tears were soaking her cheeks.

Gently, he pulled the tape off.

“Please,” she whispered. “I don’t want to die. I need to live,” she begged.

Without saying a word, he found her mouth with his and kissed her the same way he had in The Underground.

She’d been tense, but the second Calyx recognized the kiss, her body went lax.

As he broke the kiss, his whole being ached for her.

“Remmy?” she whispered.

He put his mouth by her ear.

“Mikey needs to see you. You’re safe with me. I’ll uncuff you if you don’t fight. You can’t see where we’re going. Do you trust me?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Always.”

He undid the cuffs, and cut the duct tape on her ankles so she wouldn’t be uncomfortable.

*He probably shouldn’t have, but...*

**God.**

He was in trouble when it came to Calyx.

“You could have just called me. I would have come willingly.”

He rubbed her wrists and took the pillowcase off her head.

Then he wiped her cheeks with his thumbs.

“If you are being watched, I needed to make it look good.”

She understood.

They were protecting her.

“Okay, Remmy.”

“I need you to sit here, keep the hood on, and trust me,” he said. “I’m going to drive us around a while, and then bring you there. I have to make sure we’re not being followed.”

She nodded.

“I understand.”

Before he could move, she reached up and pulled him down so she could kiss him. As she met that previous kiss with heat of her own, he held on for one hell of a ride.

Her hand was in the back of his hair, and her mouth poured heat and lust into him.

His body reacted.

Oh, and not in a way he was happy about.

*This woman...*

She undid him.

When she finally let him go, she smiled and stared into his gorgeous eyes.

“Next time, abduct me and take me to your place.”

At her words, and what she implied, his dick throbbed.

**Jesus.**

He was no match for her.

“We have to go,” he said, not answering that because what he wanted, and what he could give her were two different things.

Oh, he wanted nothing more than to sink into this woman, and fall for her even more.

Only, that would get her killed.

“Okay, Remmy. I trust you,” she said, picking up the pillowcase and placing it over her own head. “Let’s go see Mikey O’.”

**Holy shit!**

He hated that she trusted him.

He hated that she didn’t fear him.

And what he hated even more...

That he couldn’t have her.

**Ever.**



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## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

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*Chartres Street*

*Meeting*

*Saturday One P.M.*

**A**s the team came back, they found everyone working. Tommy and Gene were going through the information that they'd pulled up on the dead cops, in hopes of finding something that might give them a lead.

Maura was sitting on the couch, earbuds in, listening to white noise as she worked on her plan.

Violet was nearby, as Stella and Merry were teaching her how to use MATE—in case she ever needed it. Since it was clear the girl was going to be around, now that she was Dakota's stepdaughter, they figured they'd give her a look into the Hunter life.

As Jagger came in, Maura looked up and already knew that it had been a bust.

“Nothing?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“We stopped a flight from going out tomorrow, but that's not going to slow them down much.”

**Well, shit.**

This was bad.

As security alerted them that someone was accessing the front door, Violet checked the tablet.

“It's my mom and Dakota,” she said. Then, she lowered her voice. “Do you think he'd be mad if I called him dad?” she asked. “I've never had one of those.”

Stella squeezed her hand.

“I'm betting he'd love it. Try and see.”

The girl hoped they were right. What she'd learned was that she loved being around all of them. Stella was helping her with some science things she didn't understand, and Merry was blowing her mind with what she did for them.

Violet felt at home.

When Dakota and Eve came in, they were holding hands, and Dakota was grinning.

Oh, the men knew that look.

That was the '*I did this*' grin, that told them he was happy about the baby.

"Boy, huh?" Boone said, sitting on the couch beside Stella.

"Hey!" he said. "Did you just steal my thunder?" Dakota asked.

"Absolutely. You've been a dick for months. That's your karma."

He laughed.

"Well, okay. I get that, and yes, we're having a boy," he said, so freaking happy.

Everyone congratulated him.

Everyone but Violet.

Dakota immediately noticed she was staring at him, and not in a good way.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asked, taking off his jacket and dropping it over the back of the couch.

"Yeah, sure," she said. "Can I talk to you alone?" she asked.

Immediately, Eve's eyebrow went up.

She knew this was a potential minefield. Doctor Gaines had told her that there might be bumps once Violet realized there would be a biological child thrown into the mix.

"Sure," he said. "I could use some coffee. Let's go talk," he said.

Violet got up and headed that way. When Eve went to join them, Jinx grabbed her by the back of the jeans and stopped her.

“She might need...”

Jinx shook her head and was honest.

“You married him because you trusted him. Let him do this,” she said.

She knew she was right.

“He won’t hurt her, right?” she asked, that feeling of worry coming back. She loved Violet. She didn’t want her hurting.

**Ever.**

The team reassured her.

“Dakota is a dick, but there are two types of people he’s rarely mean to,” Maura said. “Women and children are generally pretty safe from his rage.”

Yeah, except she’d been his target of that anger.

“Uh, are you forgetting that he was a dick to me?” she asked.

Maura was honest.

“That’s because he had his dick in you. This is a different situation. Have faith.”

What choice did she have?

It appeared that her new husband was up to bat, and the outcome just might change everything.

**Unfortunately.**

In the kitchen, Violet sat at the counter, and Dakota made a cup of coffee. Without a second thought, he grabbed a soda from the refrigerator to give to Violet.

“What do you want to talk about?” he asked. “Is this about the baby, and how you feel? Because I want you to know that you’re very important to me and your mom. This baby is not replacing you.”

She opened the soda.

“I know. I’m glad it’s a boy. That’s what I wanted. Now, I don’t have to share a room,” she said.

That was a very teenager response.

He sipped his coffee.

“Then what has that look on your face?” he asked. “Because I can read a room.”

She figured it was now or never.

“I wanted to ask you something.”

“Okay, Kiddo. Shoot. What’s on your mind?” he asked, wanting to help her through whatever it was she was dealing with internally.

She did just that.

“Eve is my Mom now. Can I call you Dad? Or don’t you want me to? I know you married her, and I was part of the deal, but I was curious. I can call you Dakota...”

He stopped her.

“What do you want to call me?” he asked.

She was honest.

“I’ve never had a Dad. I was hoping you’d be okay with it.”

He reassured her.

“I’m very okay with it. I know that Mom changed her name, now that we’re married, and I’d love if you’d take my name, too, Violet, but that has to be up to you. I told you that I was marrying both of you. Your mother is a package deal, and I knew that going in. I wanted that package.”

“So it’s just not the baby you want?”

He laughed.

“Honey, you’re going to be the fun one. Babies can’t go to the movies, or bowling. They are portable, but really, the teenagers are the fun ones. You have piano lessons coming, and then you’re going to want to learn how to drive.”

She did.

“I just want to tell you a secret.”

He waited.

“If I was going to have to pick a dad from all the men in the other room, you included, I would have picked you. You make me feel safe.”

He came around the island, and stood her up. Then, he hugged her.

“I meant what I said, Violet. I’m here for you. I’ll be here for you when you decide to go away to college, and I’ll be here for you when you get married. I love you just as much as I love this baby. You’re important.”

“I found the note you wrote my Mom. Thank you for including me in this.”

He lifted her chin.

“You’re mine now too. You and this baby are going to be my whole world. I’m going to do the Dad thing wrong sometimes, Honey, but I’ll keep trying. I’ll have to yell when your room is a mess, or if you talk back...”

She laughed.

“We can leave that part off.”

He laughed.

“Or you can clean your room and not talk back.”

She hugged him.

“I love you,” she said.

Tears filled his eyes. Yeah, he’d been a dick to not want this amazing thing.

*This kid...*

She was sweet.

“So, you can call me Dad, you can call me Dakota, or you can call me backup when you need help. I’m going to be there, and if you’re ever in trouble, I come with some very mean uncles who will break legs for you.”

She laughed and was well aware.

“So I hear that about Uncle Mikey O’. That’s got some street cred.”

He winked at her.

“We good?” he asked.

“Yeah, Dad, we’re good.”

That made his heart happy.

It was funny how life changed so fast, and how he’d been alone. Only, now...he had it all.

Taking her hand, he held it in his as they walked out to the living room. It was clear that they’d been waiting for them to be done.

“All finished,” he said.

“Is everything okay?” Eve asked, worried.

“Yeah, Violet wants to pierce her nose and dye her hair purple. I said it was cool with me.”

Eve stared at him.

“Wait, is that an option?” Violet asked. “Because I’m down for a tattoo if...”

Dakota couldn’t keep a straight face.

“I hope you guys are busting my ass,” Eve said. “No one is piercing anything at sixteen.”

“Well, you do have tattoos, so how’s that?” Violet asked.

Dakota kept the amusement going.

“I say a big one like Mom’s. I mean, what’s good for the goose...”

She realized that they were teaming up and teasing her. It was very family-like, so she joined in.

“Is good for the gander to sleep on the couch,” Eve said, smiling at him.

That changed his mind pretty damn fast.

“No tattoo, Violet. Sorry,” he said, winking at his wife.

“Come on, Dad!” she said.

The second she called him that, it brought tears to Eve’s eyes. Now, she knew what had been going on. Well, that and Stella clued her in.

She’d married a good guy.

“We’ll discuss it later. Maura needs to talk to us about something.”

That she did.

She glanced over at Violet.

“Honey, this is going to get tricky for us. How about you go take a break somewhere?” she asked.

The girl got it.

“Can’t I stay?” she asked. “Maybe I can help,” she added.

Dakota handled it.

“No, Kiddo, you can’t. It won’t be safe for you.”

Eve agreed.

They were going to be discussing strategy, and she knew that the less the girl knew, the better.

When no one spoke, Violet got it.

She was outnumbered.

“Fine. Can I go watch a movie in the house next door?” she asked. “You know, with the secret access?”

Jagger nodded.

“Have at it. There are snacks.”

Violet wanted to stay, but she knew what her mom and The Hunters did.

She was bummed that she was going to miss all the fun, but that was life.

As she was leaving, Maura got a text from Remington, updating her as to his role.

***‘We just pulled in. I’m bringing Calyx in.’***

Well, it appeared they were all back in, and safe. Now, she was going to have to discuss strategy.

Immediately, Maura showed her husband the text. It appeared everyone was there for the party.

“Remmy is back. Let’s go to the kitchen, get something to eat, and talk,” she said.

Rogue was wary.

“Whenever the Major says, *‘let’s talk’* the shit is about to hit the fan.”

Oh, truer words hadn’t been said. Since the airport had been a bust, that meant there was only one option left. They couldn’t let Chevy keep sending women out, and they couldn’t risk that he moved.



They needed to get to him, ASAP, and end this once and for all.

That meant her plan was the **ONLY** option left for them. Honestly, that unsettled Maura because she knew how dangerous it was.

As they got to the kitchen, Stella began pulling out some bread and lunchmeat to make sandwiches for everyone. She was nervous because the whole time they'd been there with Maura, she was silent.

Zayn had told her when a Marine was silent, they were likely planning an attack, or getting ready for one.

As they were handed some food, Remmy came in with a hooded woman beside him.

When he took it off, Calyx moved closer to Remington, and he let her.

That told them all that there was something brewing there, even if Remington had planned to fight it. He was feeling protective of the woman.

"I'm sorry that we had to abduct you," Maura said to Calyx. "Have a seat and join us for lunch."

She took a seat at the giant island kitchen counter.

"It's okay. Once I realized who it was, I wasn't afraid. What can I do for you guys?" she asked.

Maura sighed.

"I'm going to have to implement a very dangerous and not-so-opportune plan," she said. "I won't go into the specifics with you, but I have some questions."

Remmy was behind her, waiting and watching.

"Okay, I'll help however I can," Calyx said.

Maura went there.

"I need a personal favor. You have every right to say no, and I'd understand, but it's important. I have a way to get rid of Chevy and this mess once and for all."

Everyone wanted to hear that plan because this whole situation was getting old.

The man was a pain in the ass.

“Okay, what do you need?” she inquired.

*Well, since she asked...*

“Here’s what I need. We’ve asked where to find Chevy or Cruz, but we’ve never asked if anyone you know is loyal to them.”

She said nothing, but instead let the woman discuss what she wanted.

“We have to infiltrate their enterprise. We know they are using the guise of modeling agencies to lure women in. We need someone who can get us information.”

Calyx took a bite of the sandwich she was served, and waited.

“I need a woman to go undercover for us, but I need someone you think is on their payroll. We haven’t been asking you the right questions, and now I understand that. I need to know if you have anyone who feeds you information, and is working both sides. Someone who has their allegiance, or thinks they do.”

Calyx chewed and still said nothing as Maura laid it all out.

“We can’t go in. We’re marked. I need someone who will betray us.”

They all looked at her.

Well, everyone but Jagger since he was the only one who knew the plan at this stage.

“Do you have someone like that?”

She nodded.

“Yes. Her name is Merla. From what I’ve overheard, she’s one of the women who is on call for Cruz Santiago. She owes him some money, and he gets it paid back with sex.”

“And is she dirty?” Maura asked. “I really need someone who will rat us out to him, and will take our money.”

She laughed.

Oh, well, that sounded about right.

“Merla is about as trustworthy as a double agent. She’d sell her own mother out.”

That worked.

“She is pretty loyal to Cruz since she thinks it’ll get her somewhere. From what I’ve heard, she has a *‘contract’* that she’s working off the next year. That’s a lot of sex, and I hear he’s brutal.”

Maura was working on the plan on the fly, simply because she was scribbling things down.

**Numbers.**

She was running statistics.

“We need to hire her under the guise that we’ve heard she knows Cruz and Chevy. We want to infiltrate that building and get her to tell us if he’s inside. That’s it.”

They all listened.

“We’ll tell her then we need her to come out and let us know if he’s there. We want her to warn him. We want him to ambush us.”

She lifted a brow.

“For enough money, she’ll definitely bite. Will she betray him? That’s fifty-fifty. If she thinks it’ll get her some advantage from him too...yes.”

“I’m willing to take the chance. If she comes out and says he’s in there, we’ll strike. There’s no doubt he knows where to find Chevy.”

Calyx understood the urgency. The city was about to be hit with something, and soon. She could see the signs.

“I’ll be more than happy to help.”

Maura figured as much.

“Where is this going?” Stella asked. “I don’t like the vibes I’m getting from ‘*need her to betray us*’,” she admitted.

Maura told them.

“We’re going to park a car outside, and he’s going to make a move on it. The people in the car, the bait, are going to be taken. They will be brought to Chevy.”

**EVERYONE GASPED.**

Well, everyone but Jagger.

“I know,” she said. “And here is where it gets bad. This is the part that I don’t like,” Maura admitted. “Those people are nothing more than a distraction to keep Chevy and Cruz busy. Myself, Jinx, and Eve will be getting them out. We’re going to track them to the nest, so to speak.”

Eve was honest.

“They’ll scan them for trackers. They might even move them in a different vehicle.”

She glanced over at Remmy.

“Do you have the items I asked Elizabeth for?” she inquired.

He nodded.

Then, he went to his bag and pulled a box out. One would think it was a box with a necklace in it since it was the same size, but when he popped it open, there were four pills. They were large pills, but they were pills none-the-less.

She explained.

“Those are CIA trackers. They don’t turn on until the coating is dissolved in stomach acid. The bait will swallow them, and as soon as they’re moved on, they will likely be scanned. They won’t be live, so they won’t register.”

Zayn stared at them.

“And if that goes horribly wrong?” he asked.

She focused on Remmy.

“How good of a shot are you?” she asked.

He didn't hesitate.

“Good.”

Well, then, that played into her plan.

“We have two trackers left from when we took down El Gato by following him from the cemetery. You'll have to be somewhere to take two shots. One to their vehicle, and one to ours.”

“I can do it. They won't recognize me if they see me.”

Rogue was curious.

“Okay, we have the hooker to lure Cruz to the bait, and we have a shooter to tag the bait. Who is the bait?” he asked almost afraid to know.

That was all it took.

Jagger raised his hand.

“He wants me. Cruz won't be able to resist in bringing me to Chevy. They'll want to torture me and make me bleed. After all, I've destroyed El Gato, and I've taken down most of the operation.”

Maura hated this.

“He's one person for the team.”

Oh, they all knew what that meant.

Zayn sighed.

“I'll go too.”

Stella dropped the knife she was using to make the sandwiches.

**“WHAT?”**

He gave her a kiss.

“I can't let the little guy go alone. He'll be outnumbered.”

The *'little guy'* stared at him.

“Are you kidding me?” Jagger asked. “Even now you’re going to be a dick?”

He clarified.

“You are little, and you will be outnumbered. I wasn’t lying, Dude. Chill out.”

He rolled his eyes.

Stella was horrified.

*Give themselves over to the assholes?*

*What?*

“And there’s no other option?” she asked. “None at all that doesn’t involve someone getting hurt?”

Maura shook her head.

“I’ve weighed every probability. This is the **ONLY** one that will get us to that location. Chevy is smart because he was trained to anticipate. We aren’t playing a game with El Gato now. We’re playing with someone who thinks like we do. We have to do what he won’t expect. Get caught.”

“And if he kills people on the spot?” Stella asked.

They all saw it in her eyes.

Maura was agonizing over all of this. She didn’t want to send them in any more than they wanted to go in.

“It’s got risk. It’s the **ONLY** thing we can do to find him. He won’t likely kill anyone. Not at first. He’s going to want to gloat. He’s going to want to have Jagger. Chevy hates us. He thinks I’m dead, and he’ll want to kill Jagger himself. If he has The Hunters, or who he perceives as them, he will let his guard down. Who would be coming in? Not Jagger’s dead wife.”

She had a point.

Only, that didn’t make Zayn’s wife feel any better about any of this.

“He’s going to torture them,” Stella said.

“I know. That’s why we have to move fast. We have to be on them to minimize this.”

Stella slammed down the knife.

“**MINIMIZE?** That’s my husband and your husband!” she said. “Minimize it?”

Oh, she wasn’t shocked.

She expected this pushback.

Zayn tried to keep the peace. His wife was ferociously protective of him, and the last thing they needed was a war.

“My sweet Stella, I’ll be okay.”

“Not if you’re tortured. Not if he just wants Jagger and kills you.”

“I’m sorry,” Maura said. “I’d go myself. I offered to out myself and be taken. I would do it for any of you. I just can’t because I’m what he doesn’t expect. If I go, he’ll expect Jagger to save me. I need his guard down.”

Stella closed her eyes.

Her husband reassured her.

“Baby, I can handle it,” Zayn said. “I’d die for this family. I’m a Marine. I’m not sitting here and twiddling my thumbs. I trust Maura when it comes to planning. She’s the gold standard for us Marines. You have to trust her like we do.”

She hated this.

From where he stood, Jagger knew that this was going to suck seven ways to Sunday.

Only, they had to get it done. This whole thing was getting more difficult to end.

A sacrifice had to be made.

That was him.

He rolled his neck. They all heard the tension and cracking.

“I’ll make sure that I’m the focus. I’ve lived it before. I can survive it. I won’t let anyone die, Stella. We don’t have the choice right now. How many more women get trafficked?”

She hated this.

Dakota had been quiet.

“What’s the rest of the plan? Someone gets taken, someone saves them, and then?”

She told them.

“We’re all going to be utilized. My hope is that when they take Jagger and the people with him, the rest of the team can set charges, and when I get them out, the two modeling agencies blow, killing everyone inside. We will effectively need four teams, along with Calyx to help us.”

Remmy whistled.

“That’s going to make waves.”

Yeah, and it would send a message.

“Elizabeth wants a clean sweep. Each one of those pills is about a million dollars. We are getting them because the government wants this handled. We are the people who keep this city intact. This is our mess, and we have to do it.”

That brought up a big question.

“Who is going in with Jagger?” Jinx asked. “I can take torture. I’ll go.”

Rogue choked on his food.

“No, you will not be.”

Zayn raised his hand, again.

“I just told you that I’ll go. I’m a Marine. I can handle it.”

“Are you sure?” Maura asked. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes, I do. He’s my brother, and if Jagger goes alone, they will overwhelm him. With more of us, they’ll play with us, and buy you time.”



Rogue volunteered.

“Not my wife. I’ll go. If we send in a woman, she’ll be raped. I’ll take this one.”

Maura stopped him.

“You can’t. I need you and Merry to set the bombs. She’s got the tech-savvy to do it at one place with Gene, and you and Stella at the other place. When I said we were all going to have to do this, I meant all of us.”

Tommy and Gene had been quiet.

“I don’t mind blowing shit up,” Tommy said. “I can go,” he offered.

She shook her head.

“I need you here with Violet and to be able to pick us up if we lose our ride.”

He understood.

From beside him, Gene was willing to do whatever it took.

“Just tell us what you need.”

Dakota knew what they needed, and it was going to be people to go in with Jagger.

“I’m in. I’ll go with them.”

Eve then raised her hand.

“If my husband is going in, I’m on the recovery team to get them out. You’re going to need me and Jinx. We’re heavy hitters when it comes to firepower. Once they realize you’re alive, Major, the shit will hit the fan.”

She was aware.

Boone stood up.

“I’ll go in too. I’m not tech savvy, and I’m not going to be on a recovery team. This is a Marine job, but I can take some torture.”

Merry looked like she was going to cry, and her husband saw it.

“I’ll be okay, Baby,” he reassured. “I have the protection of the Voudon,” he admitted, touching the beads on his wrist. “We all will.”

Merry was no longer hungry. Instead, she went to her husband’s side and held onto him.

“You have to come home to me,” she said. “Please, Boone.”

He kissed her in the middle of the forehead.

Merry gave him the incentive to make it out alive.

“We can have more babies if you come home to me and in one piece.”

He grinned.

**“SOLD!”**

She laughed, and cried, at the same time as he held her to soothe her.

“We’ve got this, Merry. They’ll expect a car full of Hunters. It looks weird if only one or two go. They’ve watched us plenty. Plus, if those devices fail, we’re on our own to get out.”

Not quite.

“That’s why we need Remmy to be our shooter. He can tag them from above. They’ll have their hands full. They won’t be thinking about a thump when the tag hits.”

She had a point.

Maura stood up.

“I know the kind of trust this takes. I know what I’m asking, and I know how shitty this is. Everyone’s life is in my hands, and we can pull it off if we all play our roles exactly as needed.”

Could they?

“I need you to really think about it,” she said. “As Calyx is working on getting us someone inside, I need Boone, Dakota, and Zayn to really think about it and talk to your wives. If you want out, I get it.”

The hardest part of this was the unknown. They all trusted Maura with their lives.

And now, those who didn't know her as a Marine, were going to have to put that faith in her.

She moved away from the island.

“I'm going to go work out the schematics. Decide. Again, if you can't do it, I'll go with Jagger. You guys will have to save us.”

Eve took a chance.

“I know I'm new to this team, but I'm with you, Major. I'll go in with you, and we'll get them out. We won't fail. I specialize in this shit. I have some toys I've stashed that might come in handy.”

Jinx wasn't being left out.

“I'm going in too,” Jinx said, “I want to get my family out. I'll fight to the death to make that happen too.”

Dakota kissed his wife on the temple.

“As my wife said. I don't need to think this one through. I'm in,” he said. Then, he focused on Eve. “I trust you to get me out, Mrs. Rakin.”

She winked at him.

“You know it. We have a son and daughter to take care of. I'm not leaving any non-Marine, or Marine behind.”

Boone spoke next.

“I'm still in. I'm with Moe, Larry, and Crazy,” he said, pointing at Zayn.

The man laughed.

“Ditto, Major. I'm reporting for duty, and my sweet Stella is with us on this.”

She closed her eyes.

“I’ll do my part with setting the explosives and holding down the fort in case anyone needs a doctor.”

Maura knew how hard this was. Their faith in her was overwhelming.

It was time to get to work.

“Everyone who hasn’t taken downtime, take it. Everyone else is going to get ready. I need a car for the men to take, Remmy. Steal me one on your way back, or better yet, let us use that van. It’ll be too big a lure for them. It’s an easy way to transport.”

“Yeah, no one wants to carry the dead weight,” Jagger said, looking right at Zayn.

**“HEY!”**

“Little, am I?” he asked.

The man just laughed.

Remmy knew his orders.

“I’ll take Calyx back and do the job. Don’t worry, Guys, I’ll get that van tagged after they scan it.”

He saluted the Major.

Calyx reassured her.

“I’ll get it set up on my end, and then, I’ll reach out to you. Hookers are asleep at this time of the day. It might take a while to get a response.”

“We will be on standby. Text me when it’s time to head to The Underground for that meeting.”

Oh, she would.

“I’ll make it official by really playing it up,” Calyx offered.

“What do we owe you?” she asked.

She smiled.

“Today, I was abducted by a sexy man. Maybe get him to do that again but toss in dinner, and we’ll call it even.”

With that, she walked out.

And they all stared at Remington.

“What?” he asked.

“You heard the lady. She’s waiting to be abducted. Maybe this time, take her on a date,” Rogue suggested.

**He.**

**Looked.**

**Horrified.**

“Or have sex,” Zayn added. “You know...rock her world.”

Just when they thought Remington couldn’t run faster, he did.

**Out.**

**The.**

**Door.**

“Oh, that’s a whole other mess we have to deal with now that Dakota is solved.”

“I’m literally right there. Can we not talk about me like I’m not?”

Yeah, no.

Before she could leave, Maura’s phone chimed, and she knew who it would be.

“Well, that was fast,” Merry said.

Yeah, she wished.

“It’s Elizabeth.”

Maura read over the text.

***‘Something dire has come up. I’m heading there tomorrow. I hope for everyone’s sake, you guys have something for me because I have Chartres’ next mission. GET. IT. DONE!’***

Maura sighed and told them that the hurricane was about to make landfall.

“Blackhawk will be landing tomorrow with some other job for us. She sounds...testy.”

Jagger knew what that meant.

“Everyone catch a nap. We have no idea when this is going down.”

Well, that didn’t really reassure anyone. It was going to be difficult to sleep.

Maura continued.

“After the naps, Zayn, get gear for you guys. Don’t wear the good shit. We can’t lose that gear. I’ll have to ask Elizabeth to steal more from the CIA.”

He got it.

“On it.”

Then, with that, she walked away.

As his wife left the room, Jagger went into Captain mode. He knew that she was struggling with all of this. It terrified her what was on the line.

**Her family.**

“No skipped steps,” he warned. “We get everything down to the smallest detail. If we fuck around, we’re going to find out.”

They all got it.

“If you want out,” he said, lowering his voice so that he could give them one last chance, “I will do it alone.”

They all shook their heads.

That wasn't happening.

"I want to go on the record and say this is insane, and incredibly cavalier of her," Stella admitted.

That had Jagger's attention.

"Really, Stella, she wouldn't ask if she thought there was any other way to do it."

It was clear that she was angry.

"I know. I'm just tired," she said. "And scared."

Jinx was honest.

"We all are, Stella, but what choice do we have? We want our lives back, and to save those women. This is the hill we have to die on."

Stella didn't like the way that sounded.

**At all.**

Her husband was important.

He was her everything, and there was no way she wanted to do this alone.

The Major had better deliver.

Or there was going to be hell to pay.

*Outside In the Van...*

When Remmy caught up, Calyx was already on the phone. She was making the call, and she put it on speaker so he could hear it—in case her loyalty was ever called into question.

On the second ring, it was answered.

“This had better be good,” Merla said.

“Hey, it’s Calyx. I had a message from a buyer. Someone needs a job done.”

“Calyx, I just spent the night blowing four guys in some orgy. I’m tired. Cruz is up later tonight.”

Remington heard the name, and he knew the Major was playing this right.

“I know, but it’s about him. Someone is offering a big payout for information on him. Don’t you want out of that contract?”

She sounded interested.

“How big?”

“A million,” she said.

Merla whistled.

“Is this going to be Mikey O’,” she asked. “I know he’s looking for the man.”

“I won’t know until the meet-up.”

“Let me call you back. I need coffee and to think,” she said.

Remington held up his phone. He’d typed something out for her to say to the hooker.

“Okay, but if you snooze, you lose. I’m going to offer it up in the next hour to the next girl. You know Cruz has bitches all over.”

“Yeah, let me get coffee. I’ll call you back.”

With that, she hung up.



“Good play,” he said.

She tucked her phone away.

“Well, if anything, Remington, I’m good at what I do. I do have a question.”

He waited, not sure what she was going to ask him. At this point, it was anyone’s game.

“You didn’t accept my invite. Why?” she asked. “I waited to see if you’d be brave enough to join me.”

**God.**

His heart raced.

She felt so good against him when he’d been trying to abduct her, and now, she smelled like heaven. He was so damn aware of her in proximity to his body.

It’s like his whole being knew her.

“You could at least answer that,” she said. “I was scared. I thought I was dead when you grabbed me. We both know you can break into a place. Why not when I wanted you to?”

He moved closer.

Immediately, she backed up because he was imposing in the light. In the shadows of the alley, her heart began racing.

He pressed her to the wall.

“I wanted to, Calyx. God. I really wanted to. You make me insane,” he admitted, taking her hand and placing it over his rock-hard erection.

She got wet just touching him.

If this game of cat and mouse didn’t end soon, she was going to lose her mind.

“Then why not?” she asked. “We’re both adults,” she said, gripping his erection in her hand through his pants, and getting a moan to break free.

It was so damn erotic.

Finally, the words found a way out.

“My wife.”

Her heart skipped.

“Is it because I look like her?” she asked, his mouth so close to hers as he leaned over her trapped body.

He closed his eyes and when he did, he saw her.

He saw the mistakes he made, and the adultery he committed while putting his career first.

“Yes.”

She knew she needed to do something. Calyx didn't want to stay on this merry-go-round. She wanted to find herself in bed with this man.

There was something about him that made her insane.

Taking his face in her hands, she got him to open his eyes to stare into hers.

“I'll wait for you.”

He hadn't expected that.

It was a punch to his solar plexus and nearly brought him to his knees.

“I'm a patient kind of girl,” she admitted.

Remington was desperate to feel. It had been so long that he'd pushed away his emotions and feelings. Taking that one moment, he knew he'd savor it for a very long time.

He pulled her into him, and his mouth closed over hers. The heat exploded, and they were both pulled into that eruption of need.

*The heat...*

It was ridiculous.

As he felt the control slipping, and that overwhelming need to get horizontal with this woman, Remmy knew it was time to back off.

As the kiss was broken, she was breathless.

And so was he.

“Remington,” she whispered.

Neither moved, and neither spoke anything more until he found the words.

“Let me take you home.”

Well, Hell’s freaking bells.

That wasn’t what she wanted to hear.

**Not.**

**Even.**

**Close.**

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

*Chartres Street*

*Shared Room*

*Upstairs*

When Jagger found her, his wife was on her knees in the bathroom again. She was tossing what she'd just eaten, and honestly, he didn't believe for one second that it had anything to do with the pregnancy.

**Not this time.**

This was a different kind of nerves.

**This was fear.**

Crossing to her, he held her hair back once more and tried everything he had in him to soothe her.

It was damn hard.

*Why?*

Because he was nervous too.

There was a lot riding on her plan, and it could get four men killed.

Jagger knew that once Chevy got him, he'd pay the price. There was no doubt in his mind that he'd be tortured unmercifully.

Then add in the other three men, and the slightest mistake, and children wouldn't have fathers, and wives wouldn't have husbands.

This was beyond dangerous.

"It's okay," he said.

She didn't speak.

Instead, Maura started sobbing uncontrollably. Her whole body shook as she fought that fear and terror. She was sending four men to their deaths if she dropped the ball.

He sat on the floor, pulling her between his legs to soothe her. Jagger held her tight, and it brought back so many memories.

After she sacrificed herself to the Columbian guerillas to keep him safe, and they'd raped her, she'd been this broken. They'd done the same thing in that foul, nasty prison cell.

He'd held her against him, promising her it would be okay.

She said nothing.

There weren't words.

"We'll be okay, Baby," he said, leaving kisses on her forehead.

Finally, she spoke.

"If I'm wrong..."

Jagger knew.

Only, he wasn't going to let that doubt and fear creep in. Maura had never let him down.

And he had to believe that she never would.

Going into this mess, it had to be his focus.

**To get them through alive.**

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## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

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### *The Underground*

*Saturday*

*Five P.M.*

When Maura received the text, they knew they had to get going. She, Jinx, and Eve were going to have to stay hidden, making sure that Merla didn't see them. While she agreed to help them, they had to keep their ace in the hole secret.

This had to look as authentic as possible. That meant making sure that the hooker they were buying, who they knew was going to betray them, believed it all.

That meant Jagger was up to bat.

Their teams were divided up with two of them ready to blow buildings when they got the word, and Remington ready to tag some vehicles as he played hide-and-seek from a rooftop. Not to mention that Maura and the Snakes were on standby.

As Jagger, Zayn, Dakota, and Boone walked into The Underground, they were escorted into a back room. In it, Merla was waiting with Calyx.

"Mr. O'Banion, can I offer you a drink?" Calyx asked.

He shook his head.

"I'll pass, but thank you. What I really want is confirmation that you've met the challenge I've asked of you," he said, standing there in his mob man finery.

She got it.

He was protecting her by making this chilly.

"I have. May I introduce you to Merla? She's going to help you out," she said. "She's going to go into the agencies,

and see if she can find who you are looking for,” Calyx offered.

Jagger sat, and the three men flanked him in their security gear.

The whole time, Merla was watching him.

“I appreciate your help,” he said. “You’ll be rewarded for that.”

“I could use the money, Mr. O’Banion, so thank you for the work.”

He nodded.

Calyx let them handle it. She was just the negotiator, after all.

“Then, do the job, and you’ll get paid. We will leave the money with Calyx, and when you complete it, you can come back here and pick it up.”

That seemed to work for her.

“Okay. What do you want?” she asked.

“I need you to walk into the modeling agencies, one at a time, and see if Cruz is there, or if you can find a man named Chevy. Unfortunately, we don’t know what he looks like.”

She was honest.

“I’ve never met him, but I know that Cruz is always there. Those are his businesses.”

He was well aware.

So far, so good.

“Then, this should be an easy million for you.”

She smiled.

Yes, yes, it would be.

In his ear, he could hear his wife and the Snakes talking about their position.

“J, we have confirmation that three men entered the agency closest to you. She may have called him after Calyx

talked to her. Security is tight. Hit that location first to get spotted.”

He couldn't reply.

“We're going to be sitting in the alley across from the first location. It's the modeling agency near here. Do you know it?”

She nodded.

“Yeah, I do. I always wondered what it was like inside,” she said.

He didn't buy that for a second.

Calyx had clued them in that the woman had been in there because that's how Cruz ensnared her. He promised her a better life than hooking, and when he booked her one job, a paltry one, he had her on a contract.

He owned her.

Oh, and countless other hookers in this city that he'd ensnared.

“Well, you'll get to see it up close and personal. We have a change of clothes for you,” he said.

She stopped him.

“I want to see the payout. Not that I don't trust you, but...I don't trust you.”

He lifted a finger, and Zayn made a duffle bag appear. Inside, it was packed with cash.

“Do you trust Calyx?” he asked. “You know, as a neutral party?”

She nodded.

“I do.”

Then, that was handled.

“Ms. Waters, will you hold onto this for Merla?” he inquired.

Calyx approached and took the money.



“I’ll keep it safe for her.”

He needed to get this going.

“Give her the clothing.”

Boone gave the woman a garment bag, and she got the hint.

“Do you want me to get naked here or...?” she asked, smiling.

That’s when they all heard the woman over the com.

“I’ll cut her eyes out and feed them to her via her bellybutton,” Eve said. “Test me. A hooker had best not be getting naked in front of my husband.”

Dakota laughed, and covered it with a cough.

“You can have privacy,” Jagger offered, so that the women listening wouldn’t lost their minds.

The last thing they needed was a homicide before they got this handled.

“We’ll be out in the alley,” he offered. “Just come out and tell us if they are inside. We’ll give you time to get away before we make our move.”

She agreed to that.

“Okay.”

Since it was all handled, they headed out, and Merla waited until they were gone.

“Was that legit?” she asked. “Because I don’t want to get my ass in trouble with Cruz. He’ll ship me off to some third-world country for a payout.”

Oh, well, she’d deserved it if she was helping the man hurt women and children.

Instead of giving away anything, she lowered her voice, playing the role Maura asked her to.

“I wouldn’t double cross Cruz,” she said. “Let them go to war. Give him a heads-up, get back here, get the money, and run for it.”

She smiled.

“You know me so well,” she said, pulling off her shirt to get changed.

Oh, Calyx was aware.

And that was exactly why she picked her.

Merla was a bottom feeding betrayer.

**Until the end.**

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

***Fifteen Minutes***

***Later***

***Outside Models INC.***

Maura was in a car parked down the street, and so were Jinx and Eve.

They were in three different vehicles so that when they followed, they could mix it up. Normally, she'd do one ride,

and go with her skill.

That wasn't happening.

If Chevy was in that building, he'd know how she worked, so she was letting two Snakes make the call. Eve was in the lead car, she would be second, and Jinx was following up. When they got closer, they'd ditch two, or if they had a signal indicating where the men had been taken.

As she sat there, she was no longer in contact with her husband.

"Remmy, you have a visual, right?" she asked, trying not to let the nerves get to her.

It wasn't easy.

"I do, Major. I can see his wedding band on the lip of the window. He's calm, and he's safe."

That helped.

She was focused on the other two teams.

"Rogue, are you in place?" she asked.

The com clicked to life.

"We are, Major. We're all good here. The thermal camera says there are nine people in this office. They are all sitting around. I'll give you an update if they make a move."

She gave him the orders.

"If they try to leave, take them out. No one survives this. We made that mistake in the jungle. We won't make it here too."

"Copy."

Well, that was one down.

"Gene, are you guys set?" she asked. Maura knew he was right down the street. They would be covering this building.

"I have seven inside," he said. "The hooker is heading there now. She just passed our vehicle, and we have confirmation that she's going to reach the door in a few."

Maura's stomach was queasy.

She began praying silently in her head.

This had to go perfectly, or the four men were in dire trouble. If she was wrong, Cruz could execute them on sight. Jagger was **NOT** wearing protection beyond some simple body armor.

He was a sitting duck.

“Okay, let's get ready, and everyone cross your fingers. It's about to get crazy.”

Oh, she had no idea.

But she was absolutely right.

As Merla approached, she tried to stay calm. There was a lot riding on this.

So much that she needed to be able to pull this off.

As she climbed the stairs and went inside, she bypassed the receptionist and headed right for the office she knew all too well.

She had to come here every other day to give Cruz Santiago sex or a blowjob.

Now, she had to betray Mikey O' for a dirtbag. She didn't want to do it, but the devil you knew. Had Mikey O' given her any sign of interest, she would have hooked up to be his on-call girl.

But he hadn't.

He must have been still mourning his dead wife.

**Oh, well.**

As she walked into his office, there were two guys with him, and he was surprised to see her.

Immediately, she went right to his side.

“You're early for some cock, Honey. Are you in the mood?” he asked. “The three of us can take a break.”

Yeah, hell, no.

Either way, she was getting out of *New Orleans*, and she didn't care who won the battle here.

She was honest.

“Absolutely, but first, Cruz, you have a problem.”

It was clear he wasn't expecting that.

“What?” he asked, grabbing her ass.

She needed to do this and get away.

**FAST.**

“Mikey O' is outside this office, and he's waiting for me to tell him if you're in here. He figured out that you're a part of the sex ring, and he's hired me to come betray you.”

He lifted a brow.

“And you're giving me a heads-up?”

She nodded.

“I'm loyal, Cruz.”

Well, well, well.

This could have gone badly had he not had women on his payroll.

“Where is he?” Cruz asked.

She moved toward the window and pointed. Thankfully, there was a tint so no one could see in.

He stood beside her, and saw the vehicle. Lo and behold, he saw some of the man's auburn red hair.

**Son.**

**Of.**

**A.**

**Bitch.**

Someone had come right to him. It appeared that he was about to get a bonus from Chevy when he brought him this man.

**Bet on it.**

“How many are we talking?” he asked.

She told him everything he needed to know, in hopes he'd set her free, and she could bail. The last thing she wanted was this SOB selling her to some Arabian prince with some kinks.

“They told me the plan. There are four.”

He grinned.

“And Mikey O' is in the car waiting for me?”

She nodded.

“Yes, they were at the meeting. It's a big Indian dude, a smaller one that's half breed, or maybe two. There are four in all, and they said something about Chevy. I don't know who that is, but they want him, and you dead.”

That was all he had to hear.

It was move now, or die.

Pulling her into his body, he gave her a kiss.

“Merla, you just earned yourself a year off of your sexual indenture. Consider yourself free.”

And there it was.

Only, she knew what she needed.

“Give me the contract.”

He laughed, and patted her on the ass.

“Always the business lady. We’ll talk after I handle this cockroach who doesn’t seem to want to die.”

He pulled the contract from a folder with a bunch of others, and gave it to her.

“Now, give me a kiss.”

Oh, she did, but only because it was a kiss goodbye. She was heading to The Underground to pick up her pay. She wouldn’t be telling Mikey O’ anything.

As she kissed him, he obscenely groped her, making her cringe.

“If you’re here later, I’ll take one last ride.”

She kept up the act.

“Sure.”

Only, she wouldn’t be. Merla had booked a flight to California where she was going to go MIA.

**Forever.**

She was free.

*And rich.*

“Be careful, Cruz,” she said, walking out of the office and toward the back door to make her break. “Mikey O’ is as mean as a snake.”

Cruz laughed.

He wasn’t going to be mean. The man was about to be dead.

Only after they had some fun.

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

***Twenty Minutes Later***

***Six P.M.***

Jagger didn't like being out of radio contact with his wife, but he had to make sure they did this right.

One little thing could mean the difference between being taken, and being shot in the head on sight.

As he sat in the driver's seat, that's when he saw them coming.

His team was in the white van that Remington had used to abduct Calyx, and ready in the back.

Well, not ready.

Normally, they'd be wearing guns and ready to go, but they were going to make it easy for Cruz and his people.

"We have people coming toward us," Jagger said. "Expect stun guns," he offered. "Don't put up too much of a fight," he said as they all got the pills out, and prepared to swallow them.

**Dry.**

"Bottoms up," he said, as all four men downed their lifelines.



Oh, those trackers had better work, or they had a myriad of issues coming up.

“I hate stun guns,” Zayn said. “They always fuck with them, so they hurt more.”

Yeah, he was aware.

“Three, two, One,” he whispered, as his door was wrenched open, and he took the hit to the thigh by a modified stun gun.

At the same time, the sliding door was opened, and the three men took shots from the probes to their bodies, and they all did a sick little dance.

**Holy fuck!**

**It hurt.**

Jagger didn't even get to move as his body was assaulted, and then, he was cold-cocked.

**He.**

**Went.**

**Out.**

Right behind him, the three guys who got in the van did the same thing to the other three men.

When they were all contained, then, and only then, Cruz approached.

“Scan them,” he said, as one of his thugs pulled out a scanner to make sure there were no trackers on the four men. When he was finished, he gave his boss a thumbs up.

“They are clean. Nothing. The vehicle is clean too. He really was waiting to get you, Boss.”

Yeah, well, he hadn't.

But he got him.

“Let's take our present to Chevy, Boys, because we're about to get really rich, really fast. Juno, you drive this van. You guys ride back here, and get these assholes tied up,” he

said, as they pulled Jagger from the seat to the back to lay on the floor.

This was a good day for him.

“Our boss is going to enjoy torturing this one,” he said, kicking Jagger in the ribs as hard as he could. “And I’m going to enjoy watching it.”

Yeah, that was for sure.

**\* \* \* H U N T E R S \* \* \***

*Nearby*  
*Watching*  
*Saturday*  
*Six Thirty P.M.*

It always amazed Remington how low-tech these assholes tended to be. He was using CIA equipment to listen in, and he could hear Cruz talking smack.

So, he let the team in on what was going down.

“Cruz is going in a separate vehicle. There will be two vehicles heading out. We have the white van, and a black Town Car. I’m tagging as soon as they get moving.”

Maura heard him.

“We can’t lose the van or the car. We have to hope they don’t scan them again when they get there,” she said.

Remmy watched the van move out, and he took the shot, hitting the back bumper so no one would hear or feel the tracker landing.

“One down,” he said.

Everyone, including him, were holding their breaths.

As the black Town Car pulled behind the van to follow it out of the alley, he landed another tracker onto it.

“We have confirmation of targets being tagged,” he said, picking up the tablet. “I’m sending it to you via MATE, Maura. You’ll be able to track them.”

She was grateful.

“Remmy, get back to The Underground and get Calyx out. We don’t know what Cruz told Merla to do. Protect her.”

Oh, he planned on it.

Calyx wouldn’t be hurt.

Remmy would ensure it.

“Be safe, Major. We’ll see you when you get the men back,” he said, hoping that would be the case. “If you need me, call. I’ll meet you wherever.”

Oh, she would.

From their tail cars, they watched the vehicles pull past them.

“Eve, you’re on first car. I’m on the Town Car. If it looks as if it’s about to go bad, both of you get the men to safety.”

“On it, Major,” Eve said, calmly, even when she wasn’t feeling so damn peaceful.

“Clear,” Jinx said.

Maura focused on the car, and did her job—despite feeling like she was going to puke.

It was time to stop being Maura, and time to become Major Gaines-Armstrong.

**Her husband’s keeper.**

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

*The Underground*

*Same Time*

Oh, Calyx was expecting the woman to come back wanting her money.

But she wasn’t getting it.

This bitch was helping assholes sell women, and that, as a woman, didn’t sit well with her.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

As she sat in the back office, she heard the tap to her door.

Well, it was time to take care of the trash, and take it out. While she didn't advocate violence, since Calyx had seen plenty in her life, she was more than willing to serve out some karma.

Like now.

“Come in.”

When Merla peeked around the corner, she was smiling.

“Guess who got her contract back from Cruz, and sold-out Mikey O’?” she asked, joking and jovial.

Calyx stayed neutral.

**On the outside.**

“I’m going to say you.”

Merla grinned like the cat who swallowed the whole cage of canaries.

Well, she was in for a surprise.

“Yep. Now, I’m here for my money.”

Calyx pointed toward the duffle bag and said nothing else.

“It’s been fun, Calyx. I’ll send you a postcard from my new life.”

Calyx laughed.

“Yeah, I don’t think so.”

Merla stopped dead in her tracks.

“What does that mean?” she asked when she turned suddenly.

Her paranoia was flaring, and Merla had that bad feeling that this wasn't going to go as well as she had hoped after all.

*How did she know?*

On the table, right beside her, there was a different duffel bag.

“Because I work for Mikey O’, and you betrayed him. That’s slimy.”

*Merla laughed.*

*And laughed.*

*And laughed.*

“What do you care?” she asked. “He’s a thug. Let them all take the town apart. I never took you for a sympathetic man-sap.”

Calyx pulled the gun from her lap, and pointed it at the woman.

“I care because I do. That’s not your business, but let me say this. You should care. It’s what got you killed.”

She pulled the trigger, hitting the woman in the head, killing her.

As the door opened, she pointed it at whoever was coming in.

Remmy stopped in his tracks.

“Woah! It’s me!”

Seeing it was him, immediately, she lowered it.

“Can you help me get her to the dumpster? I’m putting a lot of bodies in there for Mikey O’,” she said.

He laughed.

“It’s kinda sexy, in a weird, *New Orleans*, screwed up sense.”

She stared at him.

“Okay, who can I shoot next?” she asked.

He winked at her.

“Hopefully, not me. I don’t want to sneak into your home if you’re going to be armed.”

She handed him the gun.

“Oh, look. I’m not armed anymore. Sneak away.”

God.

*This woman...*

He wanted to do just that.

Apparently, Calyx Waters could hold her own.

And in *New Orleans*, one could only hope for that.

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

***Same Time***

***City Street***

Everyone was doing their job.

Gene and Merry were walking down the street pretending to be together. The whole time, Gene was trying to reassure her that everything was going to be okay.

It wasn't easy.

The woman was scared.

"He'll be okay, right?" she whispered, as she had her arm through his.

"I promise," he said. "Now, keep up the act."

Oh, well, she could do that.

"Don't worry, Dad, I'll make sure you make your doctor's appointment," she said loudly so people would hear her.

He stared at her.

"Seriously? Dad?"

"Well, you don't like tits, and you make a face when a woman is too close. I figured you'd be good with Dad."

He laughed.

It wasn't like she was wrong, now was she?

As they reached the business, he looked around, seeking out what they needed.

"Back there," she said, having memorized the schematics for the house.

Gene let her lead.

"We have the gas line," he said into his com.

"Got ya, Dad," Rogue said back. "Were almost there ourselves," he said.

"You're all a bunch of comedians," he muttered.



As Gene stood guard, he let Merry do the tech work. She set the charges, like Rogue had taught her, and she got it done as quickly as possible.

There were enough explosives to put a hole in the ground.

Well, that was the plan.

As they finished up, she tucked her arm back through his, and Merry couldn't help but think about her husband.

And if he'd be okay.

It was rare she felt this uneasy, as if something bad was coming. The last time she'd felt like this, Boone had been shot in the face, and she nearly lost him.

Gene sensed her unease.

"It'll be okay, Honey. Breathe," he said, as they walked away from the building.

Oh, she was trying.

Back at the vehicle, a good distance away, they parked their asses, and waited until they got the call from Maura to make it happen.

Everyone inside, was meeting their untimely deaths, sentenced by the president and the FBI.

Yeah, they'd push the button.

And blow it to kingdom come.

On second thought.

Make that Hell.

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

***Across Town***

***Same Job***

Rogue and Stella were taking a walk, and people were staring.

Oh, and Rogue knew why.

His face was all over the media not that long ago when he'd married Jinx, and now he was with another woman who was also beautiful.

Zayn's sweet Stella was drawing attention.

"Do I have something on my face?" Stella asked, picking up on the stares.

He reassured her.

"They likely think that I'm cheating on my wife. Don't worry about your face, Sweet Stella. It's perfect."

That seemed to reassure her, but she wasn't only stressing that.

She needed to know.

"Zayn will be okay, right? Maura didn't drop the ball on this one, did she?"

He reassured her.

"Maura never drops the ball. Ever. You have to trust her on this one."

She was aware.

Only, it was a problem.

As they reached the back of the building, Stella took the lookout, and Rogue handled the detonator. When he was done, he turned, to see Stella carrying a gun.

“Uh, where did you get that?” he asked, moving carefully toward her.

“I took Zayn’s. He didn’t stop me. That scares me even more,” she said.

Oh, he knew why.

The man was worried that she was going to be left unprotected while he was away on this *‘mission’*. That made him want to protect the woman even more.

**For his brother.**

“Come on, Sweet Stella. Let’s go wait in the car,” he said, holding out his hand for her.

She paused.

“Do you want the gun?” she asked.

He stared at it.

“No. You can have it.”

She shook her head.

“My damn husband has to be abducted for me to finally get a gun, and now I don’t want it. Half the fun was making Zayn try to disarm me,” she said, tears in her eyes.

“Oh, Honey, it’s okay,” he said, hugging her.

“He has to come back,” she whispered.

He gave her a kiss on her temple.

Rogue knew two things.

If his brothers didn’t make it back, he, Remmy, Gene, and Tommy would be the last men standing, and need to take

care of their family.

*And that if something did happen...*

**There would be war.**

Rogue would burn this city to the ground in vengeance.  
There was no doubt about it.

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

*Chartres Street*

*Waiting Time*

Earlier, Tommy had been tasked with watching Violet, and before the team headed out, the girl said she needed a nap, and went to one of the rooms.

Well, it had been three hours, and he was starting to get worried.

When he went to find her, Tommy realized something.

They had a problem.

**He couldn't find Violet.**

Pulling out his phone, he called his husband. When he answered on the third ring, Tommy was borderline frantic.

“I lost Violet!” he said.

Gene was caught off guard.

“What do you mean you lost Violet?” he asked, pretty sure he’d heard that wrong.

“I think you heard me, Gene. She said she was going to take a nap hours ago, and I went to check on her. She’s not here. She’s gone.”

“Oh, Jesus. We can’t call Eve. She’s on duty with getting the men out. I can’t leave here. We have to blow this building.”

“Oh, God. I lost a kid. How did I lose a kid? I was a cop! I should be finding kids, not losing them.”

He tried to calm him down.

“She’s sixteen. Maybe she went back to her house. Go there and look. See if you can find her.”

Only, that fear had him by the throat.

“What if I don’t find her?”

Well, that was a bad question to have to answer, and Gene knew it. Adder wouldn’t take kindly to one of them misplacing her child.

That didn’t bode well.

**For any of them.**

“You’ll find her. Just keep looking.”

When he hung up, Merry was staring at him and the look on her face mirrored his.

“Eve is going to go on a murder spree,” Merry said.

Yeah, and Gene's fiancé was going to be first on her list.

**Jesus.**

What else could go wrong?

**\* \* \* HUNTERS \* \* \***

*Somewhere*

*A Back Road*

*Into The Swamp*

They followed for a full hour. When it got too tricky, they let the trackers do the work. The ones the men had swallowed had kicked on thirty minutes ago, and they were able to regroup.

The first thing they did was dump two of the cars for Maura's blacked-out Navigator.

Now, they were moving closer to the target.

“Everyone get your gear ready,” Maura said, already wearing hers.

They had to move carefully from here on out. There were not only the lives of the men in danger, but now theirs, too, and two of them were pregnant.

“I’m good,” Eve said. “I swear to God, if anyone damages my husband, I’m fucking them up.”

“Same,” Maura said.

“I’ll hold them down for you both,” Jinx offered in solidarity.

As they drove, Maura heard something. It sounded like a sniffle. In fact, they all heard it.

Eve slowly pulled her gun, and so did Jinx. They moved toward the back of the Navigator, silently climbing over the seats.

That’s when Maura threw on the lights.

And Violet popped up.

“Hey! Can I come with you?” she asked, already with them and having the worst timing ever.

“**VIOLET!**” Eve said, completely caught off guard by seeing her sixteen-year-old daughter there. “Are you insane?” she asked.

The girl’s eyes got huge.

Eve had never yelled at her before.

“I’m sorry, Mom! I was worried about Dakota, and I overheard your plans. I wanted to help.”

Maura was tracking the men, and they were no longer moving. Unfortunately, they couldn’t dilly dally.

There was no time to get Violet back to the house.

If they wasted a single second, someone was going to be tortured.

“Oh, Jesus,” Jinx said. “We have a teenager on an operation, Mar!”

She shook her head.

“She’s going to have to stay here. There’s nothing we can do. We have the location. They’ll start torturing them soon. We have to move.”

Eve pointed at her daughter.

**“YOU. ARE. GROUNDED.”**

Her lip quivered.

“He’s my Dad. I just got him. I can’t let him get hurt. Then the baby won’t have a dad and that sucks. Plus, if you’re a Hunter, and so is he, then I am too!”

**Jesus.**

This was a shitty situation to be in.

No one could babysit her, and there was no time to bring her somewhere safe.

Maura reached the location where they had to dump their ride.

“We are going to have to hike in from here.”

“I can’t leave my daughter in the woods alone,” Eve said, now conflicted between her job and another life that mattered to her.

“We have to. If we don’t go in as planned, that drops the probability that we lose one of the men. Who do we pick to die? Your husband? Mine? Merry’s? Stella’s?”

Maura turned in the seat and stared at the teenager. While she got it...

“This was a bad idea,” she said to Violet. “While I get why you did it, now we’re in a bad situation. You put yourself over everyone else, and that could cost lives.”

Her eyes filled with tears.

“I’m sorry.”

Eve was about to say something when Maura handled it.



“You’re going to have to help out. You came, and now, you’re going to learn on the fly. Get up to this seat.”

Violet did.

Maura hopped out of the vehicle.

“A mile ahead is a structure. We’re going in. When you hear me over this earbud, I need you to drive toward it. I hope you know how to drive.”

“I’ve done it illegally before.”

“Well, we aren’t calling the cops on you, Violet. When I call you, **YOU COME**. Got it? We don’t know how bad the men will be and there’s only three of us. We can’t carry them out. We don’t have ears in that van, and they’re loading them into the building now.”

“I can do it,” Violet said. “I’ve got this. I’ll pick you up.”

Well, at least they had a getaway driver. They wouldn’t have to rely on Remmy for extraction.

Maura pulled a gun from under the seat and put it in the door compartment.

“It’s loaded. If someone comes for you, point and pull the trigger. Aim for the middle of their body.”

She looked scared, but she also looked determined to help them.

“Here’s a bud. Put it in your ear. You’ll hear us handling this situation. Under no circumstance unless you’re in danger, are you to say a word to distract us.”

Eve let Maura handle it.

Why?

If the girl wanted to play Marine, she was going to get bossed around by the mother of all of them.

“Got it?”

She nodded.

Violet put it in her ear.

“And for the record, to be a Hunter, you have to know when to break the rules, and when to let those who rank higher than you do the job. If you want to be one of us, you have a lot to learn, and that takes time.”

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

Oh, there was no doubt she was. Only, this might bite them in the ass.

Maura slammed the door.

“Listen, and wait.”

Violet put her hands on the steering wheel and did just that. As she watched them, the three women pulled down their masks, adjusted their guns, and began the mile hike into the swamp.

And Violet knew that she wasn’t going to screw this up. She was getting her Dad back.

They could bet on it.

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## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

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*Chevy's Hidden Warehouse*

*Saturday*

*Evening*

*Eight P.M.*

**T**oday was not a good day for him. Jagger was not living his best life at the moment, and he only hoped he could hold up long enough for his wife to get them out. Torture sucked on a normal day, but this was horrible.

The pain he was having to endure was nonstop and really bad.

Most of it was focused on him, and while he was grateful for that, for the men he called brothers, he was still praying for a reprieve.

*Or a platoon of pissed off female Marines to save their beaten down asses.*

It was clear that he was getting too old for shit like this.

They were beating on his body as they were trying to break him.

Jagger could taste his own blood, as his brothers tried to get the assholes' attentions.

**God.**

When would it end?

As he took that last blow to his gut, he felt ribs break in his side, and that was an inopportune moment to have that happen.

The torture was just beginning.

“Not so funny now, is it? Mikey O’?” Cruz asked. “I hear you were looking for me. Well, you found me. How about you get out of those restraints, and you show me exactly how badass you are?” he asked.

Jagger said nothing.

He was biding his time.

Dakota knew he had to get the man a break. When they'd been riding over there in the truck, the men had started early on Jagger.

He was a mess.

There were no doubts he had some broken bones, and possible internal injuries. He was coughing up blood.

He took one for the team, getting their attention.

“He’s badder ass than you, Cruz. How tough does it make you to sell women? Can’t get laid on your own?” he asked.

That did the trick.

Cruz focused on him.

“Oh, show the man what manners are, boys,” he said. “In fact, use them all as punching bags. The first one to get them to cry gets a bonus.”

And so it began.

There was no doubt that this was going hella wrong.

**FOR THEM.**

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

## *Outside*

### *Post-One-Mile Hike*

They had to make sure Chevy was there or had arrived. There was no way they could just rush in unless they were sure they had the rat in the trap.

Only, time mattered.

She was giving it two more minutes, and they were going in. She suspected they were waiting for someone simply because there was a lot of security at the door.

They kept staring down the road as if a car was expected, and there was no way they thought it would be them.

That's when they saw the vehicle arrive, and when the man got out of the back, she knew why they'd not been able to find Chevy.

"Well, that damn rat bastard," she muttered, keeping her voice low. "He had his face redone to look like El Gato. He was hiding as a dead man, like the original dead man had been," she said.

That was pretty sneaky.

It also explained why the jet was in El Gato's name. Someone was playing him.

Well, that was about to end.

"Are they calling him El Gato?" Jinx whispered. "Did he just hoodwink a bunch of assholes into believing that he was still alive?"

It appeared so.

“That explains why he’s been able to hide and no one knew who Chevy was.”

Well, yeah, but now that was over.

It was time to do this.

“He’s mine,” she ordered. “Kill off everyone else but he’s dead by my hands. He betrayed us once, and now, it’s payback time.”

All three women had high powered guns on their back, and silenced weapons with them.

As Chevy went in, and they knew it was him because they’d already taken out El Gato, they began moving.

One-by-one, they picked off his guards using their silenced sidearms.

One-by-one, they cleared the way, proving that three pissed-off wives, and Marines, were a force to reckon with.

As they approached the door, and it was clear, they stepped over the bodies and pulled the door open.

It led underground.

Well, this was a good place to hide. The irony was they’d done the same shit to hide from El Gato three months ago.

As they moved, she heard it.

“Shhhh,” she said, as they listened to the sounds of screams of pain.

That was Jagger. She’d know his voice anywhere.

It was now dire.

“We don’t have much more time. Take them all out. We’re getting the men out of here.”

And they would because there was nothing deadlier than a pissed-off woman.

That wasn't true.

There was.

### **A pissed off Snake.**

An adder, a Mamba, and the mother of all Snakes, a Taipan.

### **\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***

As he headed into the deep bowels of his hidey-hole to see what his men had brought him, he could hear screams.

**Male.**

**Screams.**

*What was this?*

When he approached the door, someone was waiting for him. It was his right-hand man.

“Hey, Cruz. What’s going on in there?” he asked.

The man grinned.

“My men and I found something for you, and we brought it in. I think you’re going to be very happy.”

Chevy wasn't sure what he was talking about.

“Why does it sound like men being tortured?”

He laughed.

“Because they are being tortured. Let’s just say I’m delivering you the best gift, and while I expect no reward, I think you’re going to see otherwise.”

That was interesting.

“Okay, show me,” he said.

When Cruz opened the door in the barely lit room, he saw four shirtless men hanging from the ceiling by their wrists. Their feet barely touching the floor.

He walked in and looked around.

As he did, someone took a cattle prod, and a shit ton of electricity, and drove it into the one man’s side.

He screamed.

He wasn’t sure what this was.

“You’re welcome,” Cruz said, as he walked over to the man who was being tortured, grabbed him by his wet hair, and lifted his head.

And that’s when Chevy saw it.

He began laughing.

“Oh, Captain Jagger Armstrong. It’s been a while, my old friend,” he said.

Jagger saw El Gato, but heard Chevy’s voice.

**Well, shit.**

Someone had bamboozled them.

“Nice try hiding in plain sight by wearing El Gato’s face. Only, we found you.”

That made him laugh as he punched him in the chest.

Jagger spit out blood and stared at the man as he fought for air. The blood was dripping down his face from the damage that had been done.



But he didn't give him the satisfaction of screaming.

"Welcome to my little hidey-hole. I'd offer you some refreshments, but you've been a huge pain in my ass," he said, punching him in the stomach.

Cruz laughed.

"We caught them trying to infiltrate one of the modeling businesses. We thought you'd like to have them as... souvenirs."

He laughed.

"More Hunters?" he asked, pointing toward the three other men.

The man nodded.

"Yep," he admitted. "It's that Native man, and we believe that one had been a Fed," he said, pointing at Zayn Thundercloud and Dakota Rakin. "And this one...we think he was a cop."

Well, this was going to be fun.

"Torture them, and get any information out of them about where they are hidden. I want the rest of The Hunters dead. Oh, and start with Jagger, but watch your back. He's tricky. Aren't you, J?" he asked. "Did she cry out right before she was blown up? Did you cry when pieces of her came raining down on you? Does it hurt that your precious Major is dead?"

Jagger closed his eyes.

And prayed.

This was going to suck.

Only, before anyone could land another blow, the doors were kicked in, and the women took down half the room.

There was no time to waste. He couldn't let anyone get away. This was finally the culmination of months of work as they tried to get control of the city back.

Broken, battered, and in so much pain, Jagger somehow found enough strength and wrapped his legs around Chevy, so he couldn't pull his gun.

The rest of the men moved, too, with Zayn kicking Cruz in the face.

More people went down as Eve and Jinx took down some of the thugs.

Maura checked on her husband, who looked the worst of the four.

"Ready to go home?" Maura asked, as Eve and Jinx each pulled explosives, and planted them.

The timers started.

Hurriedly, they cut them down.

"Mar," he whispered, his voice hoarse, and his mouth bleeding.

She hushed him.

"We gotta go. We don't know the layout beyond what we saw. We can't hang around and find out how many people are here."

As he was free, she bore his weight on her body, trying to help him stand.

He stopped her.

"No! He caused your rape. He's mine. I'm not going until I end this."

She knew he needed it.

"Execute everyone but Chevy. He's Jagger's," she said. "This is payback for betraying his team."

Jinx let Eve take care of her husband, and she systematically executed anyone who wasn't dead already. Then, they waited.

"Wake him," Jagger said, struggling to stand up after the torture.

Maura held him up.

Jinx kicked Chevy in the side, waking him up. When the man rolled over, she grabbed him by the hair and pulled him to his feet.

As he stood, he and Jagger stood toe-to-toe.

And the man still was a dick.

Apparently, he found something amusing.

“Oh, Jagger Armstrong, the honorable Marine. How does it feel to know that I still took away your wife?” he asked, going for the one thing that would break him.

It was Jagger’s turn to laugh.

“Chevy, you’re not smart enough to blow up my wife. You’re a dumbass.”

“She’s dead. I’m the cause.”

The woman he was talking about had enough. Maura pulled off her mask as she stood beside Jagger, holding him up. She’d hold him up for the rest of their lives.

Her Marine was honorable.

As soon as he saw her face, Chevy couldn’t believe it.

“Are you fucking kidding me? Can you just not die?” he asked, raging.

She smiled.

“I’m hard to kill, but you know who isn’t?” she asked right before she kicked him in the balls. “You.”

As he went to his knees, grabbing his junk, Jagger pulled his wife’s gun, and had enough of this asshole.

“Didn’t anyone tell you that you salute anyone who outranks you?” he asked.

To prove a point, Jagger took the gun and put it in Chevy’s mouth.

It was the easiest pull of the trigger in his whole life. With the man’s death, Jagger could let go of the past and what had happened to Maura all of those years ago.

El Gato's legacy was finally done.

**It.**

**Was.**

**Over.**

At the beep, Eve warned them.

"The building is going to blow," Eve said, helping Dakota to the door.

They had to move.

Boone was the least damaged, so he grabbed a gun, as they began getting out of there.

Zayn was laying down cover, as more assholes came out of the woodwork to stop them.

"We don't have time," Jinx said. "Haul!" she yelled, knowing that the explosion was going to be massive.

Like blow a crater in the earth, massive.

They were running.

Maura knew what she needed to do.

**"PICK US UP!"** she yelled. **"COME GET US!"** she shouted to the extraction team.

**Violet.**

The men weren't sure who was coming in, but they were damn glad to get out of this mess.

"Go," Jagger said. "I can't," he said, dropping to his knees.

There was no damn way she was leaving her husband behind. It just wasn't happening.

She got him into a fireman's hold position, and hoisted him onto her shoulders.

And this was why she made all of them work out.

**This.**

**Right.**

**Here.**

As they breeched the doors, outside, their Escalade slammed to a stop, and Violet jumped out of the way to get into the back.

Maura somehow got Jagger into the passenger seat, as Eve pulled him in. Then, Maura got behind the wheel to get out of there.

“Ten seconds,” Jinx warned, knowing they were too close to the building. It was going to take them into the ground when it blew.

Maura wasn't losing this close to the end.

She hit reverse, and began driving backward as quickly as humanly possible.

Only, they weren't done.

“Eve, make the calls!” she ordered, a little too busy but not wanting anyone to be warned and escape.

This was cleaning house.

**Marine style.**

She leaned forward and did as the Major asked by hitting the call buttons on the navigation screen. When the calls were answered, she said three words.

**“HIT THE BUTTONS!”** she ordered, just as the compound in front of them blew, sending up so much dirt and debris.

The sound was deafening, and the whole ground shook beneath the wheels of the Navigator.

“Hold on!” she said, as the explosion pulsed, and their vehicle was rocked.

“Shit!” Eve said, as she saw the flames erupt from the ground.

They were almost clear.

Maura couldn't see too much ahead of her, but somehow, she managed to whip it around, and haul ass.

As they heard two more explosions over the phone calls, they knew it was done.

**Finally.**

As she got them to the main road, then, and only then, did she speak.

“The extraction team is clear,” she said, her heart racing in her chest.

They heard the first voice.

“Did everyone get out?” Stella asked. “Please say our family is okay, Maura.”

She didn’t have to.

Zayn heard his wife.

“I’m safe, my sweet Stella.”

“And Boone?” Merry asked.

“I hate Maura’s plans,” he muttered. “I’m making fucking bracelets for all of us once I figure out what the hell I’m warding away. Is it math? I hate math too.”

It was what they needed.

Everyone laughed.

Violet climbed over the seat to sit beside her father. When she did, he stared at her.

“Uh, Honey, why is our daughter with you on an operation?” he asked.

She laughed sardonically.

“Violet? Care to answer that?”

She did.

“Because I had to save my Dad,” she said.

Dakota’s heart skipped.

Yeah, it had all been worth it. **The pain, the loss, and the struggle.** He was finally right where he needed to be.

**With his family.**

“In case your mother didn’t tell you, Violet. You’re hella grounded, young lady.”

She hugged him.

And being grounded was worth it.

“I love you, Mom and Dad.”

Yeah, they loved her too. In fact, they were feeling those warm, fuzzy feelings for the women in that ride.

They had saved their asses.

“Same, Kiddo,” he said, as he closed his eyes.

From behind the wheel, Maura glanced over at her husband, and Jagger could barely lift his hand to take hers. So, like the good wife she was, she soothed him.

“It’s done, my love,” she whispered in relief.

Jagger finally had some peace.

Thank God it was over.

“It’s done,” he repeated, and closed his eyes as the darkness took him under.

Jagger passed out.

But he could rest at ease.

The Marines finally completed that mission that began all of those years ago in the jungle of Columbia.

The bad guys were dead.

*El Gato.*

*Micah.*

*Chevy.*

*And Cruz Santiago.*

This mission had been years in the making, and now, Addiction, and the men behind it, were wiped from the earth.

May God have mercy on their souls.

There was no doubt that they were on their way to  
Hell.

And that was reason to celebrate.

**For all of them.**



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## *Epilogue*

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### *The Main House*

#### *Sunday*

#### *Mid-Day*

#### *Recovery Time*

**W**ell, they survived another one, and when they got back to *The French Quarter*, they'd had to take care of the people who had been injured, and that wasn't exactly an easy task.

#### *Why?*

Jagger, Zayn, Boone, and Dakota were stubborn, but they all got a trip to the emergency room for x-rays and some wound repair.

Each man had been advised to stay the night at the hospital, but that definitely wasn't happening.

They were safer at home.

After they were transported back home where Dakota and Eve grounded Violet until she turned twenty-one, and honestly, no one thought they were kidding.

Merry stayed with Boone, taking care of him, and tucking him in for some sleep—much to his protesting.

Even Zayn was bitching but not about having to go rest. He was hella mad that he wasn't able to unarm Stella. The gun he let her have...it was missing.

His wife had hidden it somewhere that he couldn't find it, playing a very dangerous game of hide-and-seek.

#### **Hell's Bells.**

He'd spent years avoiding that, and now, she had a gun that she would likely bring out at the worst possible moment.

That was a disaster in the making.

Jagger was tucked into bed, and his wife took care of him. She soothed his injuries, and they stayed cuddled together most of the night.

Not to have sex.

**Absolutely not.**

His body felt like he'd been run over by five freight trains. He had a concussion, four broken ribs, and he was pretty sure his spleen was tied in a knot.

A bed had never felt so damn good in his life.

In the morning, they trickled down to the kitchen to get some coffee and celebrate their survival.

They'd gotten the text, and they knew Elizabeth was en route. She'd seen the news and saw the stories on the three explosions that the military was now calling practice drill accidents.

Hey, whatever floated that boat.

They didn't give a shit.

Now, it was about getting her to give them a break before all hell broke loose again.

The Russians were coming.

*Or so they heard.*

As the vehicle pulled up to the gate, the security on it let it pass through.

Zayn was monitoring the tablet from his spot at the island. He had a swimming pool sized vat of coffee and needed it.

“Blackhawk is here. Get ready for our asses to be rode about something. I'm betting the explosions.”

Maura laughed.

“I don't care as long as we're all alive. We tore this city up,” she said, holding up her hand for Eve to give her a fist bump.

“Maybe we should rethink letting the women be in control,” Rogue said.

Jinx smiled.

“Maybe you’d like to look like Jagger tomorrow morning.”

He shut his mouth pretty fast.

When they heard the keypad being engaged, they knew the Deputy Director had arrived.

As she came in, she said something to someone behind her.

**Oh, boy.**

She had security with her too.

This was going to be official.

As she came in, she looked worried.

“Uh-oh,” Maura said.

“Yeah, tell me about it,” she said, grabbing Zayn’s coffee and drinking it.

“Hey!” he said. “I’m injured.”

“And you still have shit taste in coffee,” she said, busting his ass.

He sputtered.

Only, unfortunately, Elizabeth didn’t have time.

“I have your new mission.”

Maura stopped her.

“Elizabeth, we’re a mess. We need a week off. Jagger is held together with bandages and hope.”

She understood that, but this next mission...it was dire.

“I’m sorry. You’re going to want to handle this.”

They all sighed.

Mercenary work was never done.

“Can you at least tell us if you recovered any of the women?” she asked.

“The one who flew out two days ago, yes. The pervert was bagged and tagged at the airport. He won’t be buying women anymore. The rest...no.”

**Jesus.**

That didn’t help make any of them feel any better. That wasn’t the happily ever after they wanted.

“What I can tell you is we’ll keep looking. There’s hope. There has to be.”

They got it.

She could only do what she could do.

Eve was curious.

“What’s the new mission?” she asked. “Who are we hunting down next? Russians?”

She shook her head.

“No. I wish it was the Russians. Something came up yesterday, and this is a priority. I mean it.”

Zayn rolled his eyes.

“It’s always a priority. It’s always the most important thing.”

She was quiet.

Yeah, that was odd for her.

“This time it is. Ivan?” she called, alerting her security to bring in the next mission.

At his name, they all looked over.

And he wasn’t alone.

Beside him was a very familiar face.

It was Gamble.

Only, he didn’t look well—that was crystal clear. He looked like absolute hell as he stood there.

His eyes were red, and he was a mess.

To say that they were surprised would be an understatement.

“What’s wrong?” Stella asked, moving toward him out of concern.

Gamble finally found the words.

“Saturday morning, Storm couldn’t do it anymore. She took her life and the life of our child,” he said, starting to cry.

**Oh, Jesus Christ.**

**They’d lost one of their own by suicide.**

“The demons were just too much. My wife and child are gone,” he whispered, the tears falling down his cheeks. “I’ve lost everything.”

It took them all a minute to get that to register, and they knew why Elizabeth had called it a priority.

One of their own was destroyed.

Immediately, the wounded men pulled themselves up, and the rest of the family joined them.

They circle around Gamble.

“We have you, G-man,” Zayn said, not sure how to help him. He felt sick to his stomach over what the man had to be feeling.

Storm...

Their child...

And in that moment, one war ended.

Oh, and much more brutal one began.

This was a fight for Gamble's life.

And it would be a hard one.

To be continued in the Hunter book....

# Abduction

August 2023

A Hunter Mercenary Book 13

Coming Next:

## Here Comes the Brides

A wedding Anthology

April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023



***\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\****

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*No Justice (6)*

*All Justice (7)*

*City Justice (8)*

*Bad Justice (9)*

*Blind Justice (10)*

*Dirty Justice (11)*

*Blood Justice (12) Nov 2023*

***The Littlemoon Investigations Series***

*Julian and Tori Littlemoon*

*Blood Red Rage (book 1)*

*Lost & Broken (book 2)*

*Unthinkable Games (book 3)*

*Truth is Found (book 4)*

*Haven of Nightmares (book 5)*

*Forbidden Secrets (book 6)*

*Kiss of Souls (book 7)/FBI crossover*

*Lost Souls (book 8)*

*Found Curses (book 9)*

*Secret Shame (book 10)*

*Choice of Despair (book 11)*

*Threat of Exposure (book 12)*

*Rage of Love (book 13) FBI/Littlemoon crossover*

*Sacred Truth (book 14)*  
*Blood Moon Rising (book 15)*  
*Haunted Visions (book 16)*  
*Maze of Damnation (book 17)*  
*Dead Wrong (book 18)*  
*Icy Cold Death (book 19) Sept 2023*

**The Hunter Series**

*Dakota, Zane, Rogue, and Gamble.*

*Atonement (1)*  
*Absolution (2)*  
*Amends (3) Croft Crossover*  
*Apology (4) FBI Crossover*  
*Acrimony (5)*  
*Advantage (6)*  
*Apparition (7)*  
*Avenge (8)*  
*Altar (9)*  
*Addiction (10)*  
*Abdication (11)*  
*Allegiance (12)*  
*Abduction (13) August 2023*

**The Romance Anthology.**

*Blackhawks, Crofts, Littlemoons, etc.*

***It's Good to be the Boss (Antho 1)***

***It's Good to be Loved (Antho 2)***

***It's Good to be Bad (Antho 3)***

***The Wedding Anthology.***

*Blackhawks, Crofts, Littlemoons, etc.*

***Here Come the Brides (Antho 1) April 2023***

***The Carter Chronicles Trilogy.***

*Callista, Nathaniel, and Lucas*

***Sinner Repent (book 1)***

***Sinner Realized (book 2)***

***Sinner Reborn (book 3)***

***The Oracle Phoenix Files***

*Nathaniel Carter and Avalon Miller*

***Oracle Rising (book 1)***

***Oracle Seeing (book 2)***

***Oracle Saving (book 3)***

*Oracle Haunting (book 4)*  
*Oracle Hunting (Final Book)*

**Harcourte Vampyre Society**

*Jolie, Jacques, and Flynn*

*Dangerous Revelations (book 1)*  
*Dangerous Choices (book 2)*  
*Dangerous Misery (book 3)*  
*Dangerous Retaliation (book 4)*  
*Dangerous Influence (book 5)*  
*Dangerous Sacrifice (book 6)*  
*Dangerous Destruction (Final Book)*

**Antiquities Hunter Series**

*Flynn's story*

*Wicked Hunt (1)*  
*Darkest Angel (2)*  
*Harshest Queen (3)*  
*Cruelest Undead (4) Dec 2023*

**Anthologies**

*All of the couples in one book*

*Illegal Fantasies-*  
*Behind Closed Doors (1)*



*Romance Under Arrest-  
Behind Closed Doors (2)*

*Holiday Reinforcements-  
Behind Closed Doors (3)-*

**\*\*\* HUNTERS \*\*\***